

Wounded But Not Destroyed

By Bobby Ray Dickens

With
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Unless otherwise stated, all Bible quotations are taken from the King James Version.

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Due to the sensitive nature of this book, many names have been changed.

Chapter 1

Belize, Central America

“O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem....”

It was Christmas in the jungle. My first Christmas in the jungle. My first time ever being out of the United States, as a matter of fact. But it wasn't an uncomfortable feeling, in spite of the heat and insects. In fact, the buzzing insects around our heads added harmony as the congregation of Maya Indians strummed their stringed instruments and droned their version of the familiar nativity songs. It was December 25, 1986, and my heart thrilled to think that I was actually here, on the mission field in Belize, Central America.

The surroundings were like nothing I had ever experienced before, especially at Christmas. The church building was one of the few cement-block buildings in the village, complete with a cement floor and tin roof. Bright streamers hung from the rafters of the church, wilting with the heat and humidity. Barefooted children pitter-pattered through the church building enroute to the outhouse, while babies nursed at their mothers' breasts. As the church service progressed, I stood among the men on one side of this small church in Santa Cruz, Belize, and glanced curiously at my new little bride on the other side of the room amongst the women and children. White skin and eyeglasses caused her to stand out in the crowd of black-haired, brown-skinned people. Outside the window, I caught another glimpse of the thatched roof houses and the backdrop of the lush Maya Mountains.

Preaching to these people was like nothing I had experienced before, either. First, I had to speak through an interpreter, which meant that I had to pause after every phrase so it could be translated into Maya. I'm used to talking in front of people, but never before had I had to think so hard about what I was saying and when to stop! Second, my North-American eyes were not at all used to seeing women openly nursing their babies! It so shocked me that as I spoke, I avoided any

possibility of viewing a bare breast. Later my wife asked me, “Bobby, why didn’t you look on our side of the room at all? I kept trying to get your attention, but your eyes were riveted on the men!”

In spite of these unfamiliar things, I felt love and compassion well up in my heart as I shared the Word of life with these precious people. I sensed sadness, oppression, and fear in their lives, especially in that of the women. It had not been so very long before in my life that I, too, had similar feelings. I longed to bring to them the peace and joy I now experienced with God.

Roger and Terry Evans were the missionary pastors of this little church in Santa Cruz. I really admired them and felt such oneness with them in the few days I had been there. I saw that they were doing a valid work among the Belizeans and watched as they interacted with the people in the church, honoring their customs.

After our four-hour morning service, we all made our way to a large, two-room house next to the church building. Typical of Maya homes, the dirt floor was swept bare and clean, the stick walls left sufficient ventilation for a breeze to cool the interior, and a cohune-palm thatched roof provided thick insulation from the heat as well as a home to countless insects, scorpions, spiders, and possibly snakes. More importantly, in one corner of the house a feast had been prepared over the fire hearth. This was a traditional Christmas feast called *caldo*, a soup of broth, lard, meat pieces, and local herbs. In preparation for our big feast, the women of the church had spent the whole night boiling a pig and making *poch*, or hand-ground corn wrapped and boiled in banana leaves.

Our hosts generously set aside seven bowls of the best pieces of pork soaked in broth for the Evans and us. Roger knew that it would offend them if we did not eat all of it... but I knew that my digestive system could not handle another bite of greasy food. A few days before we had been served chicken *caldo*, and my stomach had not yet recuperated from that case of “Montezuma’s revenge”! So Roger ended up eating three of the seven bowls of *caldo*.

Later that evening, I noticed that Roger’s belly had swelled up unusually large. “Roger, what happened to you?” I asked. “You look eight months pregnant!”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’m just allergic to pork,” he replied. “But it’s OK. I only have to do this once a year.”

I felt so humbled, for I knew that I had not reached that level of self-sacrifice. It was a sacrifice of love, and I wanted to learn more about it and make it a part of my life.

That trip to Belize set off something in my heart. My wife and I already had the desire to go to the mission field. Now it began to burn intensely as we realized how much we longed to help the people and to become the true servants that God wanted us to be.

As I thought about the challenges that I realized would come my way, I reflected on my life and how hardships had prepared me for a land such as this. The love and compassion I felt for the people had not come naturally. The many heartaches, losses, and challenges of my life had been burning away impurities. God had been at work, bringing forth blessings out of crises, laughter out of pain, and victory out of defeat.

My purpose for sharing my life story is to let others know that God has an infinitely wise plan and purpose for each of our lives. Furthermore, He is working to bring that plan to completion, if we will only let Him.

I also have a second motive for sharing my story, which, quite honestly, is even more compelling than the first. Some years ago, God promised me that if I would write a book and tell others about my life, He would bring about a physical healing, enabling me to father children. My initial reaction to His proposal was, “No way, God. I’m not *that* desperate to have children. I could never endure the embarrassment of other people knowing my problem.” Quite surprisingly, however, the Lord has already wrought a tremendous healing in my heart. I rejoice in the faithfulness of His promises! Through His grace and His gentle working in my life, I am now able to share my story.

Chapter 2

School of Hard Knocks

On a warm, late-summer day, September 3, 1948, a small hospital in Greenville, Alabama, was my arrival point into the world. My mother, Annie Lou Dickens, was probably responsible for naming me “Bobby Ray” as she lovingly cradled me in her arms. My father, James Fisher Dickens, may have stood by nervously. An older brother and sister, Charles Allen and Betty Eugenia, welcomed me into the home, and a few years later, little sister Georgia Ann completed our little family.

When I was born, Mama and Daddy hadn’t been in Alabama long. From what I understand, my father was born and raised there, but my parents actually met in my mother’s hometown of Colquitt, Georgia. My father had come from Alabama to Colquitt as a farmhand. There he was soon attracted to blonde, blue-eyed Annie Lou Jordan, a petite woman with a mind of her own. He smiled as he watched her flit about, socializing and making herself generally useful. Moreover, he admired the fact that hard work was no stranger to Annie Lou, who went about her duties on the family farm with spryness and energy.

Likewise, my mother was interested in this tall, stout man with dark, curly hair and dark brown eyes. Although James’ exact heritage isn’t known, Mama learned that some Cherokee Indian blood in his veins accounted for his firm, dark features. She didn’t mind the fact that he was quite a bit older than she, with a previous marriage and a child. Soon they tied the knot at the local justice of the peace.

As a married couple, my mother and father were quite a pair. Daddy was so much taller than Mama that she could walk under his outstretched arm! But Mama was well able to handle him. Whenever he came home in a drunken condition, just as quick as you please Mama could lock Daddy in the outhouse or tie him spread-eagle to the bedposts, until he could sober up!

In all honesty, my father was a good worker, having many skills as a farm hand, carpenter, and handy man; but he usually squandered his income on booze and gambling. As far back as I remember, it seems like my father was gone more than he was home, since he was prone to going off drinking and not coming back for weeks at a time. Therefore, he had to move from place to place quite a bit, looking for jobs, trying to make a fresh start each time – that’s why the family was in Alabama when I was born. It was hard on mother, being alone with four children during those times. Finally, she persuaded Daddy to move the family back to Colquitt where at least she could have the support of her family while Daddy was off on drinking binges.

It was there in Colquitt that I have the fondest memories of my childhood. It’s not like we were wealthy or anything. On the contrary, we were quite poor. On a scale of 1 to 10, you might say we were a 1.5! But life was simple and happy for me, because we didn’t have many things to complicate life. We made do with what we had.

I remember the big farmhouse we called home when we first got to Colquitt. It had no luxuries – I learned to draw water from the outside well, utilize corncobs while in the outhouse, and help Charles gather fuel for the wood stove. One winter while helping gather firewood, my pinkie finger nearly got chopped off. I was sitting on top of the horse-drawn sled where the wood was piled, when Charles dropped the axe – right on my hand! With a little bit of tape and a lot of TLC, my mother managed to stop the bleeding, and the tip grew back onto my finger.

Mother’s lovingkindness must have had an influence on me. One day I found a stiff, cold blackbird in the barn, and my tender heart felt sorry for it. In childlike faith, I wanted to help it fly again, so I set it up on a gatepost. There it stayed for at least two days before I sadly admitted that it probably was not going to come back to life!

Another memory that stands out in my mind for some reason is of the first airplane I ever saw, there at the old farmhouse. At three or four years of age, I could not understand how that thing stayed up in the air. Yet when my sister Betty and I thought we saw Santa and his reindeer soaring through the air one Christmas Eve, I

had no questions nor qualms about a sleigh with reindeer flying! We were sure it was Santa.

Maybe I remember that event because of my father.... Daddy was there with us on that Christmas, whereas every other year, he had been out drinking or gambling. For the first time that I ever remember, we woke up on Christmas morning to find presents waiting for us! Mama must have been so happy to have had Daddy there, giving, laughing, and celebrating Christmas with us as a family.

Sadly, this happiness did not last long. Shortly after that, my father abandoned us. We had to leave that spacious farmhouse that I had learned to love, with all its memories, and move into the old Musgrove place, a one-room house on a little farm. There Charles was able to help Mr. Musgrove and bring in some money, while Betty, Georgia Ann, and I helped as best we could. More and more we learned to lean on Mama. Thank God, she was a real trooper! She overcame overwhelming hardships and made life as enjoyable as possible for her four young'uns. We loved her deeply, and I was always so thankful that I had my mama there to take care of me.

Our new little home did have one advantage over the old farmhouse: here we had the luxury of indoor running water. Just as fast as you could pump the handle, the water would come out! Also, we had two big beds in our house. Playfully, Mama would throw all of us into one of them, and we would scream with delight as the bed wrapped itself around us like an overstuffed comforter. There were no worries about electric or gas bills, because we didn't have either. Mama cooked on a wood-burning stove, heated the house with the fireplace, and warmed her iron on the fire when the clothes needed pressing. She swept the wooden floor with bunches of broom weed tied in a bundle, and in the summertime, she gave us baths in a number-three washtub out on the front porch.

However, this house had some mysterious things about it that always made me afraid. Mama and Charles pointed out stains on the floor under the bed, solemnly telling us that those were blood stains from a man that had been killed there. Also, they sternly warned us that under no circumstances were we ever to look up in the attic. We were never told why, but I could just envision dead bodies up there! I was

also filled with fear at the thought of going outside after dark, imagining that the wolves would come out from under the house and get me. Needless to say, Mama never had to worry about me, a first-grader, coming home late!

One of the most unusual events of living in this mysterious house occurred late one night. Long after Mama had tucked all of us children into bed, a hard knock on the front door resounded through the tiny, one-room shack, so loudly that all of us were startled out of a deep sleep. When we cried out, “Who’s there?!” silence answered. After two or three repetitions of this harsh knocking, Charles slipped out of bed and grabbed his rifle, while Mama hastily dressed my sisters and me. Sneaking out of a window, the five of us, with hearts beating wildly, raced to a neighbor’s house about a mile and a half away. We didn’t dare return until the next day, when we saw that the night visitor had taken the butt end of a knife and beaten it on the door. To this day, we do not know who did it or why.

Through all these experiences, both good and bad, I can look back and see the hand of God on my life. In these early, formative years, God taught me some important lessons. I learned the necessity of taking care of my possessions, because if something such as a pair of school shoes wore out before its time, we just were not able to get a replacement. I learned to enjoy small pleasures, such as the thrill of running across the field and buying out the country store for a nickel. But the most important lessons for me came in the middle of the “hard knocks.” Through these, I learned to be an overcomer, to rise above my circumstances, and to enjoy the good things that God had to offer in life. This was to be a vital lesson, one which I was called to lean upon in the years that were to follow.

Chapter 3

A Great Loss

Each of us is blessed with talents. Some people uncover their talents early in life; others wait years to discover theirs. It was at the ripe “old” age of six that I first displayed a talent for fixing mechanical things.

It was the summer of 1955. I had just finished first grade in Georgia when Mama moved the family to Jacksonville, Florida, to be near her brother Kit. Our home, on a side street on the old Northside of town, was close to a junk pile. When I found a treasure lying there among the rubbish – a rusty, old bicycle – my knack for fixing things was unveiled. Even though the tires were rotted off and the seat was missing, I saw potential. After freeing up the rims and chain with some oil that Uncle Kit gave me, I was in business: my first and very own bike! It seems that I wore out the front porch riding back and forth on it. Unfortunately, my skills were not advanced enough to keep the old bike running forever, and my treasure returned to the heap from whence it came. Nevertheless, I thank God for giving me the ability to fix things; it has proven helpful time and time again.

My family spent the majority of the summer in Jacksonville, since Charles, who was now fourteen years old, was able to earn good money working with Uncle Kit, a carpenter. It wasn't an easy time for Mama, with no husband to support her, nor for Charles, with the burden of supporting a family. So I imagine it was a big relief to them when, one day in early September (right around my seventh birthday), in popped my father. We were all surprised to see him. But I didn't trust him. He had taken off so many times that I didn't feel he cared much about us. Nevertheless, Mama said that our daddy had promised to give up drinking and take care of us if she came back to him... so *maybe* things would be OK.

Daddy had driven down from Georgia with Uncle Henry, Mama's brother-in-law. He intended to move us back there and have a real family life again. A big trip

to Georgia was planned. Even Uncle Kit and his wife were joining us for the eight-hour drive.

It didn't take long to pack all of our belongings. Everything we owned fit in the back of Uncle Henry's pick-up. The real challenge came in trying to fit everyone into two vehicles. Mama hadn't been feeling well, so she asked my aunt if she could ride with her and Kit in the car, but the answer was "no" – there wasn't room. So Mama chose to ride on top of our things in the back of the pick-up truck, thinking that maybe the fresh air would do her good. Charles rode with her, while Uncle Henry, Dad, Betty, Georgia Ann, and I squeezed in the front seat.

If only we had known what was about to happen.... There is no way to go back and change things, but I would much rather have had my loving mama next to me than to have been sitting next to the stranger who was my father. As it was, I just tried to settle into the crowded front seat as we headed off to Georgia.

Just before we reached the outskirts of Tallahassee, Florida, a tragic series of events took place. Uncle Henry pulled out to pass a car. At that same moment another car towing an Airstream travel trailer started to pass our truck. As this car blared its horn at us, Uncle Henry swerved the truck sharply back into the right lane. In the lurch, my mother somehow flew off, landing face first on the tar and gravel. The car and travel trailer behind tried to dodge her helpless form. But before the vehicle hit the ditch beside us, Mama's precious body had been crushed mercilessly by the unyielding wheels.

Before anyone could stop me, I dashed frantically back to the place where Mother was lying. Vividly I recall laying her head in my lap as her blood flowed red over my brown shirt and shorts set. Desperately, I tried to push the blood back down the holes in her face, where just a few moments before a nose had been. I had to make her all right. My heart screamed that she would be OK. I watched in horror as they placed my mama into an ambulance and took her away.

She died before reaching the hospital.

How does one explain to a seven-year-old that his mother is gone? I did not understand death at the time; all I felt was numbness. I remember her body lying in the home of her birth, the old log home in Georgia. My sister Betty said everyone went around comforting Daddy and each other, but we kids were kind of left to the wayside. I recall the funeral, and the burial spot behind the Baptist church, but I still didn't comprehend the totality of the loss. I just felt an aching sadness. As the days wore on, I wondered why Mother had left me. She had been the only person that I really ever felt loved me. I even felt that she, more than any other person or thing in the whole world, had "belonged" to me. And now I was left with nothing....

