

A SHORT STORY OF MY MOTHER'S LIFE

Mother's Day, May 10, 2015

My mother was born Joanna Christine [REDACTED] at 2:30 in the morning on Thursday, January 10, 1929 in Galena, Kansas. She was the last of seven children born to Joseph Warren [REDACTED], a farmer, and Alma Faulkner [REDACTED], a housewife. Five of her siblings were alive at the time of her birth. One of them had passed away. She was named after her father and a neighbor down the street. Her father's family came from Scotland. Her father worked as a miner in Picher, Oklahoma before the family moved to Kansas and became a farmer. He died in July of 1928 at the age of 32, just 6 months before my mother was born. Her mother Alma was also 32 years old when she gave birth to my mother. After her husband died my grandmother worked as a seamstress and a fry cook.

My grandmother married many times as my mother was growing up, I believe in an attempt to keep her children fed and together. You'll remember this was the depression and times were tough and money was hard to come by for farmers and widows, especially. As a result, my mother grew up without having the benefit of any long-term relationships with father figures. This is probably why she so loved her brothers and my father's father so dearly. They could never replace the father she did not know, but they loved her, tenderly cared for her and fiercely fought for her.

My mother attended school in Galena, Kansas and Joplin, Missouri. Her first job was babysitting when she was 12 years old. She was paid a whopping 25¢ an hour. She took her first trip to California a year later in 1942 at the age of 13. She has written that her step dad drove 35 miles an hour on this trip and it took them 6 days to make it from Kansas to Redlands, California where she attended Redlands High School. She moved back to Missouri and attended Joplin High School then moved back to California and graduated from High School in Antioch. Her favorite subjects were math, typing, and bookkeeping. In High School she was chosen as one of the 15 seniors to belong to the Golden "A" Club. She was also part of the Girls Athletic Association and played several sports. She also worked in the high school kitchen as a cook and food server.

She first met my father at her oldest sister's house when she was 14 and he was 16 years old. They were distant cousins, as he is a nephew of her Aunt Mary and Uncle Jim Burris. They were married in Minden, Nevada on July 4, 1947. They had to wake up the county clerk about 1:30 a.m. to get a marriage license and about 2:00 a.m. they woke up the Justice of the Peace. My father was so nervous that he forgot to change one of his socks and had two different colored socks on. She was 19 years old and he was 21.

Her first time in the hospital was in November of 1948 when she was delivering me. She saw her first television when she was 20 years old (that would be in 1949). My brother Bill was born in 1950 and 6 years later in 1956 my sister Sandy was born.

High School friends were important to mom. She kept in touch with them through the years. Every year after graduation my mother and two of her high school friends went out

to lunch together on their birthdays. One died many, many years before my mother but the other two kept up the tradition.

Before she died all 6 of her grandchildren were born: three to me and three to my sister. She sometimes used pet names for them such as Sugarfoot, Angel, Peaches, Cuddles, Snuggles, and Pumpkin. She loved her grandchildren and they loved her. She also saw 7 of her now 11 great-grandchildren as well.

My mother had a beautiful voice. I remember several times singing hymns in the kitchen with her while she was preparing lunch or dinner. The hymn "In The Garden" was one I remember singing the most with her. She never thought she had a good voice and probably would have been too embarrassed to sing in public. But we missed out on a lot of beauty by not hearing her sing.

She loved country music the most and my earliest memories of the music she played around the house are "You're Cheatin' Heart", "Honky Tonkin'", and "Hey Good Looking". Some of the other songs I remember she played a lot were "If I Knew You Were Comin' I'd A Baked A Cake", "How Much Is That Doggie In The Window", and "The Tennessee Waltz". Her mother who played the piano and organ and sang hymns with her children as a family event passed on this love of music to her. She passed this love down to me not only through her genetic heritage but also through her encouragement of my musical pursuits.

My mother was a simple woman who loved people and took every opportunity to be polite and pleasant to others. Because of her outgoing personality you would never know of the things she had to overcome in her life from birth till death. As an infant she grew up without her biological father. As a young adult she went through 6 step-fathers, getting a new one about every 2 years. But the ones she experienced in her later years had the most impact on her and those who loved her.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS:

My mother was in very good health most of her life. But in October of 1976 she suffered a brain aneurysm. This was a very traumatic event for the whole family, but for me it was extremely hard. I had lost my job and was told by my landlord that I needed to vacate the house we were renting. I was not able to find another house until 2 days before I was to vacate the first house. In addition to this my wife was about to give birth to our second child, Corrie. The first landlord was not sympathetic to my situation and was on me constantly to vacate.

My days were filled with dropping my first born Christopher off at his aunt Rodallee's house in the morning, going to the old house to clean and move furniture, go to the hospital to see my mother, go to another hospital to see my wife and newborn baby, then take my infant son home to bed, only to get up the next day and do it all over again. They could not do surgery on my mother for 13 days, so it happened that the day after my wife delivered was the day my mother had surgery. My wife was going crazy not knowing what was happening and I was going crazy trying to juggle all my responsibilities and still keep my emotions and my mental state in tack.

