

Faith Family Life

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Dove Christian Publishers

P.O. Box 611

Bladensburg, MD 20710-0611

www.dovechristianpublishers.com

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ISBN: 978-09975898-2-5

Printed in the United States of America

Cover drawing by Maliek Cannon

Book design by Raenita Wiggins

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Prologue

I have often tried to imagine what my life would have been like under different circumstances. What would I be if my family structure were different? What would I be if my parents were different people? What kind of life would I have had if I were wealthy? What would my life be if I had grown up not knowing God?

If you knew me personally, you would know that my family is my favorite topic of discussion. I was born into a family of nine siblings. My father is a teacher, and my mother has been a housewife since I can remember. I am the second from the youngest in my family. As with any large group of people, there are many different personalities and ideas in a big family. Since most of my siblings are older than me, I spent most of my young life watching their experiences. We have all taken different paths to arrive at the places we are now. Collectively, we have seen it all and experienced it all. Now when I look at all of us, I see the differences that make us all individuals, but I also see the common factors that make us family.

One of the identifying features of my family is that we were always in church. Growing up in church is a unique experience. I was not a pastor's child, but my parents were very dedicated to church, so we had to be just as dedicated. Sunday morning, Sunday evening,

Bible studies, prayer meetings, choir rehearsals, and whatever else came up, we were there. In my family, it did not matter what was going on or how we were feeling. If no one else showed up, we had to show up. If the lights were on at the church, we would be there. It seemed that we were at church more than we were at home. Other children teased us because we were always in church and because we were not allowed to do everything that other kids did. Being in church all the time made us outsiders.

Other than the teasing for being church kids, we were also teased because we did not have much money. We could not afford brand-name clothing. We were on welfare. We could not afford to go to the barbershop, so my mother cut our hair. We had to share clothes and sometimes had to wear clothes that were ripped or torn. Our cars were always breaking down, and we could not afford many of the things in school like yearbooks or school pictures. It was difficult having to endure all the teasing and name-calling from the other children. I did my best to ignore it, but it was still difficult. I always watched over my older sisters and my little brother because I did not want anyone to mess with them. Even though I was young, I was aware of my family's financial situation, and I knew that there was nothing that I could do to change it. I knew that my parents were doing the best that they could so I just dealt with it the best that I knew how.

Dealing with this caused me to distance myself from others as a youth. I was not withdrawn or isolated, but

I did not make much of an effort to fit in with other children. The truth was that I did not fit in. I did not feel like others could relate to or understand me, so I became a loner. I had a few friends, but they were friends from church, and they did not attend the same schools that I attended nor did they live close, so I just became comfortable being by myself. My siblings were my best friends. I had the best times of my life with them. I knew that they loved me for who I was, and that they understood me. Even when we were at school, we stuck together. Having such a close bond with all of them made me feel normal and like I had something special in life, so the teasing and the ridicule did not affect me much. I knew that I had much love around me, so that helped me make it through the toughest times of my life.

Being alone most of the time forced me to observe everything around me. I began to notice traits and behaviors. I noticed differences among people. I analyzed people's conversations and interactions. I observed most of that in church since most of my young life was spent there. I interacted with many different types of people from different backgrounds. I was blessed to have met so many wonderful people in church. These people gave so much of themselves and were a blessing to myself and my family. They helped us through some very difficult times. They were always praying for others and helping those in need. They truly showed the love of God.

Despite the good that I noticed in church, I also saw a

lot of negative things there. Unfortunately, everything that happens in church is not godly. Everyone in church is not righteous. There are people in church that are not there to serve God. They come to cause confusion and strife. They do not have the love of God in their hearts, and it is apparent in their actions. Understanding that gave me a different perspective on everything around me. I began to understand myself more physically and spiritually. I also learned more about other people and how they behave and interact with one another. The things that I saw in church are a major reason why I developed a great interest in psychology and theology.

