

Having survived a risky operation for a massive tumor, I began to wonder whether death might not have been the greater blessing.

The Day I Almost Died

BY RAYMOND L. BURROUGHS

I'm Raymond Burroughs. I'm an architect, a dreamer, and an eternal optimist. I'm also a Christian. I've seen the miracle of God's healing grace. Let me tell you a fantastic story about the power of God.

Six years ago I was operated on for the removal of an acoustic neuroma, a monstrous tumor at the base of my brain that was an immediate threat to my life. I was 33 years old, the same age Christ was when He was crucified.

Less than 48 hours before the operation, the neurosurgeon who was to be God's instrument in saving my life spent several agonizing hours trying to impress on my wife, Pat, and me the impact of the medical ordeal about to befall us. Several times during the conversation he paused to

Raymond Burroughs is owner of a highly successful architectural planning and real-estate development firm in Lake Jackson, Texas, approximately 50 miles from Houston on the Gulf Coast. © 1983 by Raymond L. Burroughs.

question whether we understood or not. He was concerned by the calm, almost matter-of-fact way we were accepting the death sentence he was predicting for me. Death or worse were the words he used.

He didn't know that the peace he saw on the outside merely reflected God's strength we felt on the inside. We were scared, and the fact that we might soon be separated by death made us feel sad, but we also knew that God was on our side, and regardless of what happened, we would sooner or later be together again.

Please don't misunderstand; the grace of acceptance of God's will does not come easily. For several months, since first learning of the tumor, we passed through all the normal phases that individuals facing death seem to experience.

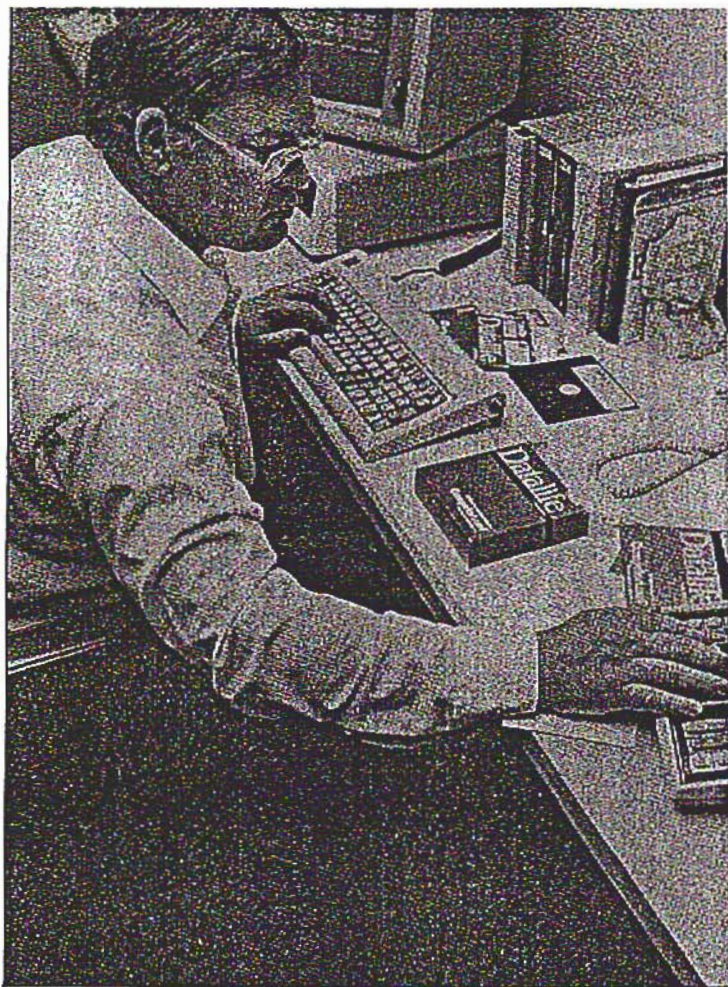
First came disbelief and defiance, then anger and frustration, followed by self-pity and the "why me?" syndrome, then mourning and grief at the

idea of our passing, and finally acceptance of the fact that the matter was no longer optional or in our hands.