As one year followed another into my teens and young adulthood, memories of my mother's untimely death caused endless wonderings and ceaseless pain in my heart. I felt as if a great injustice had been done. It just wasn't fair. A deep sense of loss hung over me, as if the only thing that had meant anything to me had been rudely snatched away. Like an infantile bird, I felt as if I had been kicked out of the nest before I was ready to fly, and there was a world of vultures ready to devour me. No one was there to protect or help or care for me. Worst of all, I grew to believe that not even God cared for me, for I thought that He had taken away my mother.

And then there was my father. Memories of him bore heavily on me. He stayed with us four children for a while after Mother's death, helping Uncle Henry build a house, and trying to assist us in his strange ways. He may have felt grief just as I did at the loss of my mother, his wife, but I never sensed it. Nor did I sense that he had any affection or real concern for me. He just slipped further and further away as he buried himself in the bottle. His withdrawal just strengthened my distrust toward him.

There was no doubt, however, that I did my share to provoke his wrath. One event in particular stands out in my memory and maybe typifies our relationship. Out by the woodpile, I had gotten hold of a cat and put a rope around its tail. Seeking my dad's attention, I daringly called out, "I'm gonna string this cat up in this mulberry tree." As I thrust the rope up toward the branches, Daddy warned me very clearly that if I did, he was going to "whoop the fire outta me." Strongheadedly, I pulled the rope anyway, leaving the cat dangling in midair. No sooner had the cat

started to howl than I was howling too – Daddy had me by the arm, with his belt in hand. Of course I deserved to be punished, but I resisted. Around and around we went, him swinging and me jumping. Suddenly I stepped on a nail, piercing my foot completely from sole to top. My father’s response was an unsympathetic, sharp reprimand: “If you’da listened ta me, that wouldn’ta happened.” With that, he sternly marched me all the way to the house and left me there. Only my sister showed concern as she put the best bandage she could on my bleeding foot. The intense physical pain didn’t compare to the deep hurt of my father’s total lack of pity toward me. It was hard to see my culpability in the situation; I blamed him instead.

In the fall of 1955, my father left for the final time. My feelings toward him which had been vague and uneasy now turned to anger and resentment. It was he who had so many times abandoned us over the years. It was he who was seated inside the truck while my mother sat outside and was killed. It was he who didn’t seem to have a care in the world for anybody but himself. Needless to say, I considered him the cause of my mother’s death, and the seed of anger and resentment in my heart developed into full-blown hatred. Years later, when he dropped in on us, I had absolutely no desire to see him. When he suggested that I come to live with him, I felt like scoffing in his face; instead, I bit my lip and only gave him a look, hoping that it expressed some of the hatred that I felt. Even nine years later (1964), when my father suffered a tragic death in a house-trailer fire, I refused to go to his funeral or visit his burial site. Charles was the one who took care of his death certificate and all, but I wanted no part of him. I hated him.

Why Charles took it upon himself to see that my father was buried properly, I don’t know. But he was like that – always assuming responsibility for the family in my father’s absence. He even felt responsible for our mother’s death; when she was thrown from the truck, he was, too, but he miraculously landed on a mattress. He received only a few scratches, but the emotional scars from the terrible event went deep. He often said that he should have been the one killed, not Mother.

Shortly after Mama’s death and our father’s abandoning us, Charles married (at age 15) and tried to start life anew. Meanwhile, Betty, Georgia Ann, and I continued to live with our relatives in Georgia. On the surface, the loss of my

parents didn't appear to affect me much, although deep inside I was a lost, lonely, confused little boy. I had learned to suppress my feelings to the point where nothing *seemed* to affect me much. My actual lifestyle wasn't altered radically: I'd never had much to call my own, I'd known nothing but severe punishments growing up, and I'd always had to work. And here on the family farm, work we did. Every day after school and all summer, Betty and I were expected to pick cotton or hoe peanuts. In the winter we carried firewood or helped butcher hogs, all in addition to our schoolwork.

In spite of it all, we did manage to have a little fun. An especially exciting event centered around a pet billy goat that used to pull us on a sled or wagon. One day as he was dragging us around, Billy broke loose from the wagon and jumped across a fence into a cotton field. I climbed the fence after him, determined to overcome him by staring him down. We were eye-to-eye, and I was just ready to catch him when all of a sudden he lowered his horns and charged at me. I stood my ground, expecting him to slow down or swerve. But that old, stubborn goat ran right over me, knocking me flat on my back! Undaunted, I jumped up and wildly chased the goat from one end of Uncle Henry's 300-acre farm to the other, through plowed and unplowed ground, filling my clothes with prickly burrs and tearing up my feet on the brittle, dry cotton stalks. Nearing sheer exhaustion, I was extremely relieved to spy my uncle's pick-up truck racing toward me. My relatives had come to join the wild goat chase! It was none other than Charles who performed the amazing feat of catching the goat by jumping him from the running board of the truck right onto the goat's back!

Eventually, however, my uncle and aunt decided that my sisters and I had to be placed in an orphanage, which meant I would be separated from the girls. Fear gripped my heart at the thought. But thankfully, when Uncle Kit in Jacksonville found out, he decided that we should come and live with him. He came to Georgia, and one by one, starting with my little sister, we found a new home with him.

I was eight and a half when it was my turn to move to Jacksonville. I still remember being enrolled only a few days later in a little wooden schoolhouse, Pickett Elementary, not far from my new home. I was in the third grade, and before

long, I met new friends and things started going better for me. My older sister Betty had already come to live with a friend in Jacksonville, but Uncle Kit decided it would be better for her to live with us. So finally, there were Georgia Ann, Betty, and I living together under one roof again. Soon after our reunion, my uncle received permission from my father to become legal guardians, and it was a glorious day for me when he became “Daddy.” I finally felt again as if I *belonged*.

For the first year, my home life was nearly perfect. Daddy took time to do the things with me that every good father does with a son. We built houses and playthings, worked together, cleaned the yard and shop, fished for hours on the St. Mary’s River, and many other things. We developed a wonderful relationship, and I learned many important skills and character traits from him.

But about this time, trouble developed.... Aunt Ella Jewel became very protective of Skip, her son from a previous marriage, who had been crippled from polio. If for any reason Skip received a whipping from Daddy, she would retaliate by striking out at my older sister and me. As soon as Daddy went to work the next day, Betty or I would get a beating. We’re not talking about a normal spanking – we got the kind of beating that left us laying across the bed or in a corner of the room, unable to pick ourselves up for hours. Betty even got struck in the face with Ella Jewel’s fists. Sadly, it became so routine that we just expected it and began to dread the times my dad would whip my stepbrother.

Aunt Ella Jewel also did things to humiliate me. When kids at school were plastering down their long hair with Brylcream, she made me keep mine buzzed off in a butch. I had to wear suspenders on my pants all the time, even though that was considered for babies. When the school recommended that I get glasses for reading, she wouldn’t spend the money on me. Instead, she refused to let me watch television, claiming it was TV that was ruining my eyes. This was a terrible fate, because I had never seen TV until we came to live with Daddy in Jacksonville! And I remember one whole summer that Ella Jewel made me stay inside (without watching TV, of course) – I can’t remember for the life of me why. Needless to say, I developed a hatred for her. I would even dream about ways of her dying.

Eventually, when I was in junior high school, she was to leave Daddy in favor of a younger man. Daddy wanted us to go and beg her to come back, but I refused. Why should I plead for such a wicked person to come back to us? It was great without her. I asserted my newfound freedom by growing out my hair, using Crisco to flatten it down so I could part it! Shortly after she and Daddy were divorced, I saw her in a general store, and I made *sure* she knew about my hair!

In spite of the hardships that Ella Jewel caused me while she was a part of our family, I truly enjoyed life with Daddy, through all of the years that I was with him. Fishing trips always left us with good feelings and a pile of fish. Working along side of him as he crafted fine cabinets or built complete houses caused me to stand in awe and respect of him. And the occasional trips to Georgia thrilled me, as I got to play with my cousins with whom I had grown up.

We also attended church very regularly, and in spite of the strict “clothes-line” religion (I thought if I wore shorts I was going to hell), I had a real encounter with God. Though it would take many years before I made Jesus Christ the Lord of my life, I came to know of God’s love for me and His gift of salvation when I was nine or ten years old. Without a shadow of a doubt, I can now see that God’s hand has been upon my life even from this young age.

He even used Ella Jewel to help me in a very unusual way. It all started one day when I was about nine years old. My stepbrother Skip and I, along with a friend named Dennis, decided to run away from home. We wrote a note and, taking nothing along with us, ran down to the tracks to wait for a slow-moving freight train so that we could run away from home. We perched expectantly under a trussle, but instead of the slow train we were awaiting, along came a fast passenger train. Rocks scattered, the trussle vibrated, sparks flew. It shook us up so badly, we ran home and tore up the note just before Ella Jewel got home! Later, someone told her that I had been thinking about running away, so she sent me to a psychiatrist. She may have done that to humiliate me, but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

For a year I attended weekly sessions with a child psychiatrist. I don’t know exactly how he did it, but somehow through those inkblots and pictures, he got me to open up. For the first time since I was old enough to understand, I learned the

freedom that there is in expressing my feelings. Over the years I had become like a turtle in a shell, not realizing how bound I was by the things I was keeping inside of me. I determined at that point that I was not going to keep things inside any more.

As with other lessons I've learned, this principle of opening up has helped me countless times throughout my life to cope with feelings that would try to build up inside of me. I'm very thankful to that psychiatrist for helping me see this vital truth. Yet as important as the lesson was, merely opening up did not and could not eliminate the feelings themselves. I still nurtured the deep hatred toward my real father and toward Ella Jewel.

It was not until years later when I completely gave my life to Jesus Christ, that I realized that I had to forgive these two people and ask God to forgive me. Matthew 6:14-15 in the Living Bible says, "Your heavenly Father will forgive you if you forgive those who sin against you; but if you refuse to forgive them, he will not forgive you." When as an adult many years later I finally forgave my father and stepmother, Father God was free to do a mighty work in my heart.

Chapter 4

The Accident

April 9, 1960, dawned as any other spring day. Daddy, Ella Jewel, and all of us kids were visiting our cousins in Bainbridge, Georgia, as we often did. The Flint River flowed steadily within the boundaries of its banks, the birds sang in the early morning sunshine, and the breezes carried the fresh scent of fertile earth. In the eyes of three young boys, the freshly plowed field was alive with possibilities of hidden treasure.

“Bobby, look at the piece of arrowhead I found!” exclaimed Ronny, my ten-year-old cousin. My eleven-year-old mind responded with eager enthusiasm. Ronny’s older brother Lou was finding treasures of his own a short distance away. Already our pockets bulged with arrowheads of all shapes and cuts, plentiful along the banks and area surrounding the Flint River. Tomahawks had even been found there, and it was our goal to find one.

As Ronny, Lou, and I searched through the red and brown pods of dirt and clay for that flawless Indian specimen, a noise caught our attention. It was a voice, crying out to us from across the road where a small strip of woods separated us from the muddy river. Abandoning our treasure hunt, we three rushed over to the barbed-wire fence and quickly yet carefully climbed through the wire to see whose voice it was. Just as we suspected, it was Skip, my stepbrother, standing at the edge of the woods. As we drew near, it became apparent that he held in his hand a gun, the very same twelve-gauge shotgun that our uncle had forbidden us to take from the house.

Lou ran on up to Skip, and the older boys decided it was time to get rid of us younger ones. Lou took the gun from Skipper’s hand. “Go back to the house. We don’t want you tagging along,” he ordered Ronny and me.

“We’re gonna go with you, or else I’m gonna tell that you got the gun,” was my cocky reply.

“You’d better not.”

“I will, ‘cause I know you’re not supposed to have it. Then you’ll both get in trouble.”

“If you tell, I’m gonna *shoot* you,” warned Lou.

“Well, I’m gonna tell if you make us go home. And we ain’t goin’,” I decided.

This went on only a very short time, and Lou got really ticked at us. Without a word, he swung toward me with the shotgun. The cold steel barrel thumped against my small body, and my eyes grew wide in disbelief as the gun fired. A scream escaped my lips as my body absorbed the shock of the explosion. Then everything went blurry.

Although nearly blown half in two, I didn’t lose consciousness right away. The next hour was like a horrible nightmare. Lou raced desperately the short distance to his house, blood from my torn body oozing over his arms. The incident must have shaken him deeply, for when he reached the house, he was clutching my body so tightly that his mother literally had to beat him across the face to get him to let go of me.

I remember lying half-delirious in the back seat of Daddy’s car as they rushed me to the nearest hospital. “Let me up! I’m dreaming,” I repeatedly begged my stepmother. Daddy drove his brand-new 1960 Rambler as fast as he could along the bumpy dirt roads, but it seemed like an eternity. When he finally jerked to a halt in front of the Bainbridge hospital lobby, he was told he’d have to take me around back to the emergency room. In Daddy’s desperation to save my life, he threw the car into reverse while it was still going forward, ripping out the transmission of his new car. Frantically he carried me to the emergency entrance, blood trailing our path. The last thing I remember was the doctor cutting off my pants in the emergency room, and a nurse giving me an injection....

When I came to, seven days later, I found myself in a hospital room, with Ella Jewel beside my bed. The first words out of my mouth: “Don’t whip Lou.” I wasn’t concerned about my own condition, just that Lou not be punished, for some reason. It’s amazing that I felt no hard feelings toward him, just pity. Actually, the

events of a few days before and all that I was still experiencing just seemed like a bad dream, not a reality. But I knew I had to forgive Lou. Even now that I've had to live with all of the far-reaching consequences of this "accident," I've never had any bitterness in my heart toward Lou. I can see now that it was the grace of God that enabled me to forgive like that.

Soon after awakening from the coma, I learned that I had been transferred from Bainbridge Hospital to a larger facility in Tallahassee, Florida, and that Ella Jewel had been with me the whole time, praying for me. In fact, she faithfully remained at my side the duration of my stay in Tallahassee, and was to take me often to the doctor in the following months. These acts of kindness seemed so out of character with her previous acts of cruelty toward me, but I am thankful to God that she had a compassionate side, especially during this time in my life.

I wasn't allowed to see my physical condition for several days. Then one day when they were changing the bandages, I looked between my legs at the groin area. There was nothing there except a tube protruding from me. Strangely, I don't remember having any feelings concerning the fact that I no longer had what every boy has. I must have been emotionally numb. I am thankful now that I was only a kid and didn't understand the full implications. I just knew it was very strange and kept waiting to wake up from this bizarre nightmare.

Dream or no dream, I could not bear the thought of just lying there in that bed, so I continuously begged the doctor, nurses, and orderlies to let me stand up. I felt that if I could just stand, I would have a little more control over the things that were happening to me. Finally, one day an orderly came in the room to grant me my desire. Carefully picking me up out of the bed, he slowly tilted me to a vertical position. When the blood rushed to my right foot, it hurt something terrible. I screamed, "Get it off the floor! Get it off the floor!" Imagine my discouragement when the orderly told me my feet had never even touched the floor.

