

Tragic day leads missionary to find peace in God's sovereignty

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By Alan James

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Her pain, grief and sadness from more than a decade ago lie just below the surface. Gloria Sloan also remembers the spiritual darkness that enveloped her on that heartbreaking day.

"I remember feeling that sense of something evil around me," recalled the International Mission Board missionary. "A very strong sense of evil for a moment."

Currently on stateside assignment in Houston, Texas, Sloan recently discussed the tragic loss of her 11-year-old daughter, Carla, and husband, Gary, 37, June 18, 1999. They drowned while swimming along the Pacific coast of Mexico. Two summer mission volunteers — Joy Murphy and John Weems — both from the United States, also died while trying to rescue Carla from an undertow current.

The Sloans and their four children had moved to Mexico as missionaries six months earlier.

Sloan, 44, remembers shaking her finger toward the ocean telling Satan, "You will not get any glory from what has happened here today."

Though life as she knew it changed that day, Sloan refused to give up God's call on her life to be a missionary.

"My calling did not end on that beach the day when Carla and Gary died," she said in a 2001 interview. "Gary completed what it was that God had called him to do. I have not.

"It is in those moments of deep darkness where we recognize under whose light we abide," she said recently.

After taking six months off to grieve with relatives in Texas, Sloan decided to

return to Mexico. She and her children — Alyssia, Rissa and Alan — moved to the Toluca Valley about 400 miles north of Chiapas where she and her family had served before the tragedy. She continued her work as a church planter.

After six years in Toluca, Sloan had trained local believers to spread the Gospel, lead discipleship training, baptize new Christians and sustain the work. In September 2005 she moved her family to Mexico City to continue planting churches.

Before the move, Margarito, a local pastor in Toluca, told Sloan something she will never forget.

“He told me, ‘please forgive me for what I’m about to tell you. If your husband would not have died, my family would not have heard of the Gospel.’”

At first Sloan didn’t know how to respond.

“How dare you say that,” she remembered thinking. “If God would have given me a choice, I probably would have chosen my family over his.”

“Then I thought what an awesome, loving and sovereign God we have that when I was standing on that beach losing my loved ones, God was thinking about Margarito’s family.”

After moving to Mexico City, Sloan again saw lives transformed by Christ. Local believers have taken ownership of the ministry and continue the work. It’s that success that leads Sloan to believe her work there is done.

Following her assignment in the States, Sloan will return to Mexico City in summer 2011 to pack up her home and transfer to Honduras. This time it will just be her and her son, Alan, who is 15.

“The time is right,” she said, noting her daughter Alyssia, 21, is attending Dallas Baptist University. Her other daughter Rissa, 17, will graduate high school in 2011 and attend college that fall.

Sloan, a native of El Salvador, is looking forward to her next place of service. In her new position, she will help mobilize missionary work in Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

For now, Sloan is thankful that God has her in Texas so Alan and Rissa can attend the same high school Gary attended. Alan also plays on the football team his father once played on and coached.

Before Sloan begins the next chapter of her life in a new place, she returned to Playa Linda in 2009, the beach in Mexico where her husband and daughter drowned.

"I did a lot of crying on that trip," she said. "But it was good crying — it was a time of victory.

"It was a time of standing on that beach, counting blessings ... counting what God has done in the lives of people in my life and how far He has brought us," she said.

"And you know, there is a church now there near that place," she casually added.

Sloan remains determined that God will be pleased with the future chapters of her life.

"I do not want the enemy to take glory for anything that happened on that day.

"That is something that motivates me to go on," she said. "As long as God gives me the grace ..."

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