During those weeks, in a vain attempt to crowd as much living as possible into my remaining days, we did everything for the last time. We went to the beach for the last time, watched each sunset as though it were the last, went fishing for the last time, made love for the last time (many times), and did all the other earthly things that suddenly become so precious when you realize you are about to lose them.

We also began to find strength in prayer, and the Christian training of our youth began to pay dividends. Our family drew closer, became more aware of each other as individuals and of the beauty and value of all that was around us.

And then the miracles began, subtly at first, and then with



Raymond Burroughs (above and at right) at his real-estate development firm in Lake Jackson, Texas.

growing momentum throughout the entire experience.

The first miracle was that we discovered the tumor in time to do something before it was too late. During a routine hearing test, a local doctor noticed I was also having balance problems. He ordered further tests in Galveston. The diagnosis: acoustic neuroma! The prognosis: eventual painful and lingering death.

We turned to a lifelong friend in Houston, a radiologist from our hometown, to help us evaluate the alternatives.

The miracle: A newly invented machine, a computer-controlled X-ray called a CAT scan, had just been installed at Methodist Hospital. It could map the brain and within minutes reveal the location and extent of the tumor.

Bad news: the massive tumor was pressing on my brain stem. Only a short time to live. Maybe days, maybe weeks—inoperable with conventional techniques.

The miracle: In a conversation with an associate, our friend

learned of a neurosurgeon in California who had developed a technique of microsurgery that allowed him to meticulously remove such a tumor. Great risk, but a shred of hope.

Our friend contacted the doctor and introduced me to him over the phone. He was sorry, but he was scheduled to leave on the following day for Europe where he would be married and spend a six-week honeymoon. I told him I would be dead when he got back.

The miracle: He postponed his wedding plans and called back.

We arranged to go to California the following week. Had it not been for the wedding plans, his surgical schedule would have been full for the next two months.

We wondered what to do with our children, Ramona, 8, and Robert, 3. We would be gone for two or three months if I survived.

The miracle: Less than six months before, we had invited Pat's mother to come live with us. She had been ill, and we were going to take care of her. Now she was in

good health, and ready and able to take care of our kids.

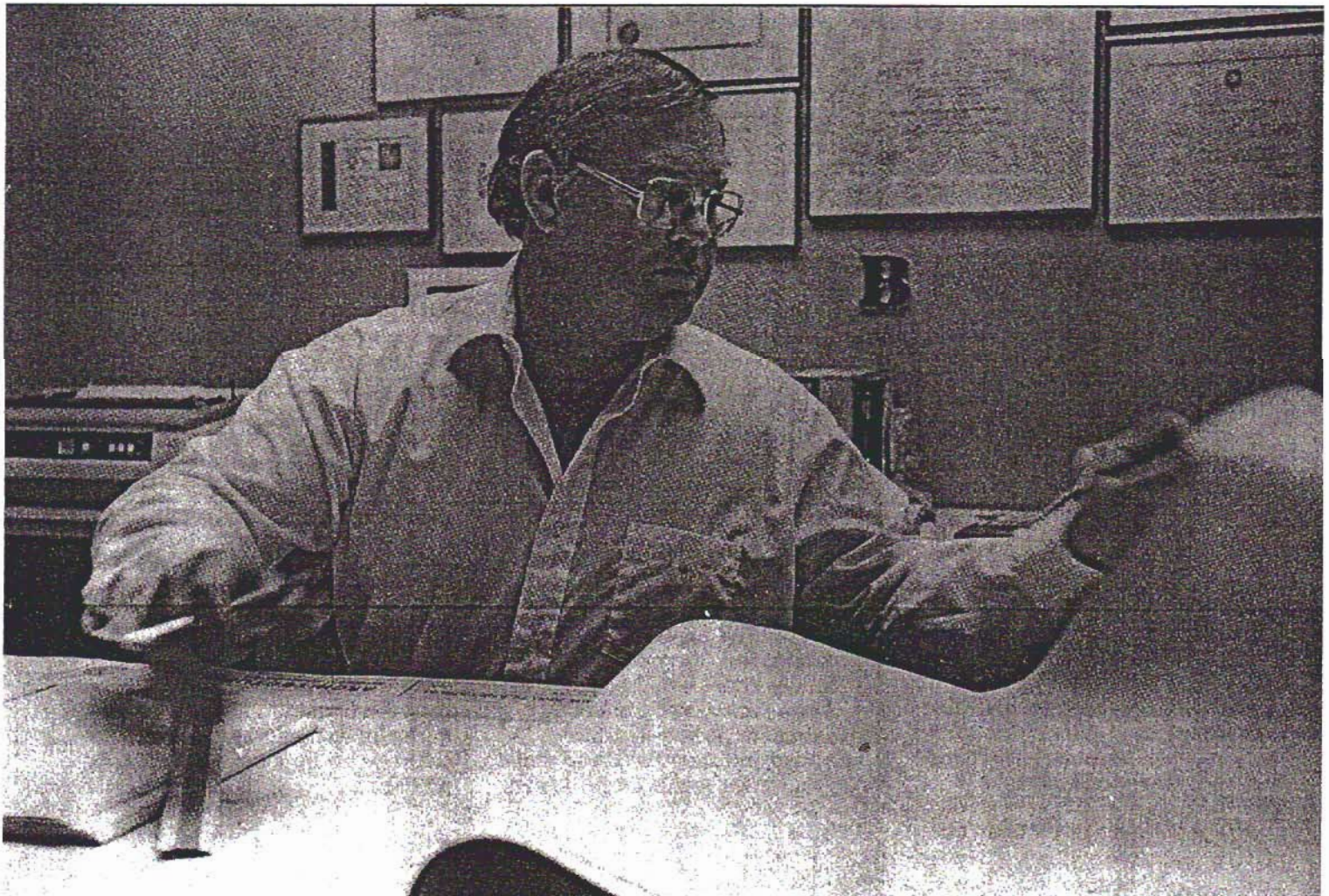
But could she do it alone?