My wonderful family was the best gift I had to help me figure my way through all that was going on with me. My five brothers and three sisters are the best siblings that one could ask for. I am one of the youngest in the family, so I looked up to most of my siblings growing up. My older brothers are hardworking men, and they are dedicated to their families. They always looked out for the rest of us and helped us through difficult times. All of my sisters are older than me, and they always took care of us. Even today they would do anything for the rest of us, and they love us unconditionally. Having a younger brother also gave me a great sense of responsibility because I knew that I had to look out for him and be a good example.

I have also been blessed to have both my mother and my father in my life. They are the most spiritual and righteous people that I know. They not only went to church faithfully, but they live their righteousness out

every single day. Everything that was taught in church was taught to us at home. We were not allowed to participate in everything that other families participated in. We could not watch everything on television. We could only listen to certain types of music. We had to read our Bibles and pray regularly. We had family prayer and devotion each night before we went to sleep. My father had scriptures posted all over the house. My parents never used foul language nor did they allow it from us. They would give their all for anyone, and they made sure that we were taken care of above all else. They were the greatest role models that I could ever ask for. Being a part of this great family taught me about the things that I would encounter that the church, school nor anything else could prepare me for. They taught me about the most important things: Faith, Family, and Life.

Faith

*T*he Merriam-Webster dictionary defines faith as “a firm belief in something for which there is no proof.” When I think about that definition, I think about everyday happenings that require faith. We do not see the air that we breathe, but we know that we cannot live without it. We do not see our hearts pumping blood through our veins, but we know that if it stopped, we would die. There are so many things that we cannot see and prove, but we believe that they exist and that they are working in our lives.

Discovering faith is a lifelong journey. There are so many factors that affect our ideas of faith, and we have to understand what our faith is to build and strengthen it. My family afforded me a great spiritual foundation and family structure. With the love that surrounded me and the wisdom that I gained, I developed the strength to handle the things that I would experience on my own. I did not always make the best decisions, and I did not always come out on top, but I could make it through all of my struggles. The things that I experienced caused me to understand what faith is and how it works in my life.

I came to understand that faith is not simply believing in God. Many people say that they believe in God but what does that mean? How does that acknowledgment

of God affect your life? I believe that air exists, but if I am not able to breath it in, I would still die. The mere knowledge of it profits me nothing. It is the same concept with God. Knowing Him is wonderful but if there is not a deeper connection with Him that knowledge of Him is in vain.

For me, faith is living my life with the belief that God is always present and that His grace and love is abounding in my life and in those that believe in Him. Through this, I can live in peace knowing that God will provide. I also understand that my purpose will be fulfilled through the good and the bad. Through this, I know that all things will work together for my good. My faith tells me that everything will be all right.

I have built this faith through many of the lessons that I was taught growing up and my personal experiences. The principles that I have learned have allowed me to see how God is working in my life and His purposes for everything that we experience. My faith tells me that no matter what happens God is in control, and He will always see me through.

These are the lessons that I learned from my upbringing in faith.

The Power of Prayer

*T*he earliest memories that I have were of church. I learned about God probably before I could spell my name. My parents were very faithful church members. They were not pastors or ministers. They were not leaders of any kind. They were just members of the congregation who believed very firmly in being in church. If we did not do anything else during the week, we were going to be at church. Church was the first public place that I went after I was born. I was told that it was in church when I took my first steps.

My earliest memory of church was going to the morning prayer meetings with my mother. I did not quite understand what was going on or what the point was at the time. All I knew was that afterward, my mother would take me to get a snack, so that kept me excited. I would listen to them during those prayer meetings and try to make sense of what was going on. I would hear some of them moaning, crying, singing, or shouting. Some were loud, and others were soft. Some were on their knees or lying down while others were walking around or sitting down. Regardless of how they prayed, every person in the building prayed during that time.

Mostly, it was the same group of people at every meeting. Whatever it took, these people were going to make it to those prayer meetings. They not only came

to the prayer meetings, but they were the most faithful members of the church. When the weather was bad, or there was a big event many people would miss church but not these people. Most of them did not necessarily have a position or a title in the ministry, but they were always there. These were the people that my parents would call for prayer when we were experiencing a crisis, and the pastor would call on whenever there was something going on in the church. They were always available and willing to pray for anyone and any situation.

