

I STILL
BELIEVE

I *Still*
B E L I E V E

JEREMY CAMP

WITH DAVID THOMAS



W PUBLISHING GROUP

AN IMPRINT OF THOMAS NELSON

I Still Believe

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Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by W Publishing Group, an imprint of Thomas Nelson.

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ISBN 978-0-7852-3342-8 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019952503

ISBN 978-0-7852-3341-1 (TP)

Printed in the United States of America

20 21 22 23 24 25 LSC 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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FOREWORD

When I heard that Jeremy's book *I Still Believe* was going to be made into a movie, I was thrilled for him. I have known Jeremy since 2002, when we first toured together on Festival Con Dios. I was excited because I know how powerful a film can be in taking a story of God's grace to whole new audiences.

But if I'm being totally honest, I was also a bit nervous for him. When the movie *I Can Only Imagine* was released in 2017, depicting my life and all the hard things that went into the writing of the song, I didn't realize how difficult it was going to be for me and my family. It's humbling and frightening to see your life represented on the big screen. Actors are playing you, your family, and your friends. They're saying the things you said and doing the things you did—the good and the bad. You have the privilege of reliving some of the most incredible experiences of your life, but you also see your worst moments displayed on the screen for everyone to witness. Allowing the filmmakers to peel back the protective layers and show the history that went into the making of that song and the band MercyMe was one of the most vulnerable things I have ever done.

I know Jeremy shares the same fears and anxieties about seeing his life come to the big screen. I know how scared and excited he is. And I will be praying that God uses his powerful story to continue to build His kingdom.

FOREWORD

It's hard to believe that a lifetime can be compressed into two hours or less of film. Hours and hours of footage (as well as a lifetime of moments) are left on the cutting room floor. I am thrilled that in the pages of this book, you have the chance to see the details of Jeremy's life that couldn't be included in the film.

Jeremy's story of loving and losing his wife Melissa—and the resilience and blessing that followed in his life with Adrienne—is a powerful testament to God's grace. As you'll read, Melissa's dying wish was that God would use her passing to bring just one person to faith. Jeremy's music and the beautiful way he's shared her story have brought many more than that into God's kingdom. And now, with the film about to release into theaters nationwide, I cannot wait to see what God is going to do with it.

—BART MILLARD, 2019

PROLOGUE

*P*ick up your guitar.

I didn't want to. I didn't want anything to do with music. It had been two weeks since Melissa had gone to heaven. My wife was only twenty-one, and we had been married just three and a half months when she passed away from ovarian cancer.

I sat on the couch in my parents' living room alone—alone in many ways.

For two weeks my life had been a fog that wouldn't lift. After everything had seemed to make so much sense, now nothing made sense. Doctors had told us Melissa's cancer was gone. We had married with the dream of having kids and working together in ministry—me through music, her through women's ministries and Bible studies. But then we barely had the chance to begin living out our dream.

My Melissa was gone, and I wondered where God was. I wanted to pray, but in my despair I wasn't even sure what my own thoughts were. I tried to pray, but I didn't know where to begin. Whatever weak words I did manage to send God's way seemed to be getting lost in the fog engulfing me.

Do You really hear me, God?

Do You really care about every situation?

God? Are You near?

Pick up your guitar: For the first time since Melissa's death, I felt

PROLOGUE

like God was answering me. His words came crystal clear into my heart.

But I didn't want to pick up my guitar. I didn't want to go back to music, or to anything I had done before. When I would write songs, I would write what my heart felt. Except now I felt nothing. I was numb. I was physically and emotionally drained. I had nothing to offer.

No, Lord—no. The last thing I want to do is play my guitar.

Pick up your guitar. I have something for you to write.

I relented and began mindlessly strumming some chords. I didn't understand why I was playing, but I kept going. Then emotions began to well up within me. I felt tears forming in my eyes. Words—actual thoughts—came to me, and I began to speak them as I played.

Scattered words and empty thoughts
Seem to pour from my heart

For the first time in two weeks, I was able to express how I felt.

I've never felt so torn before
Seems I don't know where to start

I quickly found a pen and notebook and returned to the couch.

