We finally had found a piece of property to buy. But, it was in Deer Creek, the very place we said we did not want to live.

It was 2005 when we arrived in Arizona late in September. Florida far behind us, the search had been on for a piece of land to build a house on. We had escaped Florida with enough money to begin the process. The Lord had blessed us with a nice increase on the house we remodeled in Arcadia, Florida.

Each day we would drive, and drive, looking for anything that was in our price range in Payson. Payson was nice, and at 5000 feet elevation, the summers would be mild and the winters wouldn’t be too bad. But, the prices were high and available properties were being snapped up as quickly as they hit the market.

We found several that were ‘acceptable’ and we made quick offers, only to find out it was too late. They were already sold.

With our options running low, we decided to look at the last property on our newest list of possibilities. It was in Deer Creek, near Rye, some twelve miles from Payson. We weren’t so excited, but we drove off mostly just for something to do. We frowned as we drove through Rye, with its many billboards, and scruffy looking houses and unkept properties.

This is not where we want to be.

We followed the directions to the vacant lot on Lucky Lane, at the top of the elevated plain in the twenty-five-year-old development. Someone had an idea all those years ago, the idea that people would want to live here. The idea wasn’t so popular and the one hundred or so lots sat mostly undeveloped for many years. A few moved in because they liked the isolation and the fact that few people lived there.

In those days there were more rattlesnakes than people living here. That is according to ‘Bronco’ who was one of the first to move in.

We parked alongside the lot and stepped out of the car. There was the ‘For Sale’ sign at the edge of the road. But, getting onto the lot was difficult. It was covered with a myriad of hostile, thorny bushes and trees. I tried to move sideways, turning and ducking to get a few feet onto the lot. In moments my arms were bleeding from the thorn scratches. The ‘Cat’s Claw’ was the worst of all. The thorns were curved slightly at the tip, like a cat’s claw and once it had you in its grasp, it did not want to let go. Blood would flow.

Our impression wasn’t so good. Ants were everywhere with large mounds sticking up where they abode. Red ones, black ones, small ones, large ones, and there were about as many lizards.

We returned to our car and left.
For days we wondered if we would ever find a lot. Everything we fixed our eyes on just vanished before we could act. Our amount of money to be competitive wasn’t large enough to put us into the competition.

Then we were faced with the discussion about Deer Creek. We mustered all we could to be positive and think of good things about the property. It was below the snow line, warmer in the winter, closer to Lake Roosevelt and Phoenix. It wasn’t much, but we needed to make it sound better than it seemed to be. We were out of options, and Deer Creek Village seemed to be the lesser of two evils, so to speak.

The price was less than half of properties in Payson, and for good reason; fewer people wanted to live there. But we decided to go for it and buy the property. At least we would have a home. We put together a low offer, maybe hoping they would say no. They accepted and we owned a lot in Deer Creek.

Even before we had house plans to start building, we cleared a small area in the front of the lot and put in a rose garden. It was tremendous work because of all the rock on the property, and in the soil we were to learn.

Eventually we had our house drawings, of which we had designed ourselves, and now we were going to be ‘Owner/Builders’ too. The work started first with clearing with a backhoe. When the brush began to come down, we saw an astounding thing, this lot had an incredible view. The lot was sloping, requiring that one part of the house would have to be quite elevated, giving it an even better view.

Was God providing a blessing in disguise? Maybe!

The footings were soon in and stem walls completed. The sub-floor went on and the walls followed. I had set up an old folding camp table under the large Juniper tree in the front of the lot. I would unfold the house plans every day and ponder next steps, and resolve any issue a subcontractor may have, in the shade of our Juniper tree.

Many neighbors stopped by to chat and welcome us to Deer Creek. One particular man was named, Vern. Vern would come up the street with his long thin walking stick, his grey pants, and his crew cut. He had instruction for me each and every time he arrived, telling me to put aluminum foil-wrap on the house to prevent radio interference, or to be sure and insulate the interior walls. He lacked no new topic each day.