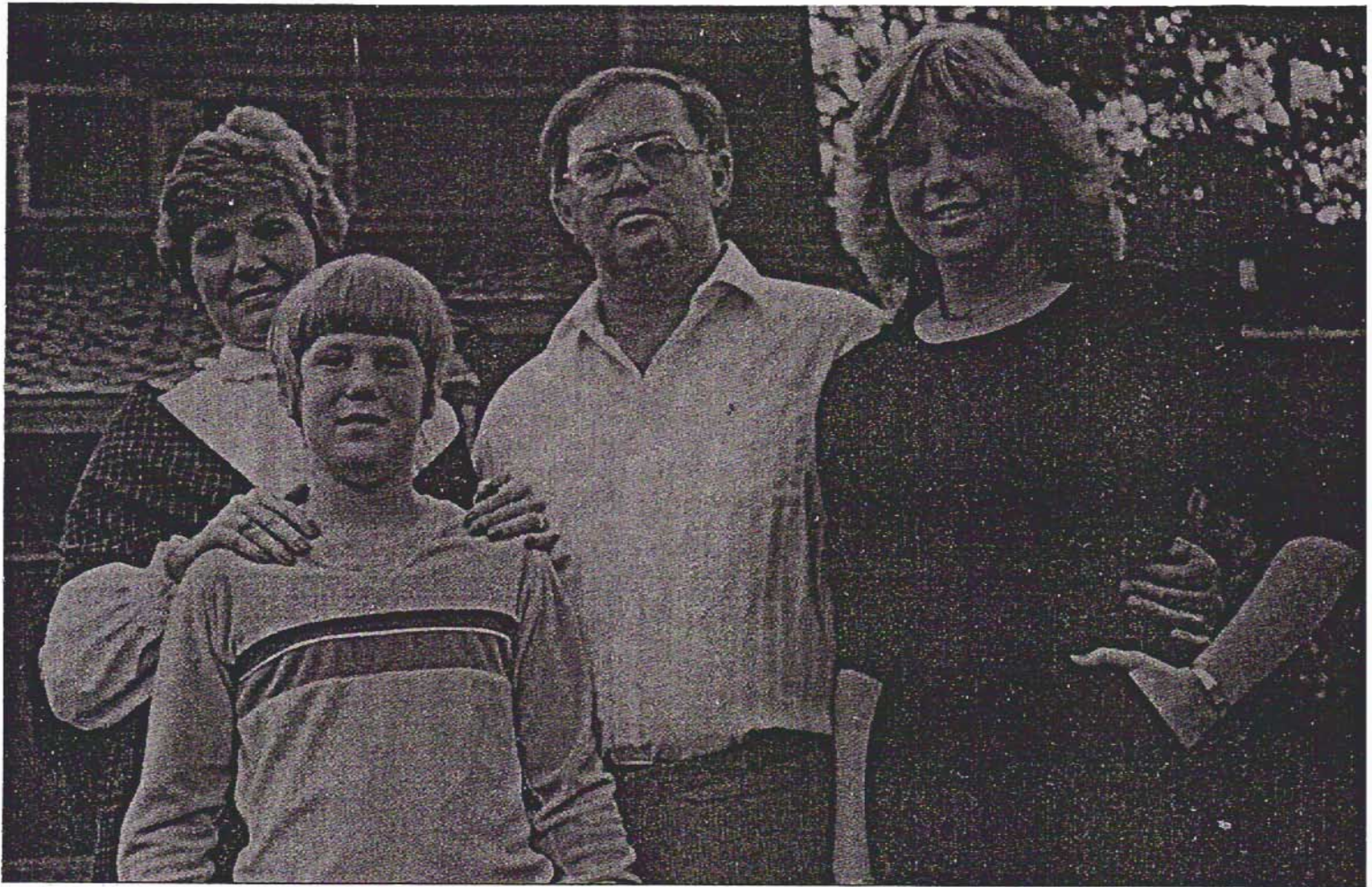
The miracle: She didn't have to. About the same time she had come to live with us, we had moved from an indifferent Houston to Lake Jackson—a small town where people know and care what happens to their neighbors. Individuals from the church, business associates, and others we hardly knew took it on themselves to take care of our family when we could not.