But it's now that I feel Your grace fall like rain
From every fingertip, washing away my pain

I jotted down the words as they continued to come to me.

I still believe in Your faithfulness
I still believe in Your truth
I still believe in Your holy Word

PROLOGUE

The words were pouring out, not from my mind but from deep within my soul.

Even when I don't see, I still believe

I alternated between playing the tune and writing in the notebook until I softly sang and penned the final words:

In brokenness I can see that this was Your will
for me. Help me to know You are near.¹

I leaned back, struck by the words that had come to me, and completely unaware of how God would use those words to speak through me to others who, like me, felt abandoned in life's deepest valley. Who needed hope. Who needed encouragement to allow God to dig into the depths of their souls, down to the very foundation of their faith, and then discover the resolve to declare, "I still believe!"

I wrote "I Still Believe" in ten minutes.

But, in essence, I had been writing the song for all my life.

Chapter 1

IT STARTS AT HOME

Faith and family.

When I look back, it's fitting that my healing in the aftermath of Melissa's passing began to take place back in my parents' home in Lafayette, Indiana.

I had left home for California to attend Bible college. It was in California that I found my path in ministry. It was there that my music career began to develop. It was there that I met God's partner for me in ministry. But after Melissa's memorial service, when the path I thought had been laid out in front of me suddenly disappeared, when my faith had been shaken in a manner I had never imagined possible, all I knew to do was to go home.

Faith and family are seamlessly knit together in my life's story.

My parents provided me with what they did not have growing up: a Christian home. That in itself was a miracle.

Imagine a drunken man, with his equally loaded friend, staggering into a church on a Sunday evening and then answering an altar call to accept Jesus as his Savior, and you have my dad's remarkable conversion story.

My dad, Tom—or “Bear,” as his friends called him—dropped

out of school at age sixteen because he had gotten heavily into alcohol and drugs. (He later earned his GED and attended college.) My dad has a life-of-the-party, let's-have-some-fun-here personality, and when he was growing up, he didn't have any trouble finding the parties or convincing others to join in his type of fun.

My mom, Teri, was the classic good girl in school. She grew up in a stable home environment. A good student, she had plans and goals. She had been accepted to Purdue University when she met and began dating my dad her senior year of high school.

Their relationship was the talk of the hallways—but not in the head-cheerleader-dates-the-quarterback kind of way. The comments were more like “What is *she* doing going out with *him*?”

She had fallen for my dad's likable personality and found him easy to talk to. But because of his heavy drinking and marijuana use, my dad had trouble landing steady work. So my mom scrapped her plans to study interior decorating in college and started working instead. My parents became popular party hosts. My dad was into selling pot by then, so you can imagine the types of parties and partygoers at my parents' home.

After learning my mom was pregnant, they moved in together, and my sister, April, was born out of wedlock in 1975. Having a newborn cut back on the parties in the home, but my dad's lifestyle continued further down the wrong path. His drinking increased, and he began to use and sell cocaine. The more he drank, the more violent he became.

About a year and a half after April was born, my dad was battling depression and realized his life was spiraling out of control.

“I don't know what's wrong with me,” he told my mom. “I feel so empty inside. It's not you. It's not April. The drugs aren't making me happy. I don't know what's wrong.”

“Do you need to see a psychiatrist?” my mom asked him.

“No,” my dad replied. “I need to talk to a minister.”

On Christmas Day 1976, my dad was noticeably depressed. My

mom thought he might harm himself, but when she tried to console him, my dad said, "I have to go to church and I have to go now."

They drove from church to church that evening, looking for one that was open. Finally, they found one where a couple of people were inside practicing music. My parents walked in and quietly sat in a pew, but the musicians never spoke to them, probably because they looked more like hippies than regular churchgoers. My parents remained in the pew for a while until my mom asked my dad if he felt better.

"Yes," he said, and they left.

Four days later, on a Wednesday evening, my parents again decided to look for a church.