While I appreciated some advice, it became apparent that I knew much more about building than did Vern. We enjoyed some chats, but soon I became weary of the visits. I was busy and had much to do. There just wasn’t time to chat and discuss all his building technics. Especially ones I already knew enough about.

It got to the point when I saw Vern coming I would turn away and pretend not to see him, and hope he wouldn’t stop to chat. But, he always did.

On one of these particular days, Vern was about half way up our Lucky Lane hill, Vern lived at the bottom, and we at the top. I could see his house from our lot. I said to myself, ‘drat, here he comes,’ and turned away.

Instantly I felt something was wrong. Terribly wrong! I stopped, and it seemed a voice spoke to me, ‘talk to him, listen.’

I knew God was telling me to do something. I turned back toward Vern and waved. He waved back and I stepped toward him as he came onto the lot. I greeted him warmly and looked into his eyes, something I had not done much of lately.

Vern began with some tips on house building and I cheerfully thanked him, continuing to make
eye contact and to be interested in what he was saying. Something changed. He moved closer to me looking back into my eyes and began telling me about his life. He told me how he had suffered depression all of his life. About his work, about his family, he didn’t leave out much.

I listened without comment, paying special attention to everything he had to say. Vern talked of life’s important issues nonstop for twenty minutes. At one point he had tears in his eyes. I touched him on the shoulders and asked if I could pray for him. He accepted.

Vern walked back down Lucky Lane to his house a different person than when he had come up, at least from my perspective. He had become a nice man with a past that had many hurts in it. He had become a man who needed a friendly ear that would listen, that would pray.

Vern and I became good friends at the moment I began to listen. He didn’t come so often anymore, but when he did, he would prop his walking stick in the corner of the garage and we would talk, not about house building, but about life.

One day the house was finished, we moved in and began life in Deer Creek. We had only been in the house for a few months when we knew it was time to begin the Bible Studies we had planned once the house was done.

One of our very first guests for Bible Study was Vern. He had been schooled in the Bible from an early age, although he had not worked on a relationship with Jesus Christ very diligently over the years. He came faithfully for a few weeks without his wife, Dorothy. We had been told that she had said she was Methodist and no one was going to convert her. She wouldn’t come.

But, in the weeks ahead Vern would tell Dorothy what a good time he was having at the Bible Study. At last, they arrived together one Wednesday night. Dorothy was with him thereafter. She had been ‘converted,’ converted to studying the Bible with Jesus loving neighbors. Vern was delighted.

As time went on, Vern’s health began to deteriorate. He was having a lot of difficulty hearing and would appear with different contraptions to help him hear better. He would set right next to me on one side that he could hear better. I learned to speak loudly and look at him so he could see my lips when I addressed him.

He soon lost ability to speak. He would quietly sit and try to hear. Occasionally he would write a note on a piece of paper and wave it in the air to get our attention. Then I would take the paper and read his comment that he meant for all to hear. He wanted to participate that much.

We had many good discussions and opportunity to hear Vern declare his love for Jesus Christ and his dedication to him. He was definitely born again.

A time came when he was no longer able to come to the meetings, and Dorothy would come alone. And this time led into the time he had to be moved to a Hospice house. Maureen and I visited him there. As we walked down the hall to his room, we heard him moaning continually. As we appeared in his doorway, the moaning stopped and a huge smile appeared on his face, and his hands extended toward us.

We held his hands and talked with him. It was apparent he had little time left. We prayed for him and said our goodbyes. He looked after us as we walked out of the door.

We never saw Vern again.

I am so grateful for a God who called me on my insensitivity that day under the Juniper tree. Vern was a wonderful gift from God, sent to us and I nearly rejected the gift. Forgive me, Father.

Dorothy has become very special to us, like a family member, and all because Vern walked up our hill with his long thin walking stick.

I will never forget Vern . . .