Then as I lay in bed day after day, I noticed the muscles in my right leg contracting, gradually drawing the leg up. The gunshot, I learned, had not only hit me in the groin but also blown away half of the muscle and tissue on my right thigh, just below the hip joint. Miraculously, the bone had been untouched. Daddy told me

that the doctors had said my right leg would never be useful, just limp and atrophied. They recommended amputation. Daddy wouldn't hear of such a thing! He was a praying man and had faith that not only would I keep my leg but also walk again. His faith was in God.

Daddy kept asking the doctors in Tallahassee when I could be transported across the state to a hospital in Jacksonville, close to our home. They informed him that it would be at least four weeks before they could even think of transporting me to Jacksonville, and that even then it would have to be by ambulance. However, since Daddy knew how to pray, and he had friends who also trusted God for healing and restoration, it was only two weeks later that I was bedded up, not in an ambulance but in the back seat of Daddy's car, headed to Baptist Hospital in Jacksonville.

The next few years of my life were spent in and out of hospitals – mostly in. At Baptist Hospital I underwent many surgeries to “put me back together.” The doctors used skin grafts from my thighs to patch the pelvic area; reconstruction of the genitals would begin at a later date. Sometimes they used the operating room at St. Vincent Hospital in Jacksonville, and there I would stay to recover from the surgery. I still have a Bible that was given to me there, dated May 6, 1960.

Of the two, I enjoyed Baptist Hospital more, because the nurses took a strong liking to me for some reason. Often they allowed me to slip into the laboratories and ask the technicians all kinds of questions. Some nights when the other kids in my ward had gone to sleep, they would sneak a television out of a private room, pull my curtains, and let me stay up all night watching shows!

From Baptist Hospital I was transferred to Hope Haven, a hospital specifically for crippled children. There I was able to receive the financial help, medical treatment, and physical therapy that I needed. When I first arrived at Hope Haven, I was very skinny. My right leg was quite drawn up, and I had to get around in a wheelchair or be carried. The only time I was to be out of this new “home” for the next several months was on weekends, when I was allowed to visit my family. At home, though, all I could do was lie around and watch television or watch my family and friends have fun in the backyard swimming pool.

So even though it was nice to see my family, I looked forward to getting back to Hope Haven where there were other kids like me. We were always doing fun things, like wheelchair races down the corridors! One time we were racing extra fast, and for some reason I had to make an immediate stop. The wheelchair skidded to a halt, but I kept right on going, out of the wheelchair and down the hall! Thankfully, I was wrapped in blankets and sitting on pillows, so I just skidded to a graceful stop.

There were also Mr. and Miss Johnson to look forward to. This brother and sister team had devoted their time and finances to making life enjoyable for us kids at Hope Haven. Mr. Johnson took us out on fishing trips and other adventures, while Miss Johnson had a room in the basement filled with all kinds of crafts imaginable. There was also a tutor who made sure that I didn't neglect my studies. Since I had missed the entire spring of my sixth-grade year, I repeated that grade, completing most of my assignments in the hospital with my tutor.

A month or two after my arrival at Hope Haven, the doctors decided that it was time to get my right leg straightened out. As I lay flat on my back on an operating table, the doctor and nurses pushed down on the knee joint until the back of my knee was about four inches off the table. I thought my leg was going to split apart. Oh, what terrible pain – and I made sure everyone knew about it! Unrelentingly they held my leg in that position until a full cast was in place. Later that same day, they cut the cast completely in half down the sides, keeping only the back section on. With the help of elastic bandages, my leg was strapped to the cast, allowing my leg to be liberated for therapy and for treatments in the medicated whirlpool.

Before long, the muscles relaxed and the doctors saw that it was time for a brace that would keep my leg even straighter. I was glad to see progress, and I didn't mind the therapy because I knew it was helping me learn to walk again; but I surely hated wearing that brace, especially when they expected me to sleep with it on at night!

Another “thorn in the flesh” developed during this time: kidney stones! Before the doctors had started working on my leg, they had finally removed the

catheter from my groin area, allowing the urine to flow naturally through the small opening in my skin. However, sharp, flaky kidney stones would sometimes get stuck in the scar tissue. They literally felt like thorns in my flesh! Imagine walking through an oyster bed or a pile of razor-sharp rocks – that’s how those kidney stones and flakes felt as they passed out of my body! The pain was so intense that sometimes I would have to bite on a rag to keep from screaming as the nurse or I pulled them out of the small hole.

One of these kidney stones caused an exceptionally traumatic time for me. It happened the day that Mr. Johnson had promised to load up some boys in his wagon and take us fishing or crabbing at the creek. Going to the creek was one of my favorite things to do, and I eagerly secured permission from the doctor and my parents the night before the trip. However, I woke up that morning in intense pain from a wallop of a stone. After diligent effort, the nurses chipped away a few pieces so that a small stream could pass. At that point, the pain hardly bothered me, as I was so preoccupied with the thought that I might not be able to go on the fishing trip. I begged and pleaded and finally persuaded the nurses to let me go. I was ecstatic and could hardly wait to get in the wagon.

However, as you might guess, things did not turn out well. Shortly after arriving at the creek, I felt the need to go to the bathroom. No matter how hard I tried, nothing came out. Mr. Johnson had to load us all up again and rush the quarter mile back to the hospital. It took an emergency operation to extract a kidney stone the size of a marble.

It was times like these, as well as the monotony of months in beds, wheelchairs, and braces, that made me absolutely fed up with not being able to walk and run and do normal activities. So one weekend when I was home, I decided to take the brace off my leg. Upon returning to the hospital, I was thrilled and proud as I came *walking*, brace-free, up the six front steps and down the long hall toward the therapy room. The first person I encountered was none other than my physical therapist.

She gave me a shocked look. “What are you doing??” she demanded.

“I’m walking,” was my cool reply.

“Don’t you know you can’t do that without a brace?” she continued.

“I might not can,” I said, “but I’m doing it. And I’m not ever putting that brace back on again.”

And I never did.

You can probably understand that by this time I had become quite familiar with doctors and nurses and had learned a lot about medicine and medical practices. From my experiences in the laboratories at Baptist Hospital and amongst the people at Hope Haven, I could converse quite freely with them. I also liked the fact that I could impress my family when they came to visit! While I was at Hope Haven, God also dealt with my heart. I saw so many sad, sad cases of children with diseases and deformities far worse than my own, helping me not to feel so sorry for myself. I determined (at the young age of eleven), on the basis of my budding medical knowledge and the compassion that I felt in my heart, that I wanted to be either a doctor or a minister when I grew up. Well, I later became a minister of the gospel, and as a missionary have helped many, many people medically as well. The Lord knew ‘way back then what it would take to mold me into the person He wanted me to be. He surely had His hand in my life, even in the midst of all my pain and suffering.

For example, it must have been God giving me the determination to overcome the prognosis that I would never walk again without the aid of a crutches or a brace. Indeed, that relentless determination to overcome obstacles was a major factor in regaining the complete use of my legs. Once my strength returned, I retaught myself to run, to play football, and to ride a bike. When I entered junior high, the challenge before me was how to walk up all those multitude of steps day after day; soon it became no problem. Roller-skating then became my challenge, and despite *many* falls, this skill was mastered also. I even taught myself to water ski, slalom style. I remember my friends telling me that I absolutely had to come up on the ski with my right leg forward. Since I couldn’t, I just did it with my left. No way was I going to let a simple problem like that get in my way! I don’t know of

any athletic activity that I haven't been able to do – even competing in the Jacksonville River Run, a 15K (9.3 mile) race, in 1985 and 1986.

Learning to use my legs was not the major obstacle I had to overcome, however. Some of the toughest battles had to be fought not physically, but on the inside where I had been deeply wounded, although the scars may not have been as visible as my deformed body. The healing of those wounds could not be accomplished by a doctor's hands; only a total immersion in love would free me from my crippled emotions. What a story unfolded as I sought to find it!

Chapter 5

Fear and Selfishness

Fear.... Fear of being different, fear of not fitting in, fear of being revealed – fear of rejection. Fear haunted me inwardly and spilled over into many of my actions, permeating my life for years to come.

The fears came gradually, as fears usually do. I was probably a little afraid of going back to Pickett Elementary, where I would be a year behind my old classmates and would have to face all kinds of questions.

“What happened?” everyone wanted to know.

“What’s wrong with your leg?” they would inquire as they stared at me limping around.

“Why don’t you come out and play?”

The questions were asked with innocence, but I began to dread them and think up lies to “protect” myself from being singled out. Sometimes, too, the comments weren’t so innocent, and sometimes they were downright cruel. I remember one big shot boy coming up to me, taunting, “I hear you got a plastic *!@&.”

I feigned surprise, “Naw, who ever heard of a plastic one?” Yes, I had undergone plastic surgery with Dr. Bernard Morgan, a wonderful reconstructive surgeon who treated me like a son. Yes, I knew what this kid was talking about. But there was no way I could let him know it.

Besides, Dr. Morgan had not used plastic. He had taken a section of skin, muscle, and fat from the left side of my abdomen, folded it so that skin was on both sides, and shaped it into a tube. While one end of the tube was still connected to my abdomen, he had grafted the other end to the groin area. When it was ready, he cut the skin away from the stomach. Thus, he constructed a semblance of the missing organ, allowing me to go to the bathroom like any other little boy. I desperately wanted to be like other boys, not to be considered “different.”

Junior high school came as a welcome relief, since the risk of being found out was not so great. There was a whole new batch of kids, and I got some new buddies

to hang out with. Also, a friend and I became the reading teacher's pets. She would let us spend time during and after class combing her long hair, and she gave us extra help whenever we needed it. When she encouraged us to carry the girls' books for them, I gladly stumbled to classes under a huge stack of books and papers, loving the attention!

Through junior high and into senior high there were many girls that I liked, but I never let them know. I just shied away, since I was becoming aware of what went on between girls and guys and once again was afraid of being found out.

PE (physical education) was also a problem. Even though I was able to participate in almost any kind of sport by then, I lived in fear of being exposed in the locker room. I had been around enough to see guys stripped of their clothing and thrown into the shower. Imagining what would happen if I was to be exposed like that, I obtained a doctor's excuse not to dress out for PE. Fear of such embarrassment was more than I could handle. Through junior high I had gotten out of PE completely, but for the first week or so of high school I was required to participate in my regular school clothes, while the rest of the class dressed out in their PE uniforms. Kids would ask, "Why aren't you dressing out for PE?"

"Aw, I'm not going to be in the class," I'd lie. "I'm going to transfer. I don't like this teacher." After that I worked in the office during PE time, which was also difficult to deal with. A crippled boy worked there at the same time, with obvious reasons for not participating in PE. But it didn't appear that anything was wrong with me. So, of course, kids would ask questions. I lied some more, telling them that was what I wanted to do, or that my help was needed in the office. But I cried inwardly when I walked outside and saw the other kids playing, for I wanted so much to be out there with them. Nevertheless, I just pretended it didn't bother me and continued with my lies.

As the fears began to build, so did the shell around my life and feelings. I was still open about most things, but the accident was one thing that was very hard to talk about. Only as I've written this book and begun to share with people about my life have I regained the freedom that's found in sharing what goes on in the deepest recesses of my heart.

I'm thankful for my daddy and the support he showed me at that time in my life. Things weren't very easy for him, either. By the time I reached tenth grade, Ella Jewel had left and my sister Betty had married, so there was no "mama" at home to take care of Daddy, Georgia Ann, and me. Therefore, I took on a lot of the responsibilities of cooking and cleaning house. I sure appreciate Daddy's patience with my messes in the kitchen and ruined meals – like the mashed potatoes I made with 'way too much black pepper! I'll never forget those. Yuck!

Between keeping house and cooking and doing schoolwork all week, I didn't have time for much else. But Friday night was my night out, when a bus came around the neighborhood and took a load of kids to the roller skating rink. On these excursions, guys and girls would pair off during the evening – if not on the trip there, then probably on the way home. At first I was too shy to approach girls. Besides, I was still in the first embarrassing stages of roller skating, where I fell more than I skated! One night, however, I noticed a new, little ninth grader on the bus, and I must have gotten very brave, because I actually sat beside her and talked to her. Her name was Angela, and we spent the whole evening talking and skating and sitting together.

It wasn't very long before I found out that Angela was a good friend of my bus driver's daughter. That may seem like an insignificant connection, but Mrs. Sinclair, my bus driver, had known me for years and of course knew all about my accident. Angela got to talking with Mrs. Sinclair about me shortly after we met, and Mrs. Sinclair proceeded to tell her all about my accident. I knew nothing about this conversation until almost a year later.

Angela must have really liked me, though, because every Friday night she continued to meet me and skate with me. This was the first girlfriend I had ever had, and I really felt the need to impress her. So I fed her a bunch of lines about things I had done and how experienced I was with girls – things that I thought would make an impact. I even got up the nerve to kiss her the way I saw others doing in the back of the bus.

The more we saw each other, the more I liked her. Here was a girl that was really dear to me. She actually seemed to like me, too. And as the months went by,

she continually did sweet things for me, like buy me mohair sweaters and special birthday gifts. I enjoyed being with her and appreciated the gifts, but it started to get too deep for me. I didn't know how to handle it.

Suddenly, just before our relationship reached the one-year mark, I realized that we were not going to be able to continue as we were. She was getting really serious, and I was getting *very* scared. Fear told me that because of my physical condition, I could not get deeply involved with her the way I thought she wanted me to. So I listened to that little voice that said, "Lie your way out of it. You can't tell her about yourself. She'll hate you."

At my first opportunity I told her, "Well, Angela, I probably can't see you anymore."

"Why?" she wanted to know.

"It's just things I don't care to talk about."

"Is it about the accident?" she gently inquired.

"Accident? How do you know about any accident??"

She informed me that Mrs. Sinclair had explained it all to her almost a year before. Man, I was furious. I felt a mixture of anger, humiliation, and betrayal. Here for almost a year, I had fed her all these macho lines about things I had never done, and she had known the truth all along. And what infuriated me the most was the fact someone else had told her about my problem. At that point, the feelings of affection that I'd had turned on me. It wasn't anything she had done; she had always been really sweet to me. But when I found out that she knew about the accident, I felt then as if I hated her. In reality, I think it was myself that I hated, and what pride I did have had been dealt a serious blow.

Still, we continued seeing each other, at Angela's urging; she more or less kept the relationship gong. Occasionally I would go out with someone else, too. Now that I had gotten my feet wet, I expanded my horizons and took out girls that knew nothing about my problem. In that way, I could take them out once or twice and continue my role-playing. But then I would always come back to Angela; I felt "safe" with her. She knew all about me and I didn't have to pretend. I could be real with her. And she proved to me over and over again that she loved me. She threw

me a surprise party for my nineteenth birthday – the first birthday party that I had ever had – and it really touched my heart. I know I had some feelings of warmth and affection for her, but the fear and confusion in my heart always seemed to override them. I didn't know if she was doing these things because she felt sorry for me or what. And I still could not overcome my pride, knowing that somebody had told her about my accident before I was ready for it to be known. Our relationship had a lot of ups and downs, needless to say.