When my dad was young, a sweet neighbor lady named Meb had taken him to church with her from time to time. One of those times, when my dad was eleven, he had gone forward to accept Christ. Without a family to keep him spiritually connected, though, he eventually got away from church. He had brought up spiritual topics with my mom early in their relationship, but Christianity stayed something he thought about and questioned in his heart and never became more than that. But at least he had that church background Meb had provided him when he analyzed his own life and reached the conclusion that he needed to make a serious change. He had tried just about everything else, but deep in his heart he knew what the truth was and that the Holy Spirit was drawing him and doing a deep work within him.

My mom had attended churches in spurts when she was growing up, with her mom taking her and her dad staying home, except on Easter Sundays and a few other special occasions. Her mother had bought a book of Bible stories that my mom had enjoyed reading as a child. But while she knew about Jesus, there was never a time when my mom had a relationship with Him. With my dad showing just enough of a trend toward dangerous behavior, she was open to church providing the source for the change he needed.

It was a few days after Christmas, and my dad said again, “I have to talk to a minister. I know where we can go—Meb will be at church.”

My dad knew where his former neighbor would be on a Wednesday night. When they arrived at the church, the service had just ended and people were on their way out. As expected, Meb was there. A big smile crossed her face when she saw my dad. When my dad said he needed to talk to a minister, she introduced my parents to her pastor. The four of them sat down, and my dad explained his problems and described how he felt a void in his life. The pastor identified the problem as unconfessed sin and explained that the void my dad felt was one that only Christ could fill. My dad agreed. The pastor then led my parents through a prayer asking for forgiveness, although my mom prayed more out of embarrassment and the potential awkwardness of not praying in that small of a group.

After the prayer, the pastor gave my parents a short and direct list of changes they needed to make: “You need to get married, change the way you dress, cut your hair, and get new friends.”

My parents understood the need to give up the drugs and alcohol. But they were confused about how they could just come up with a completely new set of friends overnight. And as for the way they dressed, they could barely afford the clothes they did have. How were they supposed to afford an all-new wardrobe?

My dad initially had a problem with marriage. He had been briefly married when he was sixteen. His girlfriend got pregnant, so they married. But when she had a miscarriage, they decided they didn’t want to be together and divorced after less than six months together. There had been a few times in the past when my dad had asked my mom if she would marry him if he asked. She kept saying she would, but my dad never asked. He told my mom he had no interest in marrying because he had never seen a good marriage—not growing up and not for the few months he was married. But as he considered what the pastor had said about needing to marry, he agreed.

The pastor gave my parents a Bible, but he didn't give them any practical help for how to make the changes he told them they must make.

As a result, they left the church asking themselves, *How can we do all that?*

Changed for Good

The Bible the pastor had given my parents was a King James Version. Reading was difficult for my dad, and the King James was even more of a challenge, so my mom read from the Bible to him. They continued to talk about church, and my mom mentioned that coworkers had been talking to her about Jesus and had said my parents would be welcomed at their church regardless of how they looked or dressed. My dad agreed to try it.

They planned to attend the Assemblies of God church on the first Sunday evening of the new year—January 2, 1977. My dad had helped a friend move that morning, then went out with his friend that afternoon.

As my mom was getting ready for church, he called. "Where are you?" she asked him.

"I'm at a Mexican restaurant."

She knew he was at the only local restaurant that served beer on Sundays. "Have you been drinking?"

"Oh, just a little."

When my dad came home to pick her up for church, he and his friend were laughing about how they had been busting out lights at the restaurant. They had been drinking more than "just a little." My mom started crying. From the night they had prayed at Meb's church, neither of them had used drugs or alcohol—not even on New Year's Eve. "There's no way I'm going to church with you guys," she told him.

My mom's mother was keeping April that evening, so when my mom saw how drunk my dad and his friend were, she immediately left for church alone.

Because it was a Sunday evening, the crowd of about three hundred wasn't as large as for a Sunday morning service. About eight rows of folding chairs at the back of the sanctuary had been roped off so the people would sit closer to the front. My mom took a seat by herself in the middle of the last available row. Shortly after the service began, she heard a commotion behind her. She looked over her shoulder to see my dad and his friend stumbling through the doors in the back.

