

A FAITH THAT RESCUES, REBUILDS,
AND REDEPLOYS

I grew up in State College, Pennsylvania, home of Penn State University where my father was a professor of economics. My mom was a teacher and my siblings followed in our parents' footsteps: my younger brother became a professor of economics and my younger sister became an elementary school teacher.

Our home life was constantly tense. Mom wore the pants and she and Dad fought continuously, mainly with her on the attack. It was like living in a war zone, never knowing when you'd step on a land mine. Few days went by without some kind verbal abuse, lengthy silent treatments, or other kinds of emotional trauma against us kids—primarily toward my sister and me.

My mom left us kids at least eighteen times before I was twenty-one. Most of those times I never knew where she went, or if she would ever come back, or if she would commit suicide. Most of the time she blamed my dad and me, never my siblings, for her leaving.

Starting when I was in second or third grade, my mom, her mother (“Gram”), and my uncle (Mom’s brother) told me *I* was responsible for my parents’ troubled marriage and my siblings’ poor behavior. They told me I was going to be held accountable for improving my parents’ relationship and for making sure my sister and brother behaved well and did fine in school.

My grandma was a nurse and outspoken Christian. Gram exerted both positive and negative influences on us kids. On the constructive side, she rewarded us with special prizes when we memorized various Bible passages. She always had a prayer with us at night and other times when we were with her. She paid for our summer church camps and bought us Christian books.

On the negative side, Gram was intolerant, racist, and bigoted—and starting at age four and lasting until my late teens, Mom and Gram sexually abused me. The worst came from Mom when I was eight and nine when my Dad was working out of state.

Hundreds and hundreds of times, Mom and Gram told me that I was a mean, evil, ungrateful son and that I had to stop wetting the bed, pooping in my pants, breaking toys, and talking mean to my mom, or I’d end up in reform school, prison, and then be executed by age twenty-one.

My family was moderately religious. We went to church and Sunday school several times a month. We rarely said blessings at meals or talked about faith.

On the other hand, Gram was extremely religious. She and my grandfather attended their Presbyterian church every

Sunday. He was an elder and she taught a women's Bible study each week.

I usually walked to Sunday school, even as a young boy—about one and a half miles each way. In fifth grade, while walking through a part of the Penn State campus on my way to Sunday school, I shot a chipmunk with my sling-shot. I shoved it in my pocket and brought it to class.

When they passed the offering plate, I dropped my chipmunk in the plate. Needless to say, my offering was met with stern reprimands and I was told to leave. I did—and except for a few occasions, that was the last time I had anything to do with church until my college years.

In my youth, I had wanted to be a doctor like my Grandpa Stevenson, an obstetrician-gynecologist who had played football for Pitt. I idolized him. Due to his influence, I later dreamed of becoming a pediatric surgeon.

My dad went to work for a year in Illinois when I was an adolescent. Several years later, when I was fourteen, my mom left my dad and took my brother and sister to live with her in Pittsburgh. I stayed with my father in State College.

After a lonely, tumultuous year, my parents "reconciled." The following two years were filled with uncertainty and anxiety for me. I often wondered, "How long will they stay married before they divorce? When will Mom leave again?"

I spent my freshman and sophomore years at State College High School. Mom, Uncle Jim, and Gram and Grandpa eventually coerced me into leaving the school and all my

friends so I could enter Admiral Farragut Academy, a Naval prep school in St. Petersburg, Florida. This move, they said, would rescue me from a terrible home situation and teach me to study. After a good fight, I relented.

I spent my junior and senior years of high school at Farragut, hanging on to my dreams of becoming a surgeon. But the Naval influence was strong there and I soon also yearned to become a Naval UDT Frogman (now called a US Navy SEAL).

In my senior year, a serious knee injury at the start of football season destroyed my hopes of the Naval Academy and a career in the SEALs, as well as several full athletic scholarships.

Left without options, I decided to accept a partial athletic scholarship at the University of Pittsburgh. I was confident I'd soon heal enough to play well and earn a full scholarship. I also hoped my grandpa's influence at Pitt might help me get into medical school.

While a student there, I participated in football and wrestling. I also won Golden Gloves heavyweight boxing championships in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

As a freshman athlete, I was invited by teammates to attend weekly Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) meetings in our dorm. Although I had heard the "Christian message" as a child at summer church camps, nothing had ever made sense to me.

The FCA speakers talked about having a personal relationship with God. They shared that God had become a man in the person of his son Jesus Christ to sacrifice his life so

that our sins may be forgiven and to show us how to live a fulfilling life under his direction.

This offer of full forgiveness and life eternal would be mine if I would open my life to Christ's gift of absolution and wholeness and submit to his full leadership in my life. All this talk about Jesus Christ was new and strange to me.

For the next several months, I attended FCA and other Christian gatherings, talked extensively with classmates and others about their faith, and read nearly forty books on Christianity.

Sometime that fall of 1960 I decided that I wanted what my teammates had: a genuine personal relationship with God. Despite all my research, I still had unanswered questions and fears but I prayed to God to forgive my sins and take over as the ruler of my life.

A key obstacle that held me back from getting more serious about faith was a strong dread that God might want me to leave my pre-med studies and become either a missionary or minister.

Finally I came to the point where I said,

Okay God, if you want me to leave medical studies and become a pastor or missionary, I'm willing. But you'll have to drag me and I'll be leaving heel marks in the sand.

I know my sins have separated me from you. Even though I still don't have many of my questions answered, I'm going to trust that you know what's best for me.

Thank you for sending your son to be punished on the cross with the death and separation from you that I deserve for my sins. Jesus, please come into my life and make me into the man you want me to be. I'm willing to take directions from you and let you call the shots for my life from now on.

After I had prayed those words, nothing happened. No emotional buzz. No tears. No sense of God's close presence. For the next six months, I wrestled with serious doubts over what had or had not happened to me spiritually. I wondered if Christ had really come into my life:

Maybe I'm too far gone to rescue. Perhaps I'm simply not spiritual enough or good enough 'Christian material.' Maybe I haven't been sincere enough about turning my life over to Christ.

However, as I learned more of the Bible's teachings during the next two years, God gave me life-changing self-acceptance, assurance of God's mercy-filled love, and guidance for my personal struggles and my career direction.