I am ashamed to say that I used her a lot. I used the fact that she loved me to my own advantage. She was always there when I needed someone to fall back on or a shoulder to cry on. She told me that none of my problems mattered, that she loved me anyway. But I hurt her very deeply, because I could not return her love.

In the middle of that first year with Angela, during the summer after tenth grade, I received an opportunity to rekindle my brotherly love for Charles. I hadn't seen him much since Mother's death, but that summer he had called and asked if I would like to come to the Tampa area to work with him. Although I already had carpentry lined up with Daddy, I jumped at the chance to be with my older brother. All summer long I worked with him in the orange groves and learned more about orange trees than I ever thought I would know. More importantly, as I lived with Charles, his wife Edna, and their three boys, I gained a sense of closeness with my brother whom I had never really gotten a chance to know before. Being with Charles reminded me of the family that I had lost at such a young age.

The next summer I returned to work with Charles, this time on a dairy farm working night shift. My job was to round up and prepare the cows for milking. One night, just after I had searched far and wide through the pastures to bring in all the cows, they broke out of the holding pen. I raced furiously across the barnyard, trying to cut them off before they got out of hand. But in my haste, I failed to remember the six-foot drainage ditch filled to the brim with cow dung behind the barn. At full speed, I hit the ditch – and came to an abrupt halt. It was like quicksand! Before Charles or anyone else could arrive to rescue me, I was up to my chest in manure. Since I was helpless to free myself, the guys dragged me out of the mire, pulling me

right out of my boots in the process! Believe me, *no one* wanted to go back after those boots! Then we spent hours rounding up and separating those cows, and didn't finish milking until 10:00 the next morning. After we got over the seriousness of the matter, Charles couldn't stop laughing at my predicament, and he has never let me forget it!

During my time with him, I found out that Charles is a real prankster. That suited me just fine, because I had learned to love a good practical joke. One night, he told me that he and his buddies were taking me out "snipe" hunting. He had built me up for the occasion, describing the "snipe" as a type of bird that lives in the swamp and makes trails which it travels every night. One person just needed to stand on a trail holding a bag, while the others went out chasing all the snipes in the direction of the bag-holder.

Edna warned me in secret before we went out: "Bobby, they're just tricking you.... There's no such things as a 'snipe'!"

"Wow, thanks, Edna," I replied. Then I snickered as I thought of what to do. "We'll see how their trick works tonight!"

Sure enough, I was the one to hold the bag that night, out there in the cypress swamps. As soon as the guys were out of earshot, I cut across the pastures toward home. I heard the car engine roar to life, but I beat them to the house. Climbing a tree in the front yard, I listened as they came in, laughing at my "ignorance."

"Edna, you should see him now, out there holding that bag!" they guffawed. Edna just sat there calmly, not letting on that she knew a thing.

After an hour or so, the fellas decided to go back out and "rescue" me. Imagine their astonishment when I wasn't where they had left me, nor anywhere to be found in the swamp! Meanwhile, Edna brought me a blanket, and I curled up quite comfortably in the crook of the tree, leaving them to worry about me until daylight!

The next morning I made my presence known: "Ha, ha, Charles! Who was left 'holding the bag' this time?" Edna and I both got a good laugh over that one!

Yes, it was really good to get to know my brother and to be reminded of my family. But there was one aspect of home life that I would rather have forgotten:

alcohol. Charles took after my father in that area. Although he was “dry” the first summer I went to be with him, he had taken up drinking again when I went back the second summer. At first I refused to be a part of it. But little by little he wore down my defenses.

“Come on, Bobby,” he cajoled. “If you love me, you’ll drink with me.” On and on he would go, until I finally gave in.

Drinking became a regular thing for me then, along with smoking cigars. When I returned to school that fall for my senior year, I found that a lot of my buddies were more than willing to go along with me on drinking sprees. How I managed to keep from getting arrested or killed, I don’t know. We did some pretty stupid things.

One thing that easily could have gotten me arrested was operating a car without a driver’s license. Daddy wouldn’t sign for me to get my license, so I legally could not drive until I turned eighteen. But down in Tampa, during the summer prior to my eighteenth birthday, I paid \$94 for a 1954 Ford Custom and had driven it all around. It was a rag of a car that burned thirteen quarts of oil in the 200-mile trip from Tampa to Jacksonville. And it knocked so badly that I had to use 90-weight differential oil (rear-end grease) in the engine! It challenged my mechanical abilities to the maximum, so I made sure to re-enroll in my Trade and Industries class that school year!

It was this T&I class, which dealt with everything from mechanics to construction, that was clearly my favorite. A score of second-highest in the class opened up a job for me at Ford Motor Company upon graduation. Therefore, in June 1967 at the age of eighteen I went to work as a mechanic at Ford. With this job came the opportunity to move out of Daddy’s house and live with a friend and his father just outside Jacksonville. It was thrilling to be out on my own, taking on the responsibilities of adulthood!

It was even more exciting for me to watch my body mature in a somewhat normal way. Dr. Morgan had not been sure, after the gunshot and all the surgery, whether my body would produce the male hormone necessary to grow facial hair. Imagine my exhilaration when peach fuzz turned to a thick beard and moustache! I

began to mature in other ways, too, and wondered if the doctors might be able to do something more to help me function as a normal man.

All along, Angela and I had still been dating, and the thought began to grow in my mind that *maybe*, if I was able to fulfill the act of love-making more completely, then she and I might get married. I consulted Dr. Morgan, and he suggested a few different possibilities for further reconstruction. We opted for an implant of a plastic rod, since it was thought to be the least likely to cause problems. The last thing on earth I wanted was to mess up what had been so painstakingly constructed thus far.

With high expectations I entered the hospital, assured that I could trust Dr. Morgan's expertise. He did indeed perform the surgery with no problems.

Anxious to know how the surgery went, Angela was faithfully waiting in my hospital room for me. While I was still groggy, the intern, thinking that she was my wife, showed her what that had done on me. Up until this time, even though we had had intimate relations, I had managed to keep her from seeing my physical condition. When she informed me that the intern had mistakenly shown her their work, I was once again greatly humiliated.

Furthermore, after all the cost, fear, and embarrassment, my bad times continued. A couple of days after the surgery, I noticed a little black spot forming where the incision had been made. As the spot grew, so did my worry. I feared that all would be lost. The doctor didn't seem concerned until the spot reached about the size of a quarter. Then he ordered me back into surgery to have the rod removed for fear of severe infection.

I could not believe what had happened. Not only had the implant gone sour, but there was also the problem of the growing infection, danger of the water passage becoming blocked, and the possibility of losing *everything* that Dr. Morgan had previously constructed. I remained catheterized for several weeks, and darkness seemed to close in on me.

As long as I was catheterized, even after I was released from the hospital, the doctor refused to give me clearance to return to work at Ford. I could picture myself losing the first nice car I'd ever owned, so I worked at low-paying odd jobs – gas

stations, mostly. The catheter and drainage bag, tucked away under my slacks, was not noticeable. That is, until the bag got extra full one day, and someone bumped into me! As the bottom burst out of the bag, it totally soaked my leg, foot, and boot! What an embarrassing mess! Shortly after that, thank God, they were able to remove the catheter and I only had to be monitored for infection.

A couple of months had passed since the ill-fated surgery, when the doctors discovered a gross infection inside of me. I was immediately admitted back into the hospital. Since the water passage through the reconstructed organ was shrinking and could no longer be relied upon, the doctor had to make an incision through the skin into the urinary tract. This rerouting caused the entire reconstructed end to close up and grow together. It also meant that for eight years, until I underwent further surgery, I had to sit down like a woman to use the bathroom. Thus, after expensive surgery and emotional trauma, I was worse off than before.

My hopes of being married to Angela – or to anyone else, for that matter – were crushed. I told Angela to go find somebody else. She cried and cried, but I had had all that I could handle. I just wanted her to find someone with whom she could be happy. I felt totally worthless. Life seemed to keep happening to me with very little that I could do to change or control it.

After all this, I began to change, and I did not like what I saw happening inside of me. First, my attitude toward church became very critical and condemning. I knew from the Bible that my drinking and carousing were sending me straight on the road to hell; yet I saw “Christian” leaders doing the same things! I reasoned, “If I’m going to hell, then they must be, too. So why bother with church at all? I’d rather spend my Sundays at the beach!” At that point I decided to go whole hog with whatever the world could offer me.

Running with the wrong crowd led me into heavy smoking and drinking. I became really wild in my imaginations, lusts, and actions. An overwhelming sex drive began to rule me. With little consideration for others’ feelings, I used women to satisfy my lusts. In my obsession, I adopted the goal to be with as many girls as I possibly could. And to hide my handicap, I devised the use of an artificial male

organ, only going to prove that when we yield ourselves to satan, he will lead us into tremendous perversion.

Although I was with many different girls, I felt no physical sensation in the act. All I felt was the mental satisfaction of having “done it,” whatever “it” was. Deep down, part of me felt remorse that I was using these women, but stronger was the lustful force that drove me on.

The deeper I got into this wild sinfulness, the more and more I realized the pain I was causing myself and others. I hated myself. Using women for my own gratification – that wasn't *me*, the me that cared for damaged and crippled humanity. I felt trapped by something in me that seemed to have taken over.

Vietnam was a big issue about his time. I got the idea that since the Army was taking volunteers, I could join. I went to sign up, seeking not only acceptance but also an easy way out of my young, turbulent life. What I really wanted was get on the front lines and let someone blow me away. But the recruiting officer took one look at me and said, “Put your clothes back on, son. We can't use you in the service.” I cried, begged, and pleaded with him to please take me, but they didn't want me because of my “problem.” There it was again: *my problem*.

Everywhere I turned it seemed as if things were controlling my life: my friends' opinions, fear of being exposed, lust, alcohol, tobacco.... I knew that my life needed a change. In desperation I managed to quit drinking and smoking just because I was sick of it.

Earlier in my experiences, I had even turned to the Mormon church for some answers to my problems. During one of my stays in the hospital, I had met a Mormon girl who gave me a logical answer to a long-standing question of mine: “Where did the dinosaurs come from?” Shortly after that, the Mormons had recruited me, and I stayed with their church for nearly a year. But I had enough Bible truth in me to soon realize that their doctrines and practices were based on fallacy. So I left and got into my wild ways. Nevertheless, God was working in spite of my mistakes to bring me around to the truth of His Son Jesus.

Chapter 6

A New Beginning

When we begin to seek the truth, the Lord has a way of moving the right people into our paths at the right time. Soon after I decided to change some of my ways, He sent Gloria Mills, a cute, redheaded Christian girl my way. I had the privilege of taking her out on a date in December 1969. As soon as I met Gloria, I made up my mind that I was not going to hurt her or anybody else the way I had been doing. I was tired of lying, so I decided that she had to accept me the way I was, if she was going to accept me at all.

Gloria had her own criteria for whom she dated as well. After we had gone to dinner on that first date, she announced that she would not go out with me anymore unless I came to church with her. I was hesitant, but Gloria assured me that her church was different from what I was used to. Since I was definitely interested in seeing more of her, I agreed.

What I encountered at her church was different, all right. It was a service full of life, enthusiasm, and the power of the Holy Ghost. What's more, when the preacher got up to give a message, I felt like he had read my mail. Every word was preached at me, I was sure! Memories of my youthful experience with God came rushing in upon me. I knew the convicting power of God; I knew that He was calling me to commit my life to Him; and I knew what that commitment meant. But I ran from it. I was not ready to submit to it yet.

Determined not to go back to that church, but unable to get Gloria out of my mind, I lived in turmoil for the next three weeks. Every time I tried to get her to date me, the answer was the same: "If you'll go to church with me, I'll go out with you." Moreover, I was struggling with those feelings of worthlessness. I was fed up with wallowing in sin. I felt that because of my obsession to feel like a man, I had corrupted every person that had meant anything to me. But here was an opportunity to start anew, to have a new beginning....

Finally, on January 11, 1970, I again agreed to Gloria's condition. We went back to her church. As far as I recall, Brother Mecier, her pastor, could have been preaching the same message as before, because the convicting power was the same. This time, however, instead of running from it, I submitted and surrendered my heart totally to Jesus Christ.

My life began an immediate transformation. I had made a commitment to Christ, and I intended to go all the way with Him. In a short period of time, my attendance in church went from "zero" to seven times a week! I went from living in utter sinfulness to being radical for Jesus. In my zeal, I began to tell all my friends about my new-found life in Christ, informing them that they had better get right with God or they were going to hell. Naturally, I turned a lot of them off, and pretty soon I only had four friends left! Balance was one of the many things that God was going to have to work in my life. Over the years, He has taught me the significance of the verse, "A false balance is an abomination to the Lord" (Proverbs 11:1). I believe He is balancing me out!

Another change that I noticed was my perspective of pain. I had always known pain, even before I was physically wounded at age eleven. Until I was twenty years old, I did not know Christ as my Savior and Deliverer, and I blamed God for my problems. When I received Christ and sat under good Bible teaching, I began to realize that He is not the author of pain (John 10:10), but that He could use the pains that I had suffered to mold me into the person that He wanted me to be.

Several months into my relationship with Gloria, I decided that it was time to overcome my fear of rejection and tell her about my problem. Without Jesus, I do not believe I would have had the courage to do it, but I knew then more than ever that I had to put off lying and speak only the truth. Furthermore, it was extremely important to me that I – not someone else – tell her about the accident and my physical condition. Who could have imagined that Gloria would accept me after I told her all that had happened? But she did! I knew that God had helped her accept me, and I grew to love her deeply.

Thoughts of marriage began to reenter my mind. After the incidents with the failed surgery, I had doubted whether I would ever get married. But here God had

brought to me a girl that accepted me, a girl whom I had grown to love and respect. I figured if I was ever going to get married, now was my chance.

In the next few months, I proposed to Gloria several times. After a number of refusals, one night she finally said, “OK.” I was floating! But there remained a fear in me of disappointing her; I felt that she should know what she was getting in a mate. So, right or wrong, I insisted that she look at me and touch me. My mind pictured a thousand times how she would turn away in disgust. But much to my relief, her response was one of reassurance that it didn’t matter. Twice I had risked rejection, and both times she had accepted me. My heart filled with joy and love toward this special Christian girl.

Gloria told me that in order to make the engagement official, I would have to ask her father. Another fear to overcome, but I was determined to marry her. When we arrived at her house, Mr. Mills was already in bed. He came downstairs half asleep with his wife’s robe on! That funny sight somewhat calmed my shaking nerves.

“Mr. Mills –“ I began.

“Whatever you want is all right with me,” he interrupted. “Just check with her mother.” I never dreamed it could be so easy!

With her mother’s approval, Gloria and I happily began to busy ourselves with wedding plans. Then on December 12, 1970, we were married.

Our new life together was very happy. We continued going to church, and under the excellent teaching of Pastor Mecier and his wife, we grew in knowledge of God’s Word and in the practice of Christian principles. For our first Christmas, just a few weeks after we were married, we invited Brother and Sister Mecier to our apartment for turkey dinner. Gloria stayed up all night baking the turkey and preparing our tiny garage-apartment for our guests. It all turned out lovely, and we had a very special Christmas celebration.