My mom's first reaction was to try to hide. She turned back toward the front, slumped in her seat, and tried to blend in with the others in front of her. It didn't work. My dad and his friend spotted my mom and started making their way toward her. But not by walking down the aisle and quietly slipping through the row where my mom was sitting. My dad started off on the most direct route from point A to point B—by stepping over the roped-off rows of chairs!

My mom continued to look forward while everyone else turned their attention to the two drunken chair-jumpers. My dad and his friend plopped down right next to my embarrassed mom, and the friend started chattering away.

An usher seeking to calm the ruckus came over and asked my dad's friend if he would like to go sit next to him, and my dad's drinking buddy obliged.

Up front, the pastor talked about being delivered from the bondage of drugs and alcohol. A couple of times during the message, my dad's friend left his seat, ran over to my dad, said, "Man, Bear, this guy knows what he's talking about!" and then ran back to his seat next to the usher.

As the pastor preached, my mom noticed tears rolling from my dad's eyes. The pastor's words really struck home with my dad, who cried throughout the message.

When the pastor concluded and asked if anyone would like to come to the altar to ask Jesus into their heart, my dad's friend ran forward while my parents hesitated, both thinking, *Haven't we done this already?* When a youth pastor approached and offered to take them to the front if they wanted to answer the pastor's call, they stood and made their way down the aisle too. The congregation gathered around the three of them at the altar and prayed for them. With all of them crying, my mom at that point was just relieved that the guys were going to change. My dad was immediately delivered from drugs and alcohol and walked out of that church sober.

My parents later learned that alcoholics and hippies were the pastor's least-favorite types of people, but he still had welcomed my dad and his friend into the church that night. The church members had been praying for a revival to break out in their church, and one began that night when, of all people, two drunk hippies answered the altar call. God does work in mysterious ways!

The pastor wound up having many opportunities to share what he would call the "whosoever ministry," exhorting the body of Christ to minister to whomever God brought into their path.

Instead of focusing on outward things, the members of that church encouraged my parents to get into the Word and into fellowship with other believers. They gave my parents a copy of *The Living Bible* to take home and suggested they begin reading in the gospel of John. John's manner of expressing the love that Jesus had demonstrated for all mankind through His death and resurrection deeply impacted my mom's heart. She had a revelation that, like my dad had been, she also was a sinner in need of salvation. One night, in her favorite living room chair, she said, "Lord, I am sorry." That became her life-changing moment. She asked Jesus to come into her heart and prayed, "I will go anywhere, do anything. Whatever You ask, I'm Yours."

Quite fitting, considering their contrasting personalities. My dad came to Christ in a public, very emotional setting. My mom did so in

a private, quiet moment. Yet the immediate impact of their decisions was the same: their lives were completely changed. On January 22, 1977, in that same Assemblies of God church, they were married. From that day forward, they modeled the type of relationship that God prescribed in Scripture and poured the foundation of faith on which I would be raised.

I was born almost a year later, on January 12, 1978. Eight years later, April and I were joined by our brother Jared. Two years after that, Joshua came along. Josh was born with Down syndrome, and he was a blessing who completed our family in more ways than one.

Our parents' decisions to become Christians certainly didn't lead to a life of smooth sailing for them and our family. It was just the opposite, in fact, because we encountered our share of struggles. And not all of us kids always walked the path our parents wanted us to follow.

But all along our journey together, we always knew where to turn for answers to life's questions: to God's Word and to one another. And that pattern has remained unchanged as we Camp kids have progressed into adulthood and started our own families. Our family has incredible stories of God's loving mercy.

Learning at Home

Before my dad dropped out of high school, he had a difficult time focusing on reading—probably from his abuse of drugs and alcohol. I remember as I grew up, however, that my dad was constantly reading the Bible. He said because of his struggles in school, he had hated to read books before becoming a Christian. But he certainly loved to spend time studying God's Word. In fact, for a short time we lived in Springfield, Missouri, so my dad could attend Central Bible College and prepare for entering full-time ministry.

