



Cycles of Life

Alice Teisan finds hope in God through the bumps, roadblocks, detours and dead ends of life.

by Stephanie Rische

From the day her father picked her first bike out of the trash when she was just five years old, Alice Teisan has had visions of cycling racing through her head. Her hobby quickly blossomed into a passion as she grew up, and at the tender age of 15, Alice went on her first cross-country cycling trip from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon—a 3,600-mile journey in which she pedaled an average of 100 miles a day.

On Alice's 16th birthday, her twin brother gave her a special gift: a gold necklace. But it wasn't just any piece of jewelry—at the end of the chain was a gold pendant

in the shape of a bicycle. Along with the necklace came this promise: "When I get rich," he said, "I'll buy you a bicycle store."

Yes, Alice had her life mapped out: her goal was to ride her bicycle on all seven continents and in all 50 states. It wasn't long before this dream started becoming reality. She took her first international trip at the age of 17, and by the age of 30, she'd biked on four continents and in 30 states. But looming ahead was a turning point she never could have seen coming. God, it would seem, had another plan.

A Journey of Faith

Alice grew up in a Christian home and had her share of head knowledge about God.

"I was one of those 12-year-olds who did a lot of youth rally altar calls," she says. But looking back, she wonders how much her "conversion" experiences were motivated by the tangible gifts that were being offered rather than by the true gift of Jesus Christ.

As a young adult, Alice lived the Christian life as best she knew how. She went to church on Sundays and attended Wednesday night prayer meetings. She tithed and served in the church. She read her Bible regularly and tried to mumble a few words of prayer before drifting off to sleep at night. "But," she explains, "I couldn't find the peace, joy, and contentment described in the Bible."

It wasn't until she was on a cycling trip in Israel that the course of her spiritual life pulsed into action. Just months before the trip, she was in what she calls "a war with God." After robotically going through the motions of faith for years, she finally got up the nerve to express to God what she was feeling: "God," she said, "I don't know if you're worth going with any longer. I'm not sure if I want to continue living for you."

In an interesting twist of providence, the person God used to shift her faith into high gear was a Jewish atheist. While touring in Israel, Alice spent time with a man named Harv, who was Jewish by culture but not by belief. After a couple of weeks of conversing with her and watching her in action, Harv made this bold statement: "Alice, you live out your Christian faith." His comment sparked a new kind of searching in Alice's soul, and she realized that her faith had been there all along—it just needed to be taken out of storage and made a daily part of her life.

Later on the trip, at an ancient fortress site called Masada, Alice fully surrendered her life to Christ. Masada, according to tradition, is the site where first-century Jewish soldiers committed mass suicide rather than surrendering to the Romans. Today Israel's military cadets make an oath of allegiance there: "Never forget. Never again." As Alice stood at the fortress ruins overlooking the Dead Sea, she made a commitment of her own: "Never forget God. Never again."

Her war with God was over, but other battles lay just ahead. In the years to come, she would need that spiritual fortress in ways she never could have imagined.

Opposite page: Alice Teisan at the headquarters of His Wheels International in Wheaton, Illinois.

Below: A hospital worker in Angola, Africa, gets a trike to assist in her commute to work.



A DREAM DEFERRED

One morning in Alice's 30th year, just days before embarking on a 10-day, 1,000 mile cycling trip, Alice woke up with what appeared to be the flu. She shrugged it off, hoping it would run its course within 24 hours so she'd be ready for the upcoming ride. But the next day Alice only felt worse. With each day that passed, she found herself still flat on her back and felt her dream of going on the cycling trip slipping away. As the days turned into weeks, then months, and doctors couldn't seem to pinpoint what was happening, greater fears crept in: What was wrong with her body? Would she ever feel like herself again?

Finally, after 10 months, Alice was given a diagnosis: Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME). This condition affects every system of the patient's body. Its symptoms include joint pain, fatigue, a low-grade fever, and in some cases an elevated heart rate, making normal work and life—not to mention bicycling—impossible.

"As a nurse, I knew that medicine didn't have answers for CFS/ME," Alice says. "I was devastated. My initial reaction was, 'Why me? Does my life still have a purpose?'" But after a period of intense struggle, she finally realized she had a choice: "Would I become bitter and give up? Or would I embrace God's new vision for my life?"

She may have had to hang up her bike helmet, but she wasn't ready to give up on God. She had no idea at the time that God wasn't scrapping her dream altogether. He was just repurposing it, weaving together threads of her old dream into her new reality.

A NEW DREAM IS BORN

One evening about a decade after her diagnosis, Alice was eating dinner with a couple from Tanzania. As she talked with them, she discovered, to her surprise, one of the greatest tangible needs in their community was for bicycles.

"Pastors in Tanzania serve up to five villages each, and typically their only mode of transportation is by foot," Alice explains. "Since it takes up to six hours to get from village to village, some pastors spend most of their time traveling." Just \$100 could buy a bicycle for a pastor, freeing him to do the ministry he was called to do.

Later that night, Alice couldn't sleep. But this time it wasn't the CFS/ME that was causing her heart to race; there was something within her spirit that resonated with this need in Africa she'd just heard about. She wasn't sure exactly where this was heading, but one thing was certain: God was igniting a new dream in her heart.

Out of this vision, in 2005, His Wheels International (HWI) was born. HWI is a not-for-profit organization

that provides bicycles and hand-pedaled three-wheelers throughout the world. The hand-pedaled "trikes," as Alice affectionately calls them, have been designed by HWI for people in developing countries who are disabled as a result of landmines, polio, or birth deformities. Since wheelchairs are scarce in these countries, and in many cases the terrain isn't conducive to wheelchairs, individuals would have to scoot on their hands for mobility or rely on others to get from place to place. The trikes offer them dignity and increased independence.

To date, HWI has given more than 1,500 bikes to individuals affiliated with 89 countries. In 2010 the organization shifted gears, and the bicycle division is now concentrated in the US. Through the global trike division, HWI has designed and built 21 different prototypes, and 60 vehicles have been distributed on five continents. Those trikes have been assembled, fabricated, or manufactured in the countries of the individuals receiving them.

THE DESIRES OF HER HEART

As difficult as her journey with CFS/ME has been, and despite all the detours and apparent dead ends along the way, Alice feels she owes a certain debt of gratitude to her illness.

"If my life had gone as I'd expected and my own dreams had come true, I'd have clocked plenty of miles riding cross-country," she says. "I imagine I would have had faith, but it would have been more situational—giving God lip service and maybe even devoting myself to frenzied ministry."

She takes a moment to reflect on a life that didn't come to be. "But if I didn't have these struggles, I wouldn't have been able to see Christ's light shine through my weakness. If I hadn't given my life completely to him, he never would have uncovered the true desires of my heart."

Now on the cusp of her 50th birthday, Alice may not own a bike shop, but as her friend Harv says, "HWI is a spiritual bike shop."

She and her team are distributing wheels to hundreds of people in the name of Christ. She may not be bicycling across the country, but thanks to her, trikes are now being placed in the hands of people who need them, with the vision of someday having small factories in other countries where the nationals can build their own prototypes.

As the light glints off the gold of Alice's bicycle necklace, you get the strong sensation that this is a woman who is truly living her dream. †

Alice Teisan lives in Wheaton, Illinois. For more information about His Wheels International, go to www.HisWheels.org.



A man disabled by Polio who lives in Ethiopia, was found along the road by a Soddó Christian Hospital worker and was brought to the Hospital to get a trike.

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