After everyone had his or her personal time of prayer, someone would say a prayer to conclude the prayer time. Then someone else would give a short devotion, and we would pray once again before we left. Everyone would gather in a circle around the altar and hold hands. They would put a small box in the middle of the circle. If anyone had a particular request that he wanted to be mentioned in prayer, he would write it out on a piece of paper and place it in that box. Then, someone would say a closing prayer. Sometimes this prayer was just as long as the time of individual prayer at the beginning of the meeting. Once the prayer was concluded everyone would clap hands, and we would go our separate ways.

We had our family prayer every evening before bed time. My mother would gather us together, say a prayer, and go through a time of devotion. My father would say a closing prayer. This was a very serious time in our household. It did not matter what we were doing or where we were. My mother would find us and get us

to her room for prayer time. On weekends and holidays when we were out of school, we had to spend some time reading the Bible and praying on our own before we could go outside and play or watch television. It was nothing that we could rush through. My mother would make us come to her and tell her what we read and how it applied to our lives. Once she was satisfied, we could go on our way. If she was not satisfied, we had to read some more and come back to her with our updated reading. She did not want us to read just because we were told. She wanted us to truly understand the Bible and what it means for us. She also wanted us to truly learn how to pray for ourselves.

We went through many trials when I was younger, and the only way that my parents knew to get through them was prayer. My mother prayed all day long. Every morning we would wake up and hear her singing and praying as she made us breakfast or cleaned the house. Whenever we were in a vehicle, they would say a prayer. My father had prayers and scriptures posted all around the house. He would recite Psalms 91 every morning before he left for work. He still does that today. He would wake up and say a prayer, and once he got home in the evening, he would eat and pray with us. Then he would go to the living room and pray some more.

I remember being in school and getting sick. We would have to call our parents to pick us up and take us home. That is usually what would happen when the other children called home. When we called our mother, she would tell us to place our hands on the area that is hurting

us, and she would make us repeat after her a prayer for whatever was bothering us. It was embarrassing, but her logic was that prayer would fix anything. We did not always have dependable transportation and sometimes even if my mother wanted to come and get us from school, she did not have transportation to make it to the school. We also did not have money to pay for a hospital visit so if it was bad enough my mother would rely on some old remedy that her family passed down to help us feel better. So we had to handle our sickness to the best of our ability and make it through the day. My parents did what they could, but we did not have the luxury of depending on medicines and doctors so all that my parents knew to do was to pray for us and have faith that God would keep us in good health.

Once we all got older and started leaving home, we would have a time of prayer at church where the pastor and the congregation would pray for us before we left home. My parents would also spend some time with us and talk with us about our plans and our next steps. They would spend time with us in prayer, and they would also spend time individually in prayer for each of us. My father would recite Psalms 91 every morning for us while we were there and away. For those of us that joined the military my father would say a special prayer for us every day of our basic training and on each day that we were deployed overseas. Even now, in the mornings before we have to leave their house to return to our homes, my father anoints our heads with oil and says a prayer over us.

Once I became an adult, I had to figure out what all of this meant. How does prayer affect my life? I think about all the struggles that we have endured. We never had enough to go around. There was always a shortage of something. My parents were stressed most of the time. They were also sick all the time. My father suffered from terrible migraine headaches, and my mother had numerous health conditions. Our vehicles were never reliable. Something was always going wrong for us. That became a part of our family culture. We were so used to cars breaking down and bills not getting paid. We were so used to finances drying up and disappointments that we did not even flinch when something went wrong. It was normal for us.

I realized though that, through it all, we survived. We always had food to eat and clothes to wear. We always had a roof over our heads. It may not have been the best, but we always had what we needed. We were never hospitalized, and we were never in trouble with the law. My parents did the best that they could to provide for us. When that was not enough, they just prayed. They did not know what else to do. They did not have another source of income. There was no one to fall back on. My older brothers helped with what they could, but they had their families and responsibilities, and they could not take care of us as well. We had to rely on our prayers and the faith that God listened to them when we cried out to Him.