I remember our family always being heavily involved in church. We were one of those families that was in church practically every time the doors were unlocked. My parents attended and led Bible studies. We would have friends over to our house, and my dad would play his guitar and lead worship right there in our living room. My mom and dad shared their faith with anyone they met, telling them about the complete transformation God had made in their lives.

The impression of my parents that remains with me is how real they were. They were the same at home as they were in church. They wouldn't go to church and worship with raised hands, talk like a Christian should, and then return home and act or speak differently. They didn't compartmentalize. They were who they were because that was who they were; the changes God made in their hearts were complete and reflected in every area of their lives. I credit my parents' consistency in living the Christian lifestyle as the reason I never became jaded toward Christianity growing up, not even during the years when I wandered from the straight and narrow path.

The phrase "He has a shepherd's heart" perfectly describes my dad. He is a great listener who truly cares about people. I remember people sitting in our living room and pouring out their hearts, and he would sit there and not just listen but intently listen. He is such a people person, and people obviously love being around him.

My dad is hilarious too. After becoming a Christian, he remained the life of the party—just different types of parties. We would go camping—yes, the Camps went camping—and my dad would make up hilarious songs around the campfire. To get the whole family involved, he'd pester us to echo the silly lyrics he improvised. One time we all went roller-skating, and he went dressed in overalls with shorts over them just to be goofy and see if he could embarrass us.

My mom was more prim and proper. She wasn't outwardly emotional (except when she saw the Lord at work), and she was meticulous. I used to think it took her forever to put her makeup on. It seemed

like she wrote slowly, too, but when she finished, her handwriting was flawless.

She kept the house clean and organized because, like my dad, she enjoyed having friends over and hosting Bible studies and prayer groups. And my mom was dedicated to praying. I remember many, many times walking into a room and seeing her facedown on the floor, praying and interceding.

My parents were opposites attracted to each other, but through Christ their opposite ways complemented one another. My dad had a go-for-it attitude. If he felt God wanted him to do something, he was ready to go. My mom would say, “We need to make sure about this, so let’s pray about it a little more.” My personality is closer to my dad’s, but from my mom I learned the importance of discipline and steadiness in the Christian lifestyle.

When we kids encountered problems, our parents would encourage us with words and wisdom from Scripture—not just with their own words and advice. Prayer time was prioritized because our home was a home of prayer. We often prayed together as a family. When we had needs, whether as an individual or as a group, we prayed about them. And we definitely had needs.

Chapter 2

TUG-OF-WAR

Our family was not just poor but super poor. Before he became a Christian, my dad's alcohol and drug use had prevented him from holding down steady jobs. After my parents became saved, their priorities changed to God and laying a foundation for our family. Because my dad did not have a strong educational background, the better jobs available to him were factory positions that often would have required long hours and working on Sundays. He chose instead to take construction-type jobs that enabled him to spend more time with our family and remain in fellowship with other believers. Those jobs also often meant being laid off, especially during the winter.

It is no exaggeration to say there were days when our cupboards were bare, and we knew they would stay that way until my dad's next paycheck. As a family, we would pray for food, and I remember nights when we prayed and the next morning there would be a bag of groceries on our front step. As far as I knew, my parents weren't telling anyone that we were out of food. But God knew, and He would place our grocery needs on someone's heart. Many times, we had no idea who had brought us food, but we always knew that it was provided by God.

Our electricity and water were cut off a few times because we couldn't pay the bills. When the electricity was off, we would make do with candlelight and oil lights until the next paycheck came.

In one house we lived in, a wood-burning stove in our basement provided heat. The basement was creepy to me—it felt like an underground cavern—and even when my dad was out working and I was the oldest male in the house, I was too afraid to go down into the basement to light the stove. My mom didn't like going down there, either. I would study or read in my upstairs bedroom while wrapped in blankets because I was so cold. But there was no way I was going down to that basement.

Once when we were without electricity and couldn't flush the toilet because our water ran on a pump, we had to get a bucket of snow and dump it into the toilet tank so we could flush. I remember when we ran out of toilet paper and either didn't have the money to buy more or had to save what little money we did have for greater needs. Our parents taught us to make toilet paper out of newspapers by crunching up the pages and rubbing them together to soften them for use.

