

FROM THE MOTHER OF *FOR KING & COUNTRY* AND *REBECCA ST. JAMES*



BEHIND THE LIGHTS

THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE OF A MUM AND HER FAMILY

HELEN SMALLBONE

❖ WITH LISA STILWELL ❖

Praise for *Behind the Lights*

“I’ve known Helen Smallbone for over thirty years and have watched her navigate her journey as a wife and mother of seven with grace and determination. She has been committed to allowing God to order her steps in unconventional yet wholesome ways in order to love her family well and live fearlessly. . . . This book will dare you to be different so you and your children can fulfill your destiny and do greater things than you could ever imagine.”

—**Jackie Patillo**, president and executive director of the Gospel Music Association

“Helen is a reflection of strength and relentless perseverance. The story of her life has encouraged me to never stop fighting for my family, my faith, and my joy. Her character is rooted deep in God’s truth, and her kindness for others is infectious. *Behind the Lights* reflects her raw authenticity of truth and always choosing what’s right over what is easy. You will be challenged in your faith, relationships with others, and living a life above reproach. The world will read *Behind the Lights* and be encouraged to see how Helen walks through hard things and yet comes out looking very different than most do on the other side.”

—**Heather Houle**, cofounder of MUMlife

“Make sure you’re buckled in, because it was quite a treacherous and miraculous journey as we, the Smallbone family, fumbled our way toward learning how to sing harmoniously in the lights and, even more importantly, behind them. We believe this book tells the story of all the lessons we were taught growing up with heart and courage. *Behind the Lights* truly demonstrates that life is a remarkable adventure.”

—**Joel and Luke**, for KING & COUNTRY

“Helen and her entire marvelous family have been dear friends of mine since we first met at the Sydney Opera House for a couple concerts back in the ’70s. They’re family to my husband Pelle and me! It is a joy to see how God has directed each one of them in life and in music ministry. Jesus has always been the focus, and for that, I salute and thank them.”

—**Evie Karlsson**, Dove Award-winning music artist

“Helen was my first mentor almost twenty years ago, and I have watched her be brave, wise, joyful (that laugh!), trusting in the Lord’s provisions, and always prayerful—all behind the scenes. What millions see on stages around the world is possible largely because of the stable and happy home Helen created around the dinner table—even if that dinner table was on a tour bus. I am genuinely delighted for you to get to meet her and learn from her. You’ll be inspired to surrender yourself to the amazing adventure God has for you. I know I have been.”

—**Heidi Reeves**, mother of three and mentee of Helen Smallbone

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*To the legacy given us by our parents:
Geoff and Jean Francis
Jim and Betty Smallbone*

*“The greatest legacy one can pass on to one’s
children and grandchildren is not money . . .
but rather a legacy of character and faith.”
—Billy Graham*

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Foreword

Prayer hugs to calm my nerves before going onstage as a teenager. Talks about anything and everything while sitting on Mum and Dad's bed. Folding washing, doing dishes, cleaning houses together. Asking for parenting advice in the kitchen at the farm during a drop-in visit. Watching Mum in the role of grandmother to my children. The thousands of memories I have of the woman who wrote this book are priceless! Prepare to be blessed and inspired by her—like she has blessed and inspired me. But before you embark on her remarkable journey, I'd like to say a few thoughts about my mother, thoughts that hopefully give you extra insight into who she is.

My mum is real. This book reads like Mum is sitting in her living room sharing her story with you over a cup of tea. This is truly who she is. After being “second mum” in our family and her “right hand,” I feel like I can read Mum very well—like a book, actually. I love that *Behind the Lights* invites you to read her heart, our story, in such an authentic way. Reading parts of our journey in this book brought me to tears as memories came to mind that I haven't thought about in decades. Our story has never

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been documented like this before now, and the fact that Mum has shared so honestly and authentically speaks to the true person. You are reading *her*.

My mum is servant-hearted. On family holidays when the family gathers, she is in the kitchen for hours, cooking, preparing a tasty meal for the family she loves. I'm not sure how she is available for all of us seven grown kids when we need her for advice, grandbaby-sitting, or care of any sort, but she is. She has sown faithfully into her family, and now, in recent years, into other moms' lives and their families. She has passionately poured herself into Mom to Mom meetings, then MUMlife, and now the masses with her podcast through AccessMore. She has viewed each as a privilege to serve, and her energy for it comes from purpose—her God-given mission.