Gloria’s culinary arts were a blessing to many people, especially to me. She often made special dishes for me or for whoever might drop in. I felt my skills in the kitchen were pretty good, too, and I would cook my famous black-pepper mashed

potatoes or a mess of fish that I had caught. One time, however, I really blew it. We didn't have a big skillet readily available for frying fish, so I took out a 9"x13" glass Pyrex baking dish. It held a good amount of oil, so I fried up the fish and let the dish cool on the stove while Gloria and I sat down to eat. We had just about finished our meal when we heard a loud *c-r-a-c-k*. Our eyes darted to the stove just in time to see the glass dish split in half. The oil poured out of it, through the burner, all down the stove, and onto the floor. Another one of Bobby's famous messes! I am certainly glad that Gloria was patient with me!

I also thank God for her patience with me in the critical area of our relationship as man and wife. Thanks to her patience and, I believe, the fact that we were committed in covenant, I was actually able to feel the physical thrill of our union. Imagine what a joy that was to me – not only physically but also emotionally! More than anything else in my life at that time, I needed the reassurance that I was really a *man* and could please my wife. With time and understanding, we learned to adapt and to satisfy one another's needs. I tried to trust God that I really was meeting Gloria's needs and that she would not be unfulfilled due to my limitations.

Problems remained in me, however. I was still very self-conscious about my condition and would not talk about it with anyone except Gloria. Several times she urged me to talk with a pastor or a counselor or *someone*. But I refused. It was too "personal." I wouldn't even let her tell her gynecologist why she wasn't having children. Only later did I realize the tremendous pressure that I placed on her because of my fears.

Those persistent, nagging fears prompted me to badger her with questions such as, "Do you really love me? Or did you marry me just because you felt sorry for me?" She reassured me over and over that she loved me, frequently striving to demonstrate it by doing special things for me. But we were so young. I was twenty-two, Gloria was barely twenty, and neither one of us was very mature. Gloria was unprepared to cope with a husband like me with deep physical and emotional scars. Looking back on it all, I realize that I was not ready for marriage either, barely able to believe that a woman could even want me as a husband. Thus, our marriage was built on a rather shaky foundation, not the stable beginning that the Lord desires.

Chapter 7

Some Tough Lessons

Since my conversion to Christ, I had been seeking the Baptism of the Holy Spirit with all the power and gifts that come with it. A number of times in church I had seen people ask for it and gloriously start speaking in strange tongues, as Luke describes in Acts chapters 2 and 19, and Paul teaches in I Corinthians 12-14. I had asked for and sought it even before Gloria and I were married, but all I could do was pray with stammering lips.

Before church one night, Gloria and I along with her father and mother and a precious Christian sister named Mim were in our apartment praying. Mr. Mills was sitting quietly in a chair as I prayed for him to receive the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly, a language that I had never heard before came out of *me!* I clapped my hand over my mouth, trying to stop the words, because I wanted to be sure that they were from God and not something I was making up. But there was no suppressing them! It was like rivers of living water flowing up from inside of me, as Jesus describes in John 7:38-39.

Sister Mim started praising God with a laughter that sounded as if it came from the Holy Ghost Himself! Everyone joined in that jubilee, and the praises continued as we made the 45-minute drive to church. All the while, I could not suppress the flow of tongues, nor did I want to by then. I must have spoken in four or five noticeably different languages, then at church it changed to a totally different dialect. Immediately Pastor Mecier received an interpretation of that language, so I was already able to observe two of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in action (see I Corinthians 12:10). I believe that God allowed my first experience to happen so dramatically to show me that it really was Him at work.

As a part of the infilling of the Holy Spirit, the Lord began to deal with me concerning addictions in my life. I had been used to sitting in front of the TV for hours, watching show after meaningless show. When not glued to the tube or working, I pitched softball with a league from work. Frequently I would find

thoughts going through my mind about the little time I spent with Gloria or in the Word of God, but I would push them aside, putting God on “hold” for awhile.

Well, God loved me enough to deal pretty strongly with me, in a very personal way. Gloria and I had driven to San Antonio, Texas, to pick up her sister Janet and a girlfriend from Bible school. They were going to stay with us for a brief time. One night after we had arrived home, I was praying in my room when Janet came in, crying. Through her tears she managed to say, “The Lord told me to tell you something!”

“What is it?” I asked anxiously.

“Stop two things: watching TV and pitching softball.”

I was floored. I had been asking God why I didn’t hear His voice clearly as others did, and where that special closeness was that I had felt with Him in the beginning of my Christian walk. He had already been speaking to my heart, but here was my second witness, for “in the mouth of two or more witnesses every word may be established” (Matthew 18:16).

Needless to say, I quit. The television set was immediately unplugged and turned to face the wall (and eventually sold), and I told my teammates that I was not pitching any more. They could not figure out why I quit right in the middle of a good season, and they were even more perplexed when I told them that God had told me. “Man, are you crazy?” they ridiculed. If they only knew how much more sane I was! It was a joy to be finally hearing from God like never before.

Not long afterwards, God started showing me unusual things as I prayed. When I laid my hands on people, the Lord would reveal something about them to me, and I would know how to pray for their problems. What a thrill it was to hear God’s thoughts and know exactly how to pray!

One night in church, when the entire congregation was caught up in praise and worship, I felt an increasing urge to spin like a top. As strange as it seemed, I obeyed and started spinning. My next urge was to walk toward the back of the room, so with eyes closed the entire time, I walked down the center aisle, past several rows, then in between two pews, where I leaned over and laid my hands on a woman.

Little did I know that this woman was suffering from a chronic health problem; but as I prayed for her, she was immediately and completely healed!

Another time during praise and worship, a beautiful, heavenly fragrance seemed to fill the building. I nudged Gloria, “Do you smell that?” She shook her head, indicating that she didn’t detect anything special. But four or five other people in the room did. It must have been Jesus, a “sweet-smelling fragrance” (Ephesians 5:2) right there among us.

As I grew closer and closer to Jesus throughout the next few months and years, He became very real to me. His Word, the Bible, came unbelievably alive. One day I discovered anew the verse, “Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart” (Psalm 37:4). With childlike faith, I began to tell Jesus how delighted I was with Him and ask Him to please teach me to play the piano. We had recently bought one since Gloria was a fairly good pianist, and I was filled with a desire to sit down and automatically make beautiful music on those ivory and ebony keys. I would even sit in front of the piano at home and pray, telling God how delighted I was with Him, holding my hands in position so I would be ready when the Holy Spirit zapped me.

God saw my simple faith and heard my prayer. But the answer did not come in the privacy of my living room like I expected. It came in the middle of a church service! During worship, I again felt an unexpected urge – this time to go up and play the piano, right in front of everyone. I must have broken out in a sweat as I struggled with the thought of doing it. “Lord, what if I get up there and make a fool out of myself?” I reasoned. Finally, fear won and I stayed in my seat in disobedience.

After the service, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to see Sister Mim, staring me in the eye. “Why didn’t you go play the piano like God told you to??” she confronted. My heart sank as I realized what I had missed. Although I have asked, He has never given me the chance to learn to play piano like that again. Some opportunities are given to us only once, and we must walk in obedience or miss God.

It is amazing how slow we are to learn our lessons, too. It took me sixteen years to obey the directions I received in the following situation:

I believe the year was 1974. Since Christmas was upon us, Gloria and I bundled up and jumped in our little, orange Ford Courier pick-up, excited about the two shiny, refurbished ten-speed bicycles in the back of the truck. They were gifts for a traveling minister and his family who had settled into an apartment in Jacksonville. As we climbed out of the truck and presented the bikes, the looks on their faces and the excitement in their two children's voices were all the reward we needed.

"Come in, come in," insisted the minister and his wife. "Have a cup of coffee."

Seated cozily in their small living area, we chatted about various things. The usual question arose: "Do you have children?"

"No, we're believing God for a miracle," was my much-used (but true) reply. I shared with him briefly that I had had an accident that prevented me from having kids.

"Well, here then, let me pray for you," he offered.

Eager to receive a blessing, Gloria and I bowed our heads as he laid his hands on us and prayed. His accuracy in prayer surprised me; I was certain that God was showing him things about my life. Then the Lord spoke through this man in a type of prophecy. "Bobby," he said earnestly, "I know by the Spirit of God that if you share your testimony with people and write a book, God will bring about the healing that you need."

His words bore witness to my spirit, but I did not want to do it. Opening up and sharing *any* details of my problem had been a giant step for me. Therefore, the thought of exposing my life to the public, especially in book form, was too much to handle. My mind totally rejected the idea, even though I recognize I was forfeiting a blessing. I have had to learn this lesson the hard way: ignoring God and following fear not only reduces our blessings, but also increases our troubles!

Chapter 8

The Attack

As we progressed toward our fifth year of marriage, I was still working as a mechanic at Ford, and Gloria was an operator with the telephone company. A comfortably sized house trailer had just become our new home, and we continued with the same church, growing in our walk with Jesus and our involvement in the church body.

I was very much in love with Gloria, yet I felt an invisible barrier going up between us. It seemed to me that she spent too much time with her parents, but I never could put my finger on a specific problem. It just made me feel uneasy at times.

Nevertheless, in His infinite goodness, God continued to speak to us and use us in ministry. At one point, Brother and Sister Mecier left us in charge of the church while they were away for a month. Getting up in the pulpit service after service scratched my “preacher’s itch” very well – I didn’t think I ever wanted to be a preacher after that!

One evening in September 1975, the Lord intervened in a very clear, strong manner. I was in the shower when suddenly I heard an audible voice command me, “Pay off the house by December.” Startled, I thought at first it was Gloria but wondered why she would be speaking to me in a man’s voice! I called to her and stuck my head out the door, but she was nowhere near the bathroom, and neither was anyone else. So I continued to shower. Then I heard it again, loud and clear and audible: “Pay off the house by December.”

Although I had never before heard God with my natural ears, it occurred to me, “That’s got to be the voice of God!” Immediately I turned off the water, jumped out of the shower, and ran down the hall hollering to Gloria. She must have known by the look on my face, the conviction in my voice, and my dripping, naked frame that I had something important to share with her. She came in to immediate agreement with me, so we began paying off the mortgage, diligently scraping together every penny we could. Miraculously, we paid off our home by November.

December came and went. January 1976 passed. We could see no reason for the urgent command to have our house mortgage-free. So I just shrugged it off, thinking that maybe I had missed God and was just hearing voices.

Then in February, after talking it over with Gloria, I decided to go back into the hospital for a second reconstruction. It had been approximately seven years since the reconstructed end of my urinary tract had grown closed, forcing me to sit down to go to the bathroom. Dr. Morgan, who had performed the earlier surgeries, recommended I consult the top urologist in Jacksonville. Many advancements had been made in this area since Dr. Morgan's first attempt at reconstruction, and he felt that this doctor could better assist me.

After a thorough examination, I was called into the doctor's office for a conference. I fully expected him to explain some great, new procedure. But no – this specialist had the gall to say that the best thing for me to do would be to undergo a sex change! Only Father in heaven knows the fury that rose up inside me. The doctor heard a measure of it expressed vividly in my words. For the first time in years, I cursed a man out. Later I had to ask the Lord for forgiveness, but at the time, I was so angry and humiliated that I could hardly contain it. Here I was, a grown man with a wife, and some doctor suggests that I become a woman! I had been through over twenty-five operations to preserve my manhood, and for him to ask such a thing was, to say the least, demoralizing. This man may have been a “specialist” in his field, but I doubted seriously whether he had a heart.

Reporting back to Dr. Morgan, I informed him of all that the specialist had told me. He shook his head in disbelief and agreed to do the surgery himself. We decided to proceed with a reconstruction similar to the one I had undergone sixteen years before. It was a fairly simple procedure, requiring only three operations and two or three months off of work.

The first operation went smoothly, and I recuperated at home. After the second operation, complications set in; the “tubing” got infected, which meant that the tip end of the reconstruction had to be cut off. Still the infection raged on in my body. Nothing seemed to work to stop it. I was continuously in and out of the hospital and at one point spent twenty-nine consecutive days cooped up in a hospital

room. By then I had reached a place of total depression, to the point that I really wanted to die. I begged God to take me home – I could not put up with this anymore. I felt as if I had reached bottom.

One of Dr. Morgan's interns was very perceptive to what I was experiencing. He confronted me with it one morning: "Bobby, the reason you are not getting well is because you don't *want* to. It's time you stopped living in self-pity."

Needless to say, I did not receive his words well. I responded to him much the same as I had to the doctor who told me to get a sex change. My concluding words to him: "Leave my room and don't bother coming back! I don't ever want to see you again!"

During the day, however, and on into the night, I could not escape his words. Finally, I admitted the truth – I *was* living in self-pity, and I really had no desire to get well. Seeking help, I called my pastor. Sister Mecier answered, and as I poured out my heart, she exhorted me to dig into the Bible and get encouragement from God's Word. Grabbing the Gideon's Bible from my nightstand, I found a list of Scriptures for various problems. As I turned from one verse to another, the Scriptures came vividly alive to me. God's words showed me how to overcome those feelings of despair. It was after midnight when I finally cried out to Father God in desperation, weeping and asking forgiveness for getting so caught up in myself that I forgot about His love and deliverance. God met me there.

The next morning I got out of bed for the first time in two weeks. I actually took a shower, combed my hair, and brushed my teeth. Then who should walk into my room but the intern! Needless to say, I had to eat a lot of "crow," apologizing to him and acknowledging that what he had said was true. He must have taken abuse from patients before, because he was very cordial and understanding. Our friendship was restored.

Three days later, the infection that the doctors had been unable to stop for twenty-six days was completely and totally healed. I was discharged and allowed to go home.

John 1:14-17 and Psalm 85:10 show us that truth and grace are intertwined. When we embrace truth, we automatically receive grace. This principle is a perfect

description of my experience described above. When I faced the truth about myself, grace came with it, and I was healed. Likewise, when we acknowledge the truth that we are sinners in need of Jesus, we find the grace to have our sins forgiven and be saved. If we have given up hope, we must face that fact and call out to God, and He will give us the grace to make it through the hard place. The same is true no matter what situation we face. God will intervene miraculously, if we look to Him in faith.

After God bailed me out of the sickness and depression, more operations followed, which all went smoothly. My faith was growing because I stayed in the Word - reading the Bible, praying, and staying in fellowship with other Christians at every opportunity. I was able to believe that God would see me through to the end of these trying times.

The Lord did indeed watch over me during the two long years that I was in and out of the hospital for this “minor bit” of surgery (a total of twelve operations). Since I was able to work only one month during the entire time, we depended heavily on Gloria’s income. One Sunday, as we were getting ready for church, we realized that if we paid our tithes, we wouldn’t even have enough money left for Gloria to cross the toll bridge to get to work that week! “Go ahead and write out the check for our tithe,” I told her. “I’m going outside.”