Sometimes we had to scrape together money for my dad to buy gas so he could drive to work. April and I would contribute any change we happened to have accumulated. We would pool together our change, count it on the table, and tell our dad, "Okay, here's \$3.50."

We didn't have to live that way all the time, but it happened enough that I have clear memories of what those experiences were like.

We wore a lot of hand-me-downs, but our parents did their best to make sure we had what we needed. If one of us needed a pair of jeans or shoes, we'd go get them. Every once in a while we would have enough money to eat out at a place such as Wendy's, and eating out—even if it was fast food—was a real treat.

Paycheck to paycheck, my parents lived by faith. I would closely watch them and be amazed at their faith during difficult circumstances that I knew had to be stressful. I remember times when our needs were

TUG-OF-WAR

great, and my dad would pull out his guitar and lead us in a time of family worship. Despite the circumstances, he would play and sing with such incredible joy. For my parents, God truly was good all the time.

I needed my parents' example. As I started working my way through elementary school, I began to realize how our situation compared to those of families of others my age. As that realization set in, I became embarrassed because we were poor.

Our school took part in the governmental program that provided free lunches for kids from low-income families. To have my name on the free-lunch list was especially embarrassing. In seventh grade, I believe it was, I was so ashamed that I would beg my parents to give me money so I could be seen buying lunch instead of having my food given to me.

I once wore the same shirt twice in a week, and when another student pointed that out, I was so humiliated that I wanted to hide. But I never resented our situation. I knew my parents worked hard to make as much money as they could for us, and they left no doubt that their faith was in God to provide. And each time He met our needs, by whatever means it was, they made sure we kids knew it was God who had provided.

Even the Pintos.

Giving and Receiving

Cars were among the gifts that people blessed us with, and we sure had some interesting vehicles. People were gracious in offering us cars, but, of course, they weren't the types of cars that we would be able to use for years and years. We would drive one for as long as we could, then God would put it in someone else's heart to give us our next vehicle. We were thankful to have each one we received. One of our cars was a beat-up, sad little orange Ford Pinto.

My mom drove it one day to pick up April and a couple of her friends from a Girl Scouts meeting. As my mom drove home, she could see in the rearview mirror that one of April's friends was big eyed as she surveyed the interesting characteristics of the car's interior.

"Um, where did you get this car?" April's friend asked.

"Oh, a friend gave it to us," my mom answered.

The girl resumed her inspection before saying just loud enough for my mom to hear, "Hmm, some friend."

My mom chuckled and kept motoring down the road in the free Pinto.

I remember another car—also an orange Pinto—that my mom was driving when she picked me up at church. I hopped in and looked down to see the ground under my feet. The passenger-side floorboard was so rusted that there were big holes in the floor.

I closed the door and noticed a belt hanging from it. "What's this?" I asked.

"Buckle up and hold on to the belt," my mom told me, "because if you don't, the door will fly open when we go around curves."

That was one instance when obeying my mom was easy. I held a firm grip on that belt all the way home.

When I reached junior high, playing sports helped make me pretty popular among my classmates. I actually was too cool for my own good, but that will be addressed later.

One day after school, I was talking with my girlfriend while waiting on my dad to pick me up. *Girlfriend* is actually too strong of a word to describe our relationship. We were "going out," if you remember that phrase, even though we weren't going out anywhere. But at the time it seemed like a serious relationship. Not only was she my girlfriend, but she was also a cheerleader. So there I was, the popular football player, trying to look all cool while talking to my cheerleader girlfriend, when I heard a loud car entering the parking lot.

I turned, as did all the others around me, and saw my dad pulling

up in yet another Pinto—a red one this time—someone had given us. The car had lost its muffler sometime before, so there was no discreetly pulling up to the school.

The Pinto was rusted and beat up, and I felt like everyone outside the school was watching as I walked over to it. I grabbed the passenger-side door handle and pulled. It wouldn't budge. I gave it another yank while trying to look like it wasn't my second attempt. Still nothing. I had to crawl through the window and into the seat. Trust me, there's no way to do that without being noticed. Especially because I was a popular athlete in school, I dealt with embarrassment a great deal, but I didn't resent our family's financial situation. I wished that we could have better cars and that we wouldn't have to go to secondhand stores to purchase clothes, but because of my parents' attitude, I had no resentment.