Well, I was at my wits end several times, but finally I said to myself that if ever there was a time when I would open my Bible and just do a “point and shoot” this was the time. I had prayed that my mother would survive the surgery but I also prayed that she would fully recover. The doctors gave her a 50/50 chance of making it through surgery but they were not hopeful that she would ever be herself again. I knew God said, *“You have not because you ask not (James 4:2b)”* so I had asked and asked and asked. But I wanted some assurance that He would answer.

So I opened my Bible at random with my eyes closed and pointed my finger at the page. What I read was this: *“He asked You for life, and you gave it to him” (Psalm 21:4)* I thought, could this just be a coincidence? Well, if God was truly telling me my mother would live, I had to go farther. After all I wanted more than life I wanted quality life. So I tried it again. I closed my Bible, closed my eyes, opened my Bible and inserted my finger again. This time I read, *“You have given him his heart’s desire, and you have not withheld the request of his lips” (Psalm 21:2)*

Afraid to tell anyone about this or to believe on something which I did not know would come true I kept silent and waited. Well, not only did she survive, the only after effect was a droopy left eyelid, and even that went away after time. The doctor was amazed and called her his miracle patient. When I told my mother this story, she responded my saying that the good Lord must have her here for a reason. This event happened 21 years before she died. At her memorial service I saw many of the reasons the Lord kept her alive. But initially it was not so obvious.

My father left my mother several months after she came home from the hospital, when she still needed to be cared for. She was told that she may never be able to work again, and suddenly a divorce was pending and she had no means of support. It was a frightening time for her. So it begged the question, why would a loving God allow someone to survive, only to have her husband leave her alone, with her health still partially in question? It was a good question then and it is a good question now. But before I attempt to address that issue, let me take you up to the events that occurred near the end of her life.

A week before she died my mother called me around midnight and said she had a terrific headache. When we got to her house we called the advice nurse at Kaiser then took her directly in to Mt. Diablo hospital in Concord. We left her there around 3:30 a.m. and came home to call my brother and sister who both lived out of town. When we returned to the hospital a few hours later the doctor confirmed that she had another aneurysm and that the outlook was not good. I then called my aunts and cousins and my church and asked for prayer for her.

I knew from my mothers past experience that God could heal her and would if He so willed. I prayed once again that she would be healed and restored to perfect health. But a far greater priority for me this time was whether or not I would see my mother in heaven. I know she believed that God existed, but in the conversations that my sister, my wife and I had with her over the years, I did not sense that she knew what a relationship with God was, one that would ensure her entrance into heaven. So there was a double burden this

time for me. It would be hard enough to let her go in this life. It would be extremely hard to let her go in the next.

As the week went by the doctors gave us very little hope that she would survive. But we rallied ourselves and took comfort in little things that my mother did which encouraged us. We knew she had fought her way to recovery with her first aneurysm and with her stroke. She was a fighter and we knew that if anyone could fight through this, she could. But as the days succeeded days she grew worse until she finally was not awake and responsive to the doctors or to us. We agreed to surgery as soon as it was feasible in order to give her as much a change for survival as possible.

After surgery on Tuesday evening it did not look good. She was worse than she was before the surgery. Her aneurysm had bled a total of three times and was the cause for her comatose state. On Thursday afternoon my family, my sister and my friends went into mom's room and prayed for her. The nurses may have thought we were giving her the "last rites". But far from that, we prayed for her to open her eyes, to rise up out of her bed, and for her to recover fully.

We also asked God for assurance that we would see my mother in heaven with us. The decision of whether or not my mother would be with me in heaven was now no longer a matter of human dialogue. She could not respond to us. It was a matter between her and her God. So we prayed that the Spirit of God would speak to her spirit and speak the words of love that only He could say - the words of a Father who had loved her all her life, but which we were not sure she had ever fully known.

We sang a few praise songs and I suggested that we sing "In The Garden" as it was one of mom's favorites. It was during this time that the assurance came to us through my wife. As we sang the chorus to this song, "*And He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am His own*", my wife felt the Lord comforting her, saying that He was doing this now with my mother. He was walking with her, and talking with her, and telling her that she was His own. The Lord had answered one of our prayers and gave us the assurance we were asking for.

But this assurance did not cause us to stop praying her to return to health. We continued to pray for this as did many others from our church and from my sister's church. You need to know that whenever we prayed and asked for what we wanted - life and health - we also acknowledged that God was in control. The Bible says that "*For everything there is a season and a time - a time to be born and a time to die*" (Ecclesiastes 3:2). It also says that "*You take away their spirit (or breath), they expire and return to their dust*" (Psalm 104:29). So we were willing to let God be God and make the final decision. As hard as it was, we would be content with whatever He was going to do.

As I thought about her first experience with an aneurysm and asked God again to grant her life, I felt He was saying to me, "I have granted her life. I gave her 21 years that were not originally hers to live. She has lived because you asked for more years. I have given them

to her. Now it is time for her to come to Me.” With these thoughts I could not be selfish and find fault with God were He to take her.