It was a clear, crisp morning, and I wrapped my jacket closer around me as I stood on the front porch staring at nothing in particular. A reflection of sunlight from across the road caught my eye, so I wandered down the driveway to investigate. There in the ditch was a selector from a jukebox – the small, old-fashioned type that hangs on the wall of some older restaurants. Kicking it, I heard a jingle. As I picked it up and shook it, ten quarters fell out – the exact amount that Gloria needed for tolls! Hearing no more jingling, I tossed the box to the ground; as it hit, however, two more quarters rolled out. The Lord spoke to my heart, “That’s the tithe on the \$2.50 I just gave you.”

Praising God for His goodness, I ran into the house, exclaiming, “Look, Gloria!!”

She heard the story and retorted, “That’s the devil’s money. We can’t use that.”

“It might have been,” I replied, “but it was God’s to start with and the devil stole it!” Then to confirm my conviction, what should the pastor preach on at church that morning but how the devil stole God’s goods and how He is bringing it back to the church!

By this time, Gloria and I could see the hand of the Lord very clearly providing for us, especially by telling us to pay off our home months in advance. With all of the mounting bills, we surely would have lost the house if it had still been under mortgage.

Nevertheless, trying times like these take a tremendous toll on a person. I know they did on me, and to say they took a toll on Gloria would be an understatement. My physical and emotional ups and downs put her under tremendous stress. She not only worked hard to take care of the bills that my insurance did not cover, but also made the decisions of the household. She basically took on the role of “man of the house.” This was in addition to the duties she faithfully fulfilled as my wife, including coming to the hospital every night I was there. Had it not been for Gloria, I do not know how I would have made it.

Finally, I was able to go back to work and reassume my responsibilities around the house. However, a definite strain had been placed on our marriage. We were both trying to recover from the emotional traumas brought on by my hospitalizations. In the midst of our “recovery,” we experienced another blow: a church split. Our special church, of which we had been members for years, fell apart.

We diligently looked for another church and found one close by, but we were not getting the nourishment that we needed and desired. So we continued looking, ending up going a little bit of everywhere but not really anywhere.

I started to gradually backslide and allowed my position as spiritual head of our home to be more and more neglected. I found out the hard way that satan takes advantage of believers when we neglect our spiritual duties. I wish so much that I could warn every Christian not to get caught in this trap! Awful things can happen when a man lets up on his responsibilities as the spiritual head, or backs down from this important position.

Trouble was also to come in the area of my employment. When I was able to go back to work at Ford Motors again, it was as a dispatcher instead of a mechanic. Eight months after going back to work, I broke my foot and was laid up for about seven weeks. Interestingly, when I was able to return, my job had been given to someone else. I was placed in another position, which, three days later, was “liquidated.” In other words, I was fired. Satan was again trying to get me down. But praise God, I found a new job the next day and began working that same week!

My new job was in a steel mill, and what excited me was the fact that I started out making more money than I had at Ford, even after being there for eleven years! A drawback, however, was the fact that I worked twelve-hour shifts, days one week and nights the next, including every other weekend. Needless to say, my new schedule placed an additional strain on our marriage, something we could not afford at the time.

Now I can see that satan had his game plan in mind and was putting it into operation full force. I was a struggling husband, working long, odd hours. Gloria was a faithful yet pressured wife. And we were still recovering from the emotional strain of my surgery and the church split. The stage was set for one of the biggest challenges of my life.

Chapter 9

Trapped

It had been eight years since our wedding. Not surprisingly, through all the surgeries and challenges, Gloria and I had gradually grown distant in our love relationship. I desired closeness, but her desire for intimacy had dropped off considerably. It was then that I noticed that she was becoming increasingly depressed.

The situation grew worse and worse until a time when Gloria remained in a state of depression for eight months. Simple decisions such as what to make for dinner seemed monstrous obstacles to her, reducing her to tears. For hours she would sit in front of the closet, trying to decide what to wear. Then she would take another hour to dress herself. My mind could not comprehend what might be the problem. All I knew at that time was that it was a really bad situation, for her and for me.

Suddenly, the depression lifted, and for three weeks she was normal. However, it was a worse time than ever for me, for during that “normal” stage, she decided that I had been the cause of her depression and that she was going to divorce me. She said she didn’t love me anymore. As she packed her bags and prepared to leave, I felt shocked, confused, and ripped to pieces by the words she had thrown at me.

I knew that her condition was not of God and sensed that the enemy of our souls was behind it. Then something happened which convinced me that it was the devil’s dirty work. Before she left home, Gloria began to leave her state of normalcy. For three days, she walked around the house hissing like a snake. If I walked by her, she would hiss. If she tried to speak to me, it came out with a hiss. The sound was so demonic that it sent shivers up and down my spine. She soon went into a state of hyperactivity. At that point I contacted a doctor, who sent her to a psychiatric specialist. Their diagnosis was manic depression.

Though I knew the source was satan, I felt tremendous guilt, believing that my problems had driven her into this condition. A friend whose mother was manic-

depressive tried to explain, “It’s not you. You’re the victim.” I really did feel victimized, but I could not shake the feeling of guilt.

After Gloria received treatment, she left me and got an apartment on her own. During the subsequent six-month period, many strange things occurred, not the least of which was an attempted suicide on my part. I was working night shift at the steel mill and had just punched out on the time clock, when the thought hit me: “Go home and shoot yourself.”

All the way out to my car, in the early-morning, pre-dawn darkness, the words bombarded my mind: “Go home and shoot yourself. Go home and shoot yourself.” I tried to shake these compelling thoughts, but as I sped down the highway toward my lonely, empty house trailer, the voices grew louder and stronger: “You have to shoot yourself. Go home and do it *now*.”

By this time I was screaming at the top of my lungs, “No, I won’t do it! God help me! I don’t want to kill myself! JESUS!!” I remember very little of the seventeen-mile drive home, except at one point I was “awakened” by the fact that I was so close to driving under a passing semi-truck that I could have reached up from my TR6 Triumph and touched the trailer.

By the time I finally arrived home, I was thoroughly convinced that the only way out of my problems was suicide. I had every intention of going into the house, grabbing my gun, and blowing my brains out. That is so ironic, too, because the only reason I ever owned a gun was to overcome the fear, having been shot once. Who else but the devil could have convinced me to be shot again, especially at my own hands??

I am sure that I would have carried through with this plan, had it not been for three very close friends waiting for me by my home. Seeing them there somewhat shook me to my senses. What were these men doing in my driveway at 8:00 a.m.? I was even more astonished to hear them tell me that my Gloria, who no longer lived with me, had called them early that morning. She insisted that they be at the house when I got off work, because I was going to shoot myself. She said that God had sent an angel to tell her. It had to have been supernatural, because I had no way of

talking to *anyone* – by phone or otherwise – from the time the voices started until I got home.

Though my mind was still dazed, I began to realize what mercy God had had on me. As I was crying out to Him on that tormented drive home, He had heard me and sent help. Tears of relief flooded my face as I thanked God for His love and mercy.

Shortly thereafter, I was successful in persuading Gloria to come back home, although she made me agree to a very difficult condition: we would have to sleep in separate bedrooms. As lonely and confused as I was, I agreed, just thankful to God for the opportunity to live with her again.

In December 1979, not long after she returned home, satan struck again. While I was working at the steel mill, the glove on my right hand got caught in a gigantic mixing machine. Before I could snatch my hand away, the revolving blade mangled the middle finger and badly sliced two more. As I sat in the work office, waiting for the ambulance to arrive, I felt totally disgusted at this additional deformity on my body. More doctor bills, more hospital visits – what would Gloria say? Would she get angry and leave again when she found out? Like it or not, there was no hiding it from her.

Thankfully, Gloria seemed to take it in stride. After my hand was healed, life continued somewhat normally for a few years, in spite of the fact that Gloria would not let me touch her for five or six months at a time. During this time, as a means of helping our marriage and of meeting some personal goals, we began to invest time in an Amway business. This was something we had started many years before, but it was not until that point that we got serious about it. We learned many valuable things at the local meetings and regional conventions, principles that built our self-confidence and have even helped me in my Christian walk. Moreover, I was thrilled when I saw Gloria begin to blossom like a rose; her newfound confidence showed up in her hairstyles, fashionable dress, make-up, etc. I *loved* her and wanted to do anything I could to bless her. Also, the fact that we were working together for the first time blessed me, and we worked very hard at becoming self-sufficient. My goal

was to retire from my regular work place in a few years and be self-employed and financially independent.

Thus, despite the fact that I was working full-time and surviving on two to three hours of sleep each night, I heeded Gloria's urgings: "You've got to go out every night and show the plan!"

At first when I showed the Amway plan to people, many became involved. But there came a time when I showed the plan for about sixty nights in a row and nobody was interested. If I had been perceptive, I would have recognized that God had lifted His blessings from us. Somewhere in the midst of our "success," we had gone overboard, me in my drive for money and success and Gloria in her appearance and desire to be attractive.

In addition, although Gloria had finally agreed to sleep in the same bed with me, it had been six months since she had allowed me to make any kind of romantic advances toward her. With my physical condition as it was, I needed reassurance from my wife that I was a *man*. I needed to know that I could please a woman sexually. The reassurance that Gloria had shown me in the beginning of our marriage had all but disappeared.

With my body suffering exhaustion and with feelings of worthlessness flooding my brain, depression honed in on me again. For six months, from the beginning to the middle of 1983, I became increasingly despondent over the fact that my wife would not let me love her. Wooing her with flowers, cards, gifts, and other signs of affection seemed to bring about no response. I attempted to forget my unhappiness by absorbing myself in the business or by going to dollar movies, alone. I even went to restaurants and lounges when Gloria thought I was out showing the plan. I was so exhausted! I just wanted to sit with a cup of coffee and try to escape for a while.

One night during this time of discouragement, I went to a restaurant where my stepbrother Skip was playing music. My waitress Theresa was very friendly, and I found out that she was also a good listener. After that, I made it a point to return often to this restaurant. Before long I was pouring out my heart to Theresa, sharing with her my marriage problems, my accident at age eleven, and my frustrations of

not feeling like a man. She was just as open with me as I was with her, telling me of her loneliness while her husband was out to sea. She also informed me that lots of men were unable to complete the sex act, and that it should not make any difference. That was news to me!

Bibbed overalls was the required uniform at the restaurant, and one day I innocently commented to Theresa, “I bet you’d look good out of those overalls.”

She responded slyly, “Wouldn’t you like to know!”

“No, no,” I replied with embarrassment, “I meant in some other kind of clothes!”

We decided to find out by going out to dinner together. My mind justified a hundred times why it was all right for me to meet with this woman, although it was difficult to lie to Gloria. On the night of my date, I managed to leave the house on the pretense of showing the business plan. Theresa and I successfully rendezvoused.

Satan then wove his trap a little tighter; the next weekend I asked Theresa if she would like to go with me to Daytona to get some car parts. She agreed, and we spent the whole weekend together, alone. There my driving question – “Can I please a woman?” – was answered. When Theresa said she could hardly tell a difference between me and another man, I became *furious* with Gloria for having shunned me. Right into satan’s neatly laid trap I went.

Nobody can ever tell me that sin is not “fun,” because I enjoyed the time spent with Theresa. True, I felt guilty at the thought of being unfaithful to God and to Gloria, but the feeling of pleasure was greater. I even had thoughts of just running off with Theresa, because she made me feel like a real man.

Amazingly, satan was not finished with me even there. It wasn’t enough to get me involved in adultery; he had to play on Gloria’s emotions, too. Immediately after I sinned with Theresa, Gloria started coming on to me like a gangbuster, trying to “put the make” on me. She kissed me, bought revealing lingerie, and tried to attract me in ways she never had before. But I was unable to respond! First I felt guilty about what I was doing behind her back. Second, I wanted her to see how it felt to be rejected and given the cold shoulder like she’d done me for so many years.

It took me three months to shake those vengeful feelings and finally respond to Gloria. The breakthrough came during a weekend in September 1983 when Gloria had gone with her mother to a Christian retreat in central Florida. The first thing I did was break it off with Theresa; then I cried out to God for forgiveness. Alone at home, I fell on my face before God. In my heart I heard the Lord give a very clear ultimatum: “Either you serve Me with your whole heart, or you go serve the devil.” I chose to serve God completely, as I confessed my sin and repented for having slipped away from Him for so many years. I asked Jesus to again become a living reality in my life. I was tired of going my own way, and I wanted Jesus to have rule and reign in my heart. As I poured out my heart, I literally felt His arms reach around me and give me the warmest, most comforting hug I have ever felt in my entire life. I knew I was forgiven, and as my excitement grew about my rekindled relationship with Jesus, so did my love for Gloria and my longing to be with her. All bitterness that I had felt was gone, and I could hardly wait for her to come home so I could tell her what had happened in my life.

Finally the weekend drew to a close. As she drove up with her sister and mother, I ran out to the car and opened the door for her, exclaiming, “I’ve got the victory! I’m not depressed anymore!”

But was I in for a rude awakening. Her cold stare stopped me dead in my tracks as she announced, “I’m divorcing you.”

No... it couldn’t be. Why? Why had this happened, just when I had rededicated my life to the Lord and gotten things straightened out? It didn’t make any sense. We had made it through thirteen years of marriage – we couldn’t quit now. I struggled and begged and pleaded with her to stay, but this time she said she was leaving for good. She did leave, and shortly thereafter filed for divorce, which was finalized by the judicial system of Duval County, Florida, on February 1, 1984.

Chapter 10

A Covenant God

Divorce.... The mere word conjures feelings of pain, rejection, and destruction. The divorce that we experienced was no exception. However, in spite of my pain, I felt a tremendous sense of God's peace. At times, when I felt as if my heart would burst with grief, I would cry out to Jesus, "Please love me, Lord!" With infinite warmth, peace, and comfort, Jesus would envelope me in His arms of love. He sustained me miraculously during this time of heartache.

Furthermore, just because a judge had said that my marriage to Gloria was dissolved, I was not resigned to his verdict. I desperately wanted Gloria to come back to me, and I was holding on to her with every ounce of faith I had.

The Lord had been doing a miraculous work in my heart since that weekend in September when I recommitted my life to Him. In obedience, I began attending New Covenant Ministries, a nondenominational, Spirit-filled church in Jacksonville. There I was able to counsel with the pastor's wife. For two hours I sat in her office, squalling my eyes out, explaining how my wife had left and how I wanted her back.

"What do you want me to do for you, brother?" she repeatedly asked.

"I don't know," was my tearful reply. "I just want my wife back."

"Listen," she said with finality, "I cannot promise that God will bring your wife back to you. But I can promise that if you will come and sit under our teaching, we will teach you the Word of God, and we will love the hurt away."

She was true to her promise. I learned the Word of God through the pastors and the many anointed speakers who came through, and the people at New Covenant Ministries prayed with me, accepted me, and loved the hurt away.

An interesting thing happened as I was going through a class designed for new members of the church. A woman who lived near me needed a ride, so I agreed to pick her up each week. On the way to our first class, she told me how her husband was not yet saved, and I was telling her how my wife had left me, when all of a sudden she blurted out, "Oh! I knew I was supposed to bring my red notebook!"

“Red notebook?” I wondered to myself. “What does a red notebook have to do with marriages?”

She explained that her red notebook contained information on an organization called “Born Again Marriages.” It wasn’t long before she got the information into my hands, and I was hooked. Here was a group of people that believed the same thing I did – that God ordained marriage, that He was involved in the covenant between a husband and wife, that I could and should stand in faith for my wife to be restored to me, and so many other things. Praise God, did I ever get excited as I studied the Scriptures on this subject and they became alive to me!