And finally, we needed more courage, more stamina, and more faith than we could ever muster by ourselves.

God responded to our needs on a day-by-day basis as our prayers were joined by others in our community, in our hometown where we grew up, and finally throughout the nation and the world through a worldwide network of prayer.

Although I was beginning to feel the effects of the tumor, and all of us were suffering from the strain,





The Burroughs family includes (from the right) daughter Ramona, Raymond, son Rob, and his wife, Pat.

the greatest pain came the day Pat and I left for California, and I had to tell Ramona and Rob goodbye, knowing in my heart that it might be for the last time. But they were brave, and we were brave, and somehow we managed to leave without a major outburst. But even with the conviction that we had God's support, I cried all the way to the Houston Airport.

On October 9, 1975, I placed my fate totally in the hands of God. As the nurses rolled me toward the operating room, I told Pat I would see her again, not knowing whether I meant after the operation or after the resurrection.

What should have been a seven-hour operation turned into a sixteen-hour marathon against death or total physical and mental devastation. On three occasions my heart stopped completely, and during the last hours of the operation my breathing was so shallow it had been impossible to monitor.

Less than an hour after it was over, I awoke and began

responding to the doctor's questions. My vision was inverted, my heartbeat ran wild, and I felt exhausted, but I remember the moment I woke up as clearly as though it happened only this morning.

The tired and bloodshot eyes of the neurosurgeon, the one doctor in the world God had endowed with the ability and know-how to save my life—were peering deeply into my own. At first I thought I saw an angel, or maybe even God Himself, but then it dawned on me that I was still alive, and still on earth, in a wonderful hospital in downtown Pasadena, California. And it felt good to be alive! My joy was so great I felt like laughing out loud! We had won—God and I, and Pat, and all the thousands of other people who were praying for us.

"Raymond, Raymond," he said, "do you know who I am?"

"You sure ain't no angel," I responded. Seeing first the surprise and then the broad smile on that great man's face, I knew

everything was going to be all right. Then, no longer able to cope with the pain, I passed out and spent the next three days on the borderline of life and death.

During that time an amazing story began to unfold. The doctor, who operated primarily on patients with little or no hope, told Pat how they found that tumor to be totally entangled with my life-monitoring brain stem. It was a situation so delicate even his skill and sophisticated equipment were not enough. Each time he tried to work in that area, my heart would stop. And he too would stop, trying to decide whether to give up or go on at the risk of my immediate death. On the first occurrence, when my heart started back up, he knew he must continue to try. On the second occasion, he had already been working four hours longer than the operation should normally last, and he decided he could go on no longer, that it was no use.