Once I began to sort out my prayer life, I began to understand how truly important it is in our lives. It was

hard growing up with all the trials that we dealt with but day after day and night after I night I witnessed my father on his knees praying and my mother spending most of her days in prayer. It may not have been apparent then, but God was looking on them with favor, and He was answering their prayers. We did not see it at the time, and it did not seem like anything was working out for us, but God was still in our midst.

Sometimes it can get discouraging when we pray, and it does not seem like our prayers are being answered. We get frustrated. We lose faith. Sometimes we just give up. We know that we should pray, but when things are constantly going wrong, it can get frustrating. The Bible tells us to pray without ceasing. However, what is the point of prayer if nothing seems to happen? Why spend all of this time saying prayers when they seem to go unanswered?

I must admit that I have been at that point in my life. I was simply tired of praying because it did not seem like any good was coming from it. I was always going through something. It seemed as if nothing was working in my favor. I got to the point where I did not want to pray at any time for anything. I am sure that many people can relate to this feeling. Even Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had a moment where He wanted to know why God had forsaken him. However, in the midst of the horrific last moments of Jesus' life, He taught us exactly what prayer is truly about.

Prayer is not about receiving things. God will bless us with the desires of our hearts when we pray to

Him, but prayer is so much more. Prayer is necessary to communicate with God to build a relationship with Him. Through that relationship, you build trust in Him. Once you develop your trust, you become willing to surrender to His will. Jesus does tell us to ask, and we will receive, but in Matthew 6:33 He tells us that we must seek the Kingdom of God first and foremost, and He will supply our needs. Everyone wants to be blessed and favored in the eyes of God, but we must remember that prayer also includes seeking His will above all else.

Before Jesus was turned over to be crucified, he prayed a simple prayer to God. He said, "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42, KJV). He prayed for deliverance from what he was preparing to endure, but He only asked for it if it was truly the will of God. Many times we are so focused on our needs and not the will of God. Because we are going through a lot, we just want some relief from our struggles. We want God to take the pain away and deliver us from our trials. We sometimes lose sight of the fact that God has a greater plan than our own. He is working things out for our good. We have to believe in Him and trust in His will. This is not to say that we should not ask for things that we want, because Jesus does tell us that we should ask for what we desire. However, we must put our trust in Him and seek His Kingdom above all else, and we will be blessed beyond measure.

The Church

Church has always been a major part of my life. Growing up, we spent just about every day at church. We had Sunday morning and Sunday evening services. We had prayer meetings on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturday mornings. We had Bible studies on Wednesday evenings. Besides our regular weekly services, there were choir rehearsals, revivals, youth programs, men and women's programs, etc. For us, there was always a reason to be at church. Even when we were sick, we had to be in church. Most people stay home when they are sick, but my mother says, "The best place to be when you are sick is in church. That is where you find healing for your sickness."

I was not quite sure what was my purpose for being in church. I just knew that whether I wanted to go or not, I was going to be there. My parents never missed a service, and they made sure that we were right there next to them. At the time, it was seven of us because my two oldest brothers had already married and moved away from home. We were probably the most noticeable family because it was many of us. We also took up the entire second row of the church. My mother wanted us all to participate, so anytime there was an activity, there was always a Cannon in the mix. I took to the drums because I thought drummers were cool but also

because that satisfied my mother, and she never made me participate in anything else. She enjoyed singing as part of the music ministry. Two of my sisters also sang in church, and my little brother played the saxophone. My best friend played the keyboard, and his sister sang; so we had our little music ministry, and we loved it. For most of my young life that was what church was to me.

Once I left home, I had a decision to make. Do I continue going to church? Many children who grew up in church tend to turn away from the church once they leave home. Since I no longer had my parents watching over me and making sure that I was in church, I decided that I would stop going to church. That lasted one Sunday. I missed a Sunday service, and I did not feel right about it. My spirit was troubled, so I decided that no matter what, I still needed to go to church. It had been such a major part of my life it was difficult to step away from it. I discovered that it would be necessary for my life moving forward.