It wasn’t long before I was reaching out to people in the same situation and ministering to the hurts in their lives. God had provided me with a reservoir of information through “Born Again Marriages,” and He used me to help restore many torn unions. I stood in awe and praise of God as I saw couples reunited because of words I had shared with them.

But one thing troubled my heart: what about *my* marriage? All during the time leading up to the divorce and after it was “finalized,” there was only one major thing that I wanted, and that was my wife Gloria. I had lost everything else – all the material things that I had worked so hard to achieve seemed to filter through my fingertips, and I was left with very little to call my own. Yet, as I released things to God, Jesus became my treasure. In addition, my pride started to dissolve as I began opening up about my physical problem. It was hard to expose that which I had endeavored for years to hide, but there was such freedom in opening up. And I found that people were much more understanding than I thought they would be. Still, as I cried out to Jesus, I told Him that there was one thing that I was holding on to, and that was my wife. Next to Jesus, she was all I wanted.

As months passed, I questioned God over and over again as to why Gloria had not yet been returned to me. Not long after we were divorced, she was making plans to remarry. Suddenly, I heard she had called off the wedding plans. I rejoiced to hear that it was because she had a dream with a big “STOP” sign! The Lord was honoring the covenant, yet why had she not come back to me yet? In a time of prayer, the Lord spoke the answer to my heart: “I can make her come back, but I

cannot make her love you. I can make her honor the marriage covenant, but I cannot force her to love you. That is a choice of her will.”

“Oh, Lord, I don’t know if I could handle that....” God’s words began to penetrate deeply, even as I continued to stand on the marriage covenant.

Then in July 1984, the Lord brought about a series of events that made His will clear to me. Early in the month, I “happened” to attend a service in a church that I had never visited before. The special speaker was a traveling preacher, a woman with whom I was totally unacquainted. In the middle of her preaching, she stopped and pointed me out, proclaiming, “You in the white shirt back there, stand up.” I was sitting ‘way in the back and looked around to see who she might be pointing to. When I finally realized she meant *me*, I stood to my feet and braced myself for whatever might be in store. The Lord knows how skeptical I can be and that He would have to speak really plainly to get my attention!

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect the words of prophecy that came forth from this ordinary woman. Through her, the Lord quoted to me things that I had spoken to Him in prayer, which only *He and I* knew about; He definitely had my attention. I had been praying, “Make me like Thee, oh Lord,” and He told me what it would take to be made into His image:

The Lord God would say unto thee, “My son, there are trials, yea, and there are testings, yea, and there is tribulation, yea, that those saints begin to walk through as they cry out to me, ‘Make me like Thee, O Lord,’ following the Lamb, withersoever He goest.... My son, I the Lord would encourage thee in this very hour, for the baptism of fire shall come upon thee, and that which is left shall be burned away even as dross, and pure gold shall remain. And thou shalt be a vessel *worthy* in the house of the living God, *worthy* in the house of the living God, *worthy* in the house of the living God, even to lift up praises and thanksgivings and intercede and pray and worship the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, and soul, My son.”

What a strong witness these words bore! I continued to listen intently as the preacher brought forth words about walking in pure religion, not under a dark, religious spirit as I had seen in others. Then the prophecy continued with more words of confirmation and guidance:

And the Lord thy God would say unto thee, “My son, I the Lord desire... that thou would know thy Savior, Jesus Christ. And there shall be no more marketing, there shall be no merchandising, there shall be no glitter of tinsel, but I would say unto thee, it shall be pure and undefiled.”

And the Lord thy God would say unto thee, “My son, there is an area of thy life, that thou wilt have to walk through and let go of, that thou shalt begin to come into more and more understanding. And thou shalt know it is the Lord, thou shalt know it is the Lord, thou shalt know it is the Lord.

“For I would say unto thee, My son, thou hast cried out, ‘Holiness!’ unto the Lord, and so thou shalt begin to know of the holiness of which thou hast not even perceived. And I would say unto thee My son, count the cost. But I would say to lose is to gain. And thou shalt gain the revelation of Jesus Christ. Thou shalt gain the presence of God in the midst of thee. Thou shalt gain the keys to the kingdom. And thou shalt know it is the Lord thy God who speaketh unto thee. And so it shall be.”

As the words burned into my innermost being, God made it clear to me that this prophecy really was from Him. I went home that night in a daze.

As I slumped against the wall of my living room, trying to gather my thoughts, two directives that the Lord had spoken remained foremost in my heart and mind. First He said there should be no more marketing, no more merchandising, and no more glitter of tinsel. I knew this applied to my Amway business. Never was I going to achieve the holiness of God by striving after material wealth, even if I did

have good intentions of putting the “extra” finances into the kingdom of God. He had other, more important things in store for me.

Second these words rang through my head: “There is an area of thy life that thou wilt have to walk through and *let go of*...” In my heart, I knew that there was only one thing that I was hanging on to: my wife. I felt as if I had been stripped of *everything* else – everything except my desire to be reunited with Gloria. And here was a prophecy telling me to let go of that, too. I told God that in order for me to submit, He had to show me clearly and without a shadow of a doubt that it was about my marriage that He was speaking.

Chapter 11

Not My Will, But Thine...

I have never been one to beat around the bush, not even with the Lord. And He has always seemed to honor my straightforward approach. “Lord, I’m going to continue to stand on my marriage unless you show me clearly, without a shadow of a doubt, that you want me to let go of Gloria.” For the next few weeks, I stayed open before Him and thanked Him for honoring my request.

Understandably, I had ups and downs in my thoughts concerning Gloria, but through these experiences I had such peace in my heart and I was more excited than ever about God. I knew that the Lord was faithful, and that something big was about to break!

Through my new church, God had brought some good friends into my life. Friendship was important, because I did not feel like I really fit into the groups at New Covenant. I was not “single,” because I was standing in faith for my marriage to be healed, and singles would inevitably notice the wedding ring I still wore and wonder where my wife was. But I did not feel comfortable with the married couples, either, since I wasn’t a “couple.” So I was blessed when I found understanding friends who listened and helped me.

After a regular Thursday-evening church service, July 26, 1984, I was hanging around minding my own business, when I noticed a friend standing up front in a group of people. Bouncing up front to say “hi,” my vision suddenly narrowed in on another person in the group – a young woman with sparkling blue eyes and a beautiful smile. It seemed as if everyone else in the room disappeared as my eyes focused on this attractive stranger.

Something leaped inside my heart, as if a part of me already knew her. It may have been how Elizabeth felt when her child leapt within her at the presence of Jesus, who was still within his mother Mary. The moment I saw her, I felt a supernatural love sweep over me for this young woman. I knew that God was putting this love in my heart, and deep down I knew that she was the answer to the

prayers I had prayed. Right there I sensed that somehow, some way, she was going to be the wife that I longed for.

Even as I marveled at these feelings, a part of me cried, “No, God! No!! Don’t do this to me! I want Gloria!” Still, I could not escape the strong attraction to this most striking stranger.

Despite the pounding of my heart, I calmly introduced myself. “Hi, I’m Bobby Dickens,” I said with hand extended.

Shaking my hand, she replied, “Hello, I’m Denise LaFontaine.” Her name was as smooth as the hand that was in mine.

“Where are you from?” I ventured, detecting a northern accent.

She replied, “I live in Ohio. I’m just here visiting my friend Christine for two weeks. She’s from Ohio, too, and I...”

Even though our conversation continued, my mind remained fixed on those two words “just visiting.” At home that evening I wrestled with the Lord: “Why did you do this, God? Why did you let me feel this way if she’s going to leave? What’s going on??”

I did not get an instant answer from the Lord, so I decided that I had better make the most of the time I had to get to know my “bride-to-be.” A few nights later we enjoyed dinner together at a Japanese restaurant. The atmosphere was fantastic; a dozen or more people were seated around a sizzling-hot griddle, watching the chef broil fresh scallops, shrimps, and other seafood delicacies and eagerly tasting them as he served them onto our plates.

The atmosphere around Denise and me was fantastic, too – charged with excitement as we discovered how much we had in common. We both enjoyed running and water sports; our favorite book in the Bible was Ephesians; we both had a keen interest in Old Testament prophecies; and most important, we shared a desire to serve the Lord with our whole hearts, particularly in the area of missions. As we talked, I found out that she had wanted to be a missionary ever since high school, as a Catholic, had even wanted to be a nun so she could serve God on the mission field. Now that she was a born-again, Spirit-filled Catholic, her desire to be a missionary had been fanned into full flame, (though her desire to be a nun had faded!). I myself

had felt a desire to be on the mission field for years, though it had never been a real consideration during my marriage to Gloria. The more Denise and I talked, the more I sensed a kindred spirit between us, and the more I wanted to know about her.

During her two-week visit in Florida, we spent much time together. She even extended her stay an extra four days so we could go tubing and snorkeling in the Ichetucknee River. As we floated in inner tubes down the crystal-clear, spring-fed river, it was pure joy for me to entertain her. I would dive to the river bottom and retrieve snails and other treasures for her perusal. The sparkle in her beautiful blue eyes was all the reward I needed. Shortly, my mischievous side began to show as I sought ways to tip her off her float. Something of the show-off in her surfaced, too, when back on land she walked a handrail like a balance beam. However, “pride cometh before a fall” – her toe-touch dismount became a rear-end bounce! Seeing she wasn’t hurt, I broke out in laughter as she jumped to her feet and tried to hide her embarrassment!

Times like these during her short two-and-a-half-week visit caused a very special friendship to develop between us. All too soon, it was time for Denise to return to Ohio. Many of us at church hated to see her leave, because she had already become so much a part of our fellowship. But it was especially hard for me, and I could make no sense of it.

The night before her departure, some people from the church had a going-away party for her. After we said our goodbyes, I sat in my car, unable to drive because of the heaviness in my heart. Again I cried out to the Lord, “Father, what is going on? Why is she leaving? I *love* her, and I know that this love is from you. Will I ever see her again?”

In the darkness of the night, I continued praying, mostly in tongues because my heart was so burdened. Suddenly I felt a presence next to me. Opening my eyes, I found Denise standing beside my open window. I was so startled that I almost hit her as I jumped! Quickly I stepped out of my car so we could talk.

“Why are you out here in the dark, Bobby?” she wondered.

It was very difficult to explain, but I attempted, “Well, Denise, I was just praying for you. I really don’t want to see you go.”

“I know what you mean. I don’t want to leave either. I’ve really had a great time with you these past couple of weeks. I’ll sure miss the fellowship.”

Her words were sweet, but I could tell that she did not have the same depth of feelings toward me that I had for her. The heaviness inside of me was as strong as ever.

“Denise, I’ve got to tell you something.... During the past two weeks, I’ve really grown to *like* you” (understatement of the century). When she looked at me with a puzzled expression, I knew if anything were going to come of the feelings that God had placed in my heart, it would only come through prayer. God was going to have to work some miracles.

After Denise went back inside, I returned to my car, alone. I resumed praying in my heavenly language, for no words could express my feelings of loss and confusion. Gradually, light seemed to break through the darkness as God assured me, “I’m bringing her back to Jacksonville.”

Could it be? Yes, of course! If God said He was bringing her back to Jacksonville, then I knew He would do it!

Originally Denise had come to Jacksonville to visit her friend Christine, having just finished college in Ohio and simply wanting a vacation in Florida before school started in the fall. In fact, she had already signed a contract to teach in Fremont, Ohio, her old hometown, working under the woman who had been her elementary principal! It “looked” like a perfect position, but she says that even before she came to Florida, she knew something about it was not lining up with the Lord’s plan for her life. While in Florida, she prayed a lot had thoughts about moving back to Jacksonville, even so far as to inquire about teaching positions in the area. Nevertheless, it was necessary that she go back home and make a final decision.

Christine and I had volunteered to take Denise to the airport. After we saw her board her plane, Chris began to giggle. I shot her an inquisitive look. “What is it?” I had to know.

“You know what it is,” she laughed.

“Did God tell you what He told me?” I asked.

“Yep, He told me He’s bringing her back in two weeks!” Glory! We had a Holy-Ghost time right then in that airport!

Meanwhile, Denise was not having such a great time. She says that as her parents drove her away from the airport in Columbus, Ohio, she looked longingly toward the south, and an intense desire filled her heart: “Oh, how I miss Bobby and Chris!” Over the following week, she had to make a decision about staying close to home where all was comfortable and familiar vs. going off into the unknown with a myriad of uncertainties. Her parents thought she was crazy for even considering such a move, especially when she had a good job lined up! But she sensed the Lord was leading her in the direction of Florida....

First, however, there was the contract she had signed. Here it was, late August, and school was set to start in just two weeks. Breaking a contract at this late date could cost her her hard-earned teaching certificate. Naturally, Denise was apprehensive as she asked to be released from the contract. But almost immediately God provided a replacement for her position, and she was free to go with no repercussions!

In the mean time, I had come to grips with the fact that the Lord was indeed asking me to let go of Gloria. I removed my wedding ring and waited eagerly for any news from Denise. When Chris and I received word that she would definitely be moving to Jacksonville, we both jumped for joy!

Almost unbelievably, in *exactly* two weeks from the time Denise left Florida soil, she was back again with all of her belongings. Chris welcomed Denise to live with her. And in three weeks time, the Lord provided Denise with a job in the Duval County Schools, teaching third grade.

Chapter 12

Growth

As Denise and I actively continued our friendship, I found it harder and harder to contain my true feelings for her. My struggle became evident as together we celebrated my thirty-sixth birthday at Busch Gardens. On the way there, with the sun peeking over the Florida horizon, I told her I loved her. She did not respond in words, but I could tell that she was thinking deeply.

At the park, as we shared ice cream and French fries and walked around carrying a big stuffed prize that I had won for her, my natural inclination was to take her hand in mine. After a few moments, she gently removed it.

“I’m flattered that you want to hold my hand, Bobby. But we’re still friends, and we wouldn’t want to do anything here that we wouldn’t do in front of our friends in Jacksonville, right?” she asked with searching eyes.

I gulped down my disappointment. “OK, if that’s the way you want it...,” but I continued to trust that Lord would work in her heart what He had worked in mine.

In another conversation, Denise told me that she saw how our relationship could be like Saint Francis and Sister Claire.

“Who were they?” I had asked.

“A monk and a nun who lived back in the Middle Ages. They were a real support and encouragement to one another in their spiritual walks.”

“Were they single?”

“Of course.”

“Well, uh, that’s nice, but it’s not quite what I had in mind...” I don’t think she was getting the hint! Or maybe she didn’t want to. She felt there were too many obstacles to even consider marrying me. Initially, she was concerned about our age difference; she was only twenty-four and I was thirty-six. Also, she was holding on to her religious heritage by attending Catholic Mass every Sunday evening, in addition to going to New Covenant Ministries in the morning, and she felt our

backgrounds were too different. Furthermore, being a Catholic, she felt that marrying a divorced man was an impossibility. But the biggest barrier, as I came to find out, was her pride – she had her master’s degree in education and felt she could never be satisfied with a “common laborer” such as I, who had never been to college!