All along they worked hard and taught us about having faith in God, to believe He would meet our needs. And He did, countless times over.

We weren't able to have many of the things we wanted, but that taught us to appreciate the times when we did receive things on our lists of wants.

Christmas was a big deal in our home. I always had trouble sleeping Christmas Eve night and invariably would wake up around three in the morning and ask my parents, "Can we please get up? Can we please get up?" They would send me back to bed, though, and I would have to wait until a more decent hour to get up and see what gifts we had.

My parents would be excited about Christmas, too, because they had saved up whatever money they could for gifts to make Christmas morning special for all of us.

One gift I distinctly recall receiving demonstrates how we learned to appreciate what others our age might consider a small gift. I was big into sports growing up, and one Christmas I received a Nike duffel bag for all my sports gear. I was so excited. I carried that bag anytime I had a reason to haul my equipment around.

While the bag was nice to receive and very practical, what meant more was the knowledge that my parents had worked odd jobs and saved up their money to give me a gift I didn't have to have.

I hope that my children still have the same appreciation that I did when I was young. Even though I'm in a different financial position from what my parents were in, my wife and I want our children to have a full appreciation of how the gifts they receive on Christmas morning are blessings from God. That lesson is probably easier to teach when a family has fewer resources as my family did growing up.

Although my parents did not have a lot of material resources, they still were giving people. They were great at giving others time and attention—two resources people often fail to realize they have to offer.

In addition to the Bible studies and church groups they took part in, my parents also served as caretakers for troubled boys.

When I was six, they started working with a group home to provide a home for teenage boys who had been in trouble. As many as eight boys stayed with us at one time, and some of the kids came from really tough backgrounds.

Originally my parents were told it would be okay if they shared Christ with the boys, but only if the boys asked about Him. When my parents shared the gospel with the boys who did show interest, however, the group home disapproved.

Because of that, my parents left the program after almost a year. My dad took a job as a childcare worker at a home for boys, so my parents were constantly bringing in boys and even some adults who needed help. I remember an elderly woman in a wheelchair who lived with us for a while. I also remember a truant officer who would call my parents often to ask if we could take in another troubled boy. And our pastor would contact my parents about people he knew who needed a place to stay.

On a couple of different occasions, I even contributed kids to the Camps' program. They weren't even close friends of mine, but I knew

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they had difficult home situations, and I asked my parents if they could stay with us.

“If you don’t mind sharing a room with them,” they told me.

I was fine with that, and when their parents agreed to let them live with us for a while, I had new roommates.

My parents had a heart for troubled people—especially youth—and wanted to provide a stable home environment that most of them didn’t have. They did that even though we were struggling financially.

God always met our needs, though.

There was one teenager named Todd who lived with us. Todd was a big kid who could really eat. One day he opened the refrigerator, and there wasn’t much on the shelves.

“Teri,” he asked my mom, “what are we going to have for supper?”

“Don’t worry about it,” my mom told him. “There’s food in there you just can’t see.”

Todd gave her a strange look and shut the refrigerator door.

As dinnertime neared, my mom put together everything she could find in the refrigerator and in the cabinets. When Todd came to the kitchen table, he did a double take when he saw a full spread of a wide variety of foods. Todd ate all he could and left the table amazed that so much food had come out of what had looked like so little.

No matter how accustomed our family became to seeing God provide, each instance still surprised us a bit. We truly understood that God always was meeting our needs.

The Battle Within

My mom likes to tell the story of one time when someone gave us a freezer full of liver. We ate a lot of liver for a while, and my mom remembers praying, “Oh, Lord, I just wish we had something different to eat.”

Shortly after praying that, she read in Deuteronomy where the Israelites were reminded of how the Lord had provided for them in the desert. The Israelites had grumbled and complained because the Lord had kept giving them manna to eat and they had grown tired of eating the same thing over and over.