Once the heartbeat was restored, he ordered his assistants to close up. But as he turned to walk away, he said he felt a surge of new strength, new courage, as if some power outside himself had willed that he go on.

An hour and a half later, when the heart stopped again, he merely paused until the heartbeat again showed on the monitor, and continued with renewed strength, fully confident that it was God's will that the operation be a success. "You should have died," he later told me. "It's a miracle that you are here."

Over the next few months each member of that seasoned surgical team testified to Pat and me that they felt the very presence of God in that room that October day, and that never in their entire association with the neurosurgeon had they seen him perform with such strength and precision. Each of them had wanted to quit, to collapse from the strain, at one point or another, and each of them had experienced a resurgence of courage and strength and an infusion of the power of God that caused them to perform above and beyond their normal capabilities.

Several days after the initial crisis had passed, we realized it would take as much courage to go on living as it had to face the earlier threat of death.

The frustrations that followed the operation often seemed greater threats to our well-being than the operation itself. Pain and mental depression took turns attacking my body and mind.

I was a cripple, incapable of standing erect. The left side of my face without feeling and incapable of moving, had collapsed. I was in danger of becoming blind in my left eye, for the tears could not flow. I was deaf in my left ear.

But worst of all was the psychological impact of losing my physical identity. Not only did I feel ugly, I couldn't even kiss my wife or smile at my children should I ever see them again. My ego shattered, my dreams scattered, and my strength sapped, I began to wonder whether death might not have been the greater blessing.

In the days that followed, Pat became God's physician as she patiently and lovingly stayed by my side, giving me the courage and the encouragement to learn to walk again, to swallow without choking, to talk again without drooling, and all the other simple tasks of life we take for granted.

Pat also made it possible for me to cope with the reality that life would never be the same again. At that time, the song "The Way We Were" hit the music charts. Every time I heard it, I would have an emotional breakdown. One day when I was already well on my way to physical recovery but still in the throes of an identity crisis, I again began crying as that song was played. Suddenly Pat asked me point-blank, "Raymond, was it really all that good before?"

And then the greatest miracle of all occurred: I suddenly came to grips with the fact that I, through the grace of God, was still here on earth. And that if I was willing, life could be better than it had ever been before.

I reevaluated my life and the

ability to sell a refrigerator to an Eskimo, the dominance, the strength, and the clout and financial reserve built up over a dozen years of hard work and bluff.

A turning point. I realized the operation had become the turning point. I began to reorder my life, to establish new priorities, and to respond to the goodness and the help that the whole world had been holding out to me all along. I made a pact with God that from then on He would be Chairman of the board, and that every decision I would make from that day forward would be after consultation with Him.

We came back to Lake Jackson, and the people opened their arms to us. Within weeks I was in business for myself, within a year we had a nice home for our family, and for the first time in my life I found doing for others brought as much joy as doing for myself. Now we are back in the mainstream of the community, and everywhere is the presence of God, and miracles

For more than 20 years I had chased dreams of wealth, success, superiority—missing many of the true values that make life worth living.

impact it had on others and determined to live every day as if it were my last. For more than 20 years, since I had become a Christian, I had been trying to prove that I didn't need Christ or anyone else to accomplish my goals in life. I had chased dreams of wealth, success, and superiority—missing many of the true values that make life worth living. My wife, my children, my family, my friends, my country, even my Christianity had taken a back seat so I could pursue what I wanted and what I believed to be of value to me. I was Raymond Burroughs, the great American hope, and anything I wanted was there for the taking.

And then it all vanished—the good looks, the confidence, the

for the seeing on a daily basis. And the more I ask of God, the more He responds, and the more I give, the more I receive.

A number of individuals and groups did many special things for us during those trying times, but one particular item stands out in my mind. Not long after we returned following the operation, a member of my church, a beautiful young Christian woman, brought a special gift to me. It was a small plaque, and on it were the words "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." It had and still has, great significance to me.

And God still has a purpose for me. You know, it's quite possible that this opportunity to tell you about the miracle of God in my life is a part of that purpose. **TF**