Nevertheless, as I began to express my true feelings to her, the thought which had already come to me began to sound louder in my ears: “You must tell her about the accident.” I knew it was necessary to tell Denise about my physical condition, for my own sanity as well as in obedience to the Lord. But I was still nervous about it.

One dark evening, soon after Denise had returned to Jacksonville, I invited her out for a walk in the park. There we sat down on a floodwall next to the St. Johns River. As the waves followed their course serenely toward the sea, I opened up my heart and began to unload my burden. I had chosen a dark place because I could not bear to see what her reaction might be. Finally, when I had spilled my whole story, my eyes met hers. How relieved I was to find a look of compassion, understanding, and acceptance. Her words were reassuring. “I’m really impressed with how you overcame all those *obstacles*, Bobby. I’ve worked with many handicapped people, and so many just sit down and give up. I know that God really has His hand on your life! I can see you doing great things for Him.”

Finding such acceptance, I decided to share with her the promise that the Lord had given me ten years prior, that if I would write a book and tell people about my life, He would heal me. More than once He had reminded me that this blessing was still available if I would step out in obedience to Him.

“The only problem is,” I explained, “I don’t know how to write a book.”

“Oh, I know how. I just wrote a hundred-page thesis for my master’s degree. I’ll help you with it,” she offered.

It reminded me of the conversation that Moses had with God at the burning bush (Exodus 4:10-17). Moses did not know what to say to Pharaoh, so God sent Aaron to help him. When the Lord wants something done, He will always make a way!

A strange thing happened on the Sunday morning following our talk. As I walked Denise out to her car after church, she announced that she had something she wanted to tell me. Hem-hawing around, she finally blurted, “Well, it’s like this. I’m attracted to you! Not only spiritually, but also emotionally and even physically.” Her voice echoed all over the parking lot.

“Calm down, Denise,” I advised. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“It’s just that, well, I *like* you.”

“You like me.”

“Yea.”

“Oh.”

I didn’t know what else to say! Once again I went home and slumped against my living room wall, plopping myself on the floor. What was this all about? Here I had told her I loved her and had spilled my guts to her, and she tells me that she *likes* me? Admittedly, it was a start, but a rather slow one for my taste. Little did I know that it was going to take months of patient prayer and waiting for our relationship to become what the Lord and I desired it to be.

As time went on, the Lord began to deal with her objections. The age difference was no longer a barrier; Denise indicated that she actually preferred older men! Also, the Lord dealt beautifully with the divorce issue, showing Denise that He was able to unite two hearts as one, regardless of what the hearts had been through. Gradually, she began to return my love.

I let her know, perhaps prematurely, that I wanted her to be my wife, but talk of marriage seemed to frighten her. More than once she “broke off” our relationship because of religion, or education, or because I was getting “too serious,” or whatever else was bothering her. There were times when I got so frustrated with her arguments and indecision that I just wanted to throw in the towel and say, “Forget it! It’s not worth this hassle!” But as I prayed, the Lord would show me things about her, and I would pray for her or talk with her as the Lord directed me. These anointed conversations brought healing to her heart as well as to mine, and our love for one another grew.

One such direction from the Lord came at 4:00 one morning in March (1985). I woke up suddenly with one word in mind, and I just had to write it down. Grabbing pen and paper, I wrote the word; then another came, then another, and for the next two hours, I scratched out a message similar to the following:

Growth. I am concerned about growth.... Take two pots, a black pot and a white pot. Fill the black pot with only soil; put one inch of fertilizer in the bottom of the white pot, then fill it with soil. Plant two bean seeds in each pot. Put the black pot in the shade and the white pot in the sunlight. Water each with one-fourth cup of water – the white one every day, but the black pot only once a week. Tell Denise to compare the plants that come forth; both will grow, but only one will bear fruit. I desire that ye bear much fruit.

I knew that the message applied to Denise’s wavering to and fro between New Covenant Ministries and the Catholic church. In order to be able to show her something concrete, I obtained the pots, some bean seeds, and the other items as quickly as possible. Faithfully I watered the pots as instructed, but I began to wonder why *nothing* seemed to be growing. After a week or so, I stuck my finger down into the dirt.... Oops! I had forgotten to put in the bean seeds!

Nevertheless, I knew it would still be a good illustration, so when I felt the time was right, I shared the message with Denise. Unfortunately, she did *not* receive it well.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” she argued. “You just don’t understand about the Catholic church. You just don’t understand *at all*.” With that, she turned and walked away.

What I did understand was that this would have to be her decision. So I gave her some space and let God do His work.

It wasn’t too many days before she came back with an apology. “You were right, Bobby. I’m sorry.” As my arms folded around her, she continued, “It’s been really hard for me to face this issue. But I looked around at the people in both churches and asked myself, ‘Who do I want to be like when I am older?’ I *want* to

bear fruit. I *want* my life to count for God, and I'm tired of jumping back and forth between churches. I've decided to join New Covenant."

My heart swelled with joy and excitement, but her decision was not a surprise to me. I was confident in what God had said, and was convinced that my bride-to-be would hear His voice, too.

Chapter 13

From Glory to Glory

One day in early June, 1985, about nine months after God first placed the love in my heart for Denise, I was sitting with her at my kitchen table when I noticed her looking intently at me, her eyes sparkling brighter than usual and her lips curved in a suspicious-looking smile. I returned her gaze, inquiring cautiously, “What is it?”

“Oh, I just thought maybe you wanted to ask me something,” she grinned.

“Like what...?” I did not want to get my hopes up. I had already proposed marriage several times and didn’t feel like hearing “no” again.

She prompted, “You know what.”

“Do you want me to ask you to marry me?”

A delighted, bashful look spread across her face as she nodded.

“OK, will you marry me?”

“Yes!!”

Finally! The love that I had carried those nine long months had been birthed in Denise, too! God had gotten it through her heart that yes, indeed, He did want her to marry me. So eighteen months from the day we met, we were married: December 28, 1985.

In the month of August before Denise and I were married, I wanted to see about having one more minor bit of surgery. The tiny hole made in my urethra years before was still there. After having gone through countless surgeries in my lifetime, the last thing I really wanted to do was get under the doctor’s knife again. But it was annoying for me to have to hold my finger over the opening if I wanted to go to the bathroom normally, so I wanted to have it closed. Dr. Morgan, with the help of a urologist, set to work.

After surgery, the doctors placed a catheter through the urethra to bypass all urine from the stitches they had so painstakingly made in the tiny, fragile tube and surrounding skin. We all knew the danger if urine passed the catheter and infected

the incision; such an infection could cause the tiny opening to enlarge, worsening the problem instead of solving it.

As day after day passed, I could feel the spot swelling and getting very sore. I prayed, yet when I went to the urologist for a checkup, he confirmed my suspicions. “It looks as if urine has slipped past the catheter. The opening is not healing....” He shook his head.

I went home and collapsed in bed. Denise was there, but I did not want to talk to her. I just wanted to cry. Unable to hold back any longer, I finally put my head in my hands and poured out my tears and heart to God, placing myself totally in His hands. When I finally got it all out, I felt as if a ton of bricks had been lifted from me; again I felt God’s peaceful presence comforting me.

The following day I noticed that the swelling had gone down somewhat, and over the next few days I saw continuing signs of improvement. By the time I was to go back to the urologist for my weekly checkup, there was brand-new skin where the infected opening had been. The Lord had done an amazing work!

Through this physical healing, as well as the emotional healing I experienced as I began to share my life story, I could see the hand of God moving to bring about the total healing of my body. More important to me, however, is the spiritual growth I have seen in my life. Repeatedly I have been required to lay down my own desires and let God have His way in my life. I have had to be emptied of myself so that He could fill me with Himself. I have come to a place that I desire to be totally abandoned to His will, because I know that there is nothing on this earth that could possibly be better.

I feel so blessed to have a mate who desires the same thing. Her consecration to the Lord and her desire to serve Him on the mission field have provoked me to do more for Him. Likewise, she has been able to receive much encouragement and prodding from me. It is wonderful to be a husband/wife team in the Lord’s service!

However, I hope that this one thing is clear: I am not advocating divorce. Divorce is *not* the will of God. He allows it because of the hardness of people’s hearts (see Matthew 19:8), but it is not His will. Never should we take the attitude that it is all right to divorce our mate because “God will bring along a better one.” If

I had had the chance to go back and change or mend many of my words and actions with Gloria, I believe God could have used us as an effective team.

In all things we must stay close to God, listening to His voice. In this way, He can guide us in paths of righteousness and safety. He can bring restoration to broken relationships. He can bring healing to hurting hearts. And if our mate insists on divorcing us, we have the authority to do one of two things: stand on Malachi 2:14-15, agreeing with God that the marriage covenant will be honored; or release him or her in peace, trusting in *God alone* to meet our every need.

I can relate so many testimonies of how God met my needs after I totally surrendered to Him. One need I recognized before I even met Denise was to get out of debt. The Lord had been impressing this upon me so that I would be ready to go into full-time ministry, which I hoped would be mission work. I traded in my Corvette sports car for an El Camino pickup and was able to eliminate car payments. Living in a small, humble house also eliminated high monthly rent, so with these savings I was able to get completely out of debt by May 1984. However, when Denise became a part of my life, she brought with her \$10,000 worth of school loans! She, too, was burdened to get out from under this commitment.

As a married couple, our combined income was nothing spectacular. By this time I was working as a welder with the railroad, and Denise was teaching in a private, Christian school. Nevertheless, we put concentrated effort into paying off our debts, all the while giving liberally to the church and to missions. As we were faithful to give and to pay our debts, God was faithful to provide for us. Thus we were debt-free by June – less than six months after we were married! How we ever paid off \$10,000 in six months, only God knows.

Once debt-free, we were ready for service. During the summer months of 1986, we began planning a mission trip to Jamaica for the upcoming Christmas vacation. But something happened in August that changed our direction slightly. Our church hosted a slide show by missionaries Roger and Terry Evans. As they stood on stage with their three adopted children, sharing about their work in Belize, Central America, I felt as if I *must* get to know these people. A short chat with them

after the service just did not suffice. Upon their return to Belize, we kept up correspondence and made plans to visit *them* at Christmas.

Our seventeen-day trip to Belize had a profound impact on both Denise and me. Neither one of us felt it a sacrifice to spend our first anniversary and Christmas there. On the contrary, the simplicity of the people, the need for capable teachers and mechanics, the tug that we felt on our hearts – all of this caused us to begin praying about returning to this country as missionaries.

As soon as we got home, I began to think about things we would need if we got the “go ahead” from the Lord. After experiencing the rugged roads of Belize, I knew we would need a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Thinking how much money we could save if I converted my trustworthy El Camino into a four-wheel drive, I began to look for a running gear.

Meanwhile, even on the way home from the airport, Denise’s little car began to give out. Rather than wait for the Lord’s guidance, we rushed out and traded her car in for a plush, top-of-the-line \$12,000 Honda Accord! “It’ll have good resale value,” I reasoned. But I felt hollowness inside at the thought of being in debt again....

Then just over a week later, my friend John approached me, “Bobby, are you still looking for a four-wheel-drive running gear?”

“I sure am!”

“Would you be interested in a 1980 Jeep Cherokee for \$500?” he asked.

I wondered what kind of condition this Jeep must be in, if he only wanted \$500! Nevertheless, I figured the running gear might be good, so I agreed to look at it.

What he showed me was a genuine, top-rate, well-kept government vehicle! Seeing my puzzlement, John explained, “While you were in Belize, I went to a government auction. There were two Jeeps just like this that I put bids on. I asked, ‘Lord, why am I bidding on *two* Jeeps? And the Lord spoke to me, ‘One is for you, and the other is for Bobby and Denise. They’ll be needing it.’ I didn’t want to say anything until it was a sure thing, but here it is now, if you want it.”

“If I *want* it?? Man, this is perfect!” I could still hardly believe it as he handed me the keys.

Later on, John even canceled the \$500 price tag, saying, “If I was worried about the money, I never would have given you the keys. Use the money toward your trip to Belize.”

I was overcome by the Lord’s goodness. I was also very convicted about the Honda! When we received the Jeep, Denise and I knew that we *had* to get rid of the Honda – we definitely had purchased it outside of the will of God. Mercifully, the Lord touched the heart of the Honda dealer as I humbly shared with him our situation. He actually bought the car back – for the original price! Unheard of! We did lose our trade-in and the taxes, but we definitely rejoiced in the mercy and faithfulness of our God.

Through these and other confirmations, the Lord let us know that He did indeed want us to serve Him in Belize. Therefore, since July 1987, Denise and I have been serving Him there in different capacities: pastor, mechanic, teacher, nurse, doctor – whatever role has been needed at the time. How we look forward to continuing to serve the Lord Jesus, wherever and however He desires!

It is a joy to me to have finally written this portion of my life story. Writing the book is a completion of the condition that the Lord gave me in order to receive my healing. It is like a “hook” on which to hang our faith for fulfillment of Scriptures such as Psalm 127:

Sons are a heritage from the Lord,
Children a reward from Him....
Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;

and Psalm 128:

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
Your sons will be like olive shoots around your table.

Denise shared something very special with me as we were making wedding plans. She said that the first time I told her I loved her, that day we were headed to

Tampa, Florida, as the sun was peaking over the horizon, a picture flashed in her mind of curly-haired children – *our* children – playing in the front yard, surrounded by a white picket fence. How strange that vision seemed to her at the beginning stage of our relationship! But how *real* it appears to us now.

The second major purpose I had for writing my life story, besides for my healing, is to emphasize that no matter what circumstances or crises we face, God can see us through. I know that God has a definite purpose for my life, which He has only begun to reveal. It is evident in His Word that He has a specific purpose for *each* of our lives, which will be revealed as we walk with Him.

I encourage everyone in this: never lose sight of who God is in you and the potential and greatness that you can achieve through Jesus Christ. Trust in Him, not in yourself, and you will overcome. This is my promise and God's promise to you.

Photos



A 2004 photo of Bobby (center) with his beloved family (clockwise): Wife and partner Denise, and children Alicia (10), Caleb (8), and Elizabeth (17)

RIGHT:

A newspaper clipping concerning the accident, April 9, 1960.

Shotgun Blast Wounds Boy, 11, Near Bainbridge

BAINBRIDGE, Ga. – A Florida youth was in fair condition today in a Tallahassee hospital after being accidentally shot Saturday while hunting squirrels with his cousin near here, Decatur Sheriff A.E. White reported.

Sheriff White said Bobby Dick-ens, 11, of Jacksonville, was wounded in the right leg and groin when a 12-gauge shotgun was accidentally fired by his cousin, 13, of near Bainbridge.

According to the youth's parents, the boys took the shotgun without the parents' knowledge to go hunting.

The youth reported that he saw a squirrel go around a tree and when he swung the gun around it accidentally fired, hitting the Dickens lad.

Bobby was visiting his cousin for the weekend when the accident occurred, Sheriff White said.

We would like to hear from you!

Bobby & Denise Dickens

2921 St. Andrews Drive

Findlay, Ohio 45840



Please let us know how God has touched your life,
or if there are ways we may pray for you.

May God's richest blessings be yours!