I always find it interesting to hear the excuses that people have for not going to church. "There are more hypocrites in church than anywhere else." "They are going to be looking at me funny." "Everyone in church is so judgmental." As ashamed as I am to admit it, these statements are true in many churches. Going to church is supposed to be a time of enjoying fellowship with other believers and building yourself up spiritually. However, you will find that there is quite a bit of negativity and malice that are present among congregations and groups of faith. Even for individuals like me who have been

in church all their lives, it can often be a very hostile environment.

Unfortunately, some churches have created an environment where individuals who do not regularly attend for whatever reasons are treated as outsiders, as if they do not belong in church. They are judged by what they are wearing, the background they come from, and what their current situation might be. Instead of demonstrating the love of Christ, the people of the church frequently tend to overlook these people or turn their backs on them because they do not portray the perfect picture of a church person.

My parents did not wait for the church to teach us the word of God. They taught us the Bible at home. They taught us what it meant to have a relationship with God and how to live righteously. They lived by what they read in the scriptures. Their righteousness was visible in their everyday lives. Other people could sense that they were believers because of the things that they did and said, and how they loved and showed compassion. They taught us that our relationship with God did not have anything to do with the church we attend or the position we may hold in ministry. They ensured that we understood that attending church is not the way to salvation. They taught us that God does not love people that attend church more than He loves anyone else. "Church folks" are not better than anyone else because of their church attendance. These people are searching for answers just like anyone else. They have the same problems, addictions, and issues as everyone else.

People in church are not perfect, and neither are those that do not go to church. Church attendance is important because it allows us to spend time learning and worship God and fellowshiping with other believers, but we are fooling ourselves if we think that attending church offers us an advantage in the eyes of God. God loves us all the same, and He will judge us all the same. God is the only one that can pass judgment on anyone for their sins.

I can remember growing up and listening to others' testimonies of how they came to be in a relationship with God. Some would testify about being drug dealers or gangsters. Others would talk about being hooked on drugs and lives of violence. The people that made up the congregation came from many different backgrounds and had experienced many different things. I would listen to these testimonies and how these people found deliverance, and it showed me that everyone has a story. Everyone has done things that he or she is not proud of. People come to Christ from all different backgrounds, and they do not always have honorable stories. Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Because we have not always lived up to God's standards for our lives, we have no room to condemn anyone else. Many of these people are in the same situation or sin that we were in before and after Jesus came and changed our lives. Remember that God loves us all the same, and He can forgive others, just as He has forgiven you.

For those that are members of a church family,

just take the time to think about the ministry of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was carrying out His mission, He ministered among the people. He went where the people were. He never taught from a pulpit or a place of authority. He did not turn people away because of their sins or because they did not attend services regularly. He did not create a “church family” where only certain people were accepted. Jesus was the Son of the Most High God, but He did not separate Himself from the people because of who He was. Quite the contrary, the world was Jesus’ church. The outcasts were His family. The people whom no one else wanted to deal with were the same people to whom Jesus opened His arms. If we truly model ourselves after Jesus Christ, we should be willing to do the same thing. Being a member of a church is wonderful. Having a thriving ministry is great, but we must never forget that our ministry extends beyond the church. It extends beyond our praise, our worship or our revivals. It extends to those that come to church after a long night of partying. It extends to those that have fallen into drug addictions. It extends to those that are homeless. It extends to those that are just seeking help. Just as Jesus showed compassion and love to the man possessed with demons in the tombs, and the woman with an issue of blood, we must show the same compassion and love for the people that may not know the love of God.

For those that may be struggling with their beliefs understand that you must not let the sins of others affect your relationship with God. Because there are

hypocrites or liars in church does not mean that you stay away from church. Because you have witnessed the downfall of a woman or man of Christ does not mean that you turn your back to God. The Bible tells us in Philippians 2:12-13, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Other people's shortcomings should not hinder your relationship with God. Your church attendance has nothing to do with anyone else. It is a time set aside for you to go and connect with God. We cannot spend our time trying to find a church without sinners. An attempt to do that would prove futile every time. We have to find the Lord for ourselves and build our relationship with Him. So do not be discouraged by the things that you see or hear around you but seek the Lord out for yourself, and there you will find peace and freedom.