As my mom was reading, the Lord reminded her, *I'm providing for you. I am doing this to test you and to know what's in your heart and to humble you. Then, when you come into the land of plenty, you won't forget Me.*

It hit my mom that God was providing for our needs and that our needs weren't what the typical American would consider needs. My mom had not been raised in an environment of want. Her family had plenty in their household. They took nice vacations and stayed in nice hotels. It was nothing like the way we were growing up.

But almost from the day my mom had become a Christian, she looked at times of need with this question in mind: What would it be like to be a missionary? She thought of missionaries and the conditions in which some of them chose to live in order to take the gospel message to the unsaved, and she chose to look at her surroundings with a "Think missionary" mind-set. To this day, when she hears someone describing a seemingly difficult set of circumstances, she will make the quote marks sign with her fingers raised, and say, "Think missionary."

With all the different people moving into and out of our homes, my parents were very careful to make sure that we, as their kids, received the proper parent-children attention we needed. I don't recall ever thinking the other kids were taking away from something I should have had in our home. Looking back now, I understand that living with kids from difficult backgrounds perhaps helped me keep proper perspective on what I did have at home in my parents' time and attention, instead of what I did not have in material goods.

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Still, though, I made some poor decisions in response to the circumstances we faced growing up.

At age four or five, I had asked Jesus into my heart, and I had grown up a good churchgoing boy. Beginning in junior high and into my high school years, though, I began to stray for the first time.

I excelled in sports, and I worked out a lot and was in good shape. When I reached the age when I could play team sports in school—especially football—my athletic ability afforded me a “cool” status on campus.

I set out on a course to prove that I could do whatever I wanted to do. I honestly don't think I was going through some sort of ultra-rebellious stage, because I don't know what I would have been rebelling against. I wasn't angry at my parents. I wasn't angry at the church. Even though we were poor, I wasn't angry at what some would call “the system.” But I think that after growing up in humble surroundings, being a popular athlete in school made me want to test how far I could stretch my boundaries. I had missed out on some pleasures at home that my friends had enjoyed, I thought, so now I was going to have some fun. If anything, I actually was insecure and trying to be accepted.

I wound up in an internal tug-of-war. I knew what was right and was influenced positively at home with my parents and at church. Yet at the same time, my desire to be part of the “in” crowd was pulling me in the opposite direction.

To appease the “be cool” side of me, I started partying and drinking alcohol. When I drank, I'd feel much braver, and I almost got into several fights. Because I was one of the strongest boys in my class, there really weren't any takers for fights, so mostly I would put on a display of macho bravado knowing I probably wouldn't have to back it up. Although I wouldn't have minded if someone did dare to challenge me.

I also used my status and strength to stand up for those who were

picked on. I wasn't really interested in trying to gain acceptance from the super-popular kids—I wasn't among the coolest of the cool and didn't care to be. Still, I did run with the popular crowd; but because I had been an underdog for much of my life to that point, I kept an eye out for opportunities to protect the poorer or less-popular kids who were ridiculed. If I saw someone in the underdog group being picked on, I'd step in and tell the bully to stop, and usually he would without me having to become the enforcer. Although I wasn't always doing good things, I still had a lot of do-good in me.

I didn't turn my back on God. I still went to church and did the "church thing." One trait I admired about my parents was their intentionality in behaving the same away from church as they did at church.

I didn't lose my sense of right and wrong. I knew the truth. If I was going out to a party, I liked to drink a little before I got there so I'd already be a little numbed to the feeling of conviction I'd get while I was at the party.

At church I would feel convicted about the wrong decisions I was making. I would tell God that I was sorry and that I wanted to change. But then I would go to school the next morning and want to do the same old things that the others were doing. I wanted to do right, but at the same time I could not say no to what I knew was wrong.

It was the type of internal battle that Paul wrote about in Romans 7:21–25:

Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

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I discovered that in my pursuit of having fun, I was only having some fun. The fun times weren't lasting. They couldn't last because, as I knew in my heart, the source of my fun was outside of God's will. And I would come to learn that the peace that comes from having fun inside of God's will is far better.