So I am back to my original question. Would a loving God allow someone to survive, only to have her husband leave her alone, with her health still partially in question? The answer is yes, a loving God would, for He had a plan for my mother. She had many wonderful qualities which had nothing to do with whether or not she was married. God states that in this world we will have tribulation (John 16:33), and my mother had her share. But He also endowed her with a loving and gentle spirit and surrounded her with friends and relatives that needed her love and loved her in return. If she had not lived 21 years after her first aneurism she would have missed 7 of her 8 grandchildren and she would have missed her daughter’s wedding. These are too many good things to miss out on, and it is a result of answered prayer from a loving God that she lived long enough to enjoy them.

My mother once expressed that several of her friends believed in reincarnation including my uncle. So I informed her that the Bible says “*it is appointed once for man to die and after that the judgement*” (Hebrews 9:7). I also let her know that judgement for those who believed in Jesus Christ and His resurrection was already paid. Those who believed have already passed from death into life (John 5:24). The price and penalty of judgement has already been paid in Christ. We had to wait until she was almost gone before we were assured, not by her but by God, that she was going to Him.

One last comment on my mother’s life. Mom once told me that my grandmother tried everything to get rid of her before she was born. One can certainly understand the anxiety that was going through my grandmother’s heart and mind after her husband died and left her 3 months pregnant. But she was not successful in her attempts to abort my mother. So she came to the conclusion that this unborn child must be the one who would take care of her in her old age.

This is just what my mother did. She took care of her mother until she died at the age of 77 in April of 1974. And she continued to take care of her stepfather until he died some years later. That was who my mother was – she loved life and loved taking care of others. If my grandmother had gotten pregnant today she would have no trouble aborting my mother. What would our lives have been like if my grandmother had been successful? I would not exist. Neither would my brother or sister, or any of our children. And what would your lives have been without our influence?

Yes, God does have a purpose for each of our lives. Even if our earthly parents do not initially want us, God wants us for His kingdom. And we can live our lives in love and service to others, just as my mother did. Is that enough to get us into heaven? No. We need the grace of God for that. But shouldn’t we all live our lives in love and service to others? Isn’t this what God calls us to do?

No matter how our lives begin, in poverty or riches, in love or abandonment, in success or tragedy, we are created in the image of God. Created for a purpose, and destined for eternity. Scripture says that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39)

and I believe this includes our own personal history. In fact, He can take each one of our failures and tragedies and make them into something good if we will let Him.

The Bible is full of ordinary women who did nothing more than yield to the God of purpose. We briefly touched on 6 of these women and the contribution they made to us all. Because of them we inherited both tragedy and triumph – the tragedy of sin and the triumph of the cross. Eve lost one of her sons to murder and another to banishment (Genesis 4:8,12). Yet her descendant crushed the head of Satan; Leah was unloved by her husband, married to a man by deceit (Genesis 29:21-35). Yet she bore children named Levi and Judah from whose tribes would come both a deliverer and a Savior - Moses and Jesus. Jochebed fought the abortionists of her day and refused to have her youngest child killed as he exited the womb. And both she and Hannah willingly gave their sons up to others to raise in gratitude for the gift of life (Exodus 1:15—16, 2:1-10; 1 Samuel 1:20-28, 2:11). Yet both Moses and Samuel, bereft of their birth mothers, grew up to be used mightily by God. Ruth lost her father-in-law, brother-in-law and husband to an early grave yet she became the grandmother of the greatest king of Israel, King David (Ruth 1:3-5; 4:13, 17). And Mary, suffering the shame of being pregnant out of wedlock, gave birth to the Savior of all mankind (Luke 1:26-33).

What they all had in common was this: *“God works all things out for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28)*. All mothers, indeed all of us, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, grandmothers and grandparents should heed this truth. The tragedies we face in life may define us for a season but they do not decide our destiny. Our destiny is decided by where our hope is placed. God has said, *“I know the plans I have for you, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11).”* I encourage you to place your hope in God, for He will not disappoint. He will make all things work together for your good.

This is God’s promise to you: If you will draw near to Him He will draw near to you. If you humble yourself, He will exalt you (James 4:8, 10). The peace that passes understanding can be yours. Just take the pain and confusion of the past and cast all that anxiety on Him, because He cares deeply for you (Philippians 4:6-7). And when you do, leave it there; don’t let it follow you home and don’t pick it up again. Leave it in the nail scarred hands of the One who paid the price so you could be free. Then go and walk in that freedom.

Scripture says that *“We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:7-10)*. Knowing this, isn’t it time we left our past behind? God is already making something good out of what happened to us in the past and He will continue to make something good out of what happens to us in the future. So let’s take our sorrows, our shame, our sickness and our pain and lay them all down at the foot of the cross. It is there the joy of the Lord waits. The Scriptures say, *“The joy of the Lord is our strength” (Nehemiah 8:10)*. So let’s pick up this undeserved and indescribable joy and find the strength we need to go on. Let’s be active

participants with Him in this work of perfection knowing that as Christ overcame the grave we too can rise out of the graves that have been dug for us in the past. No matter how our lives began, we can be more than conquerors through the strength and power which Christ provides (Romans 8:37). Nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37).