My mum is faithful. My dad cries pretty much every time he talks about Mum. I know that it is largely because of how faithfully she has loved him. When he was broken and at his most emotionally fragile after huge setbacks and worldly rejection, she did not doubt him or waver; she did not fear for the future of our family of nine. She knew God would provide and that Dad would come through. That belief was used to bring our family to the season we are in today—a season of much fruit from that faithful trust.

My mum is wise. I cannot count the number of times I have called her asking for her thoughts on all sorts of

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topics to do with parenting, faith, and family life. I now have her on my K-LOVE podcast regularly, too, as I love giving my audience a chance to glean from her hard-earned wisdom. If she doesn't know what to advise, she will say so and ask for a bit of time to think and pray about it. Often we will pray about my question then and there. (See? Wisdom.)

My mum is humble. She is the kind of mom who has said that she's been "quite happy" for her kids to be the ones in the spotlight and not her. She says it with a sparkle in her eye and in all sincerity. She knows the challenges of having a profile and truly has enjoyed the view as a support person. Which is in large part why I sense God has entrusted her with this book—He loves humility. He blesses humility. And my mum is strong, but humble. Thank you, Jesus, for such a woman, with a message for such a time as this. A woman who has a passion to encourage women, mothers, families.

I'm not sure that I could have had a better example of a true Proverbs 31 kind of woman. One of the biggest goals of her life has been to see her children "arise and call her blessed" (Proverbs 31:28 NIV). On Mum's sixtieth birthday, we "kids" rented a house as a family, had a beautiful meal together, and did just that: each in our own way paid tribute to her and called her blessed. So, in this moment, Mum, I say thank you. Thank you for loving Jesus first. Thank you for loving Dad faithfully and well.

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Thank you for raising us the way you did—in the love and truth of Jesus. I pray that this book will bless God’s people and bring much fruit for His kingdom and glory. You are treasured, Mum, and I arise and call you *blessed*.

Rebecca St. James

November 2021

Introduction

I confess I'm my happiest when I'm behind the scenes—I have spent my life in the background—but there I was, lit up onstage with my husband, David; Joel and his wife, Moriah; and Rebecca, who was emceeing. Luke would have been there, too, but he was recovering from vocal surgery. It was June 12, 2021—the night before the K-LOVE Fan Awards—when AccessMore put on “An Evening with the Smallbones.” There were a couple of thousand people in the audience who wanted a more up-close look into our musical family, sometimes referred to as the Australian von Trapps. Some have even likened us to that of a farmer’s family or a circus family in that the children have grown up as a vital part of the business. We have been a touring family for the past twenty-seven years, with much of it in the spotlight in some way or another.

It was a very sweet night, and we had some fun laughs and meaningful discussion that, I think, gave a glimpse into some of our family’s dynamics. Then, when our time was over, and with the cameras that were filming for the public turned off, Joel addressed the audience. He announced that he and Luke had been writing a new album, and they

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wanted to premiere a song they had written for me called “Unsung Hero.”

In that moment I was very grateful I had previously heard the song. They’d played it for me on Mother’s Day, and I could tell then that Joel and Luke were both very proud of the piece and keen to see my reaction. I knew it was written from a deep place and was being presented to me as a thank-you gift for being their mum. It was an honor I wholeheartedly accepted—not only for my years of hard work but for all those fellow mothers out there who pour their hearts into their families. Deep down, I believe *every* mum is an unsung hero.

As Joel introduced the song to the audience, I realized our son Ben had put together a video to go with the song—a video I had not seen on Mother’s Day. There were photos and videos of my parents; of David and me when we were dating; of us when we were married; and photos of the kids when they were small, right on up to Luke’s wedding day and for KING & COUNTRY performing onstage. By the time it was over, there was not a dry eye in the place. It was all so very precious, and watching it quickly took me back and flooded my mind with the journey God has brought me on from my childhood in Australia where I grew up to our family farm in Tennessee where David and I live now.

It’s been quite a journey, filled with the testing and growing of my faith and God leading us all step by step

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toward living “outside the box.” I never thought my life would unfold the way God has led it. Living outside the box is countercultural and has, without question, been a different path from the way the world says we are supposed to live. There is a certain expectation from the world about what life should look like. It is expected that we are to graduate from high school, go to college, and get a job that takes us from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. five days a week. “Normal” people should prepare for retirement, have medical and life insurance, get married, and buy a house. We are supposed to set goals and, when we reach them, get awards and nice vacations. At my age—now sixty-six—we are supposed to retire and attend to our bucket list.

We as Christians do this as well—we often create our own agendas and goals, then attach God’s name to them. We ask Him to bless our plans and efforts to live out what we want.

After we left Australia, we were forced outside the box of normal, as you will see. It is not a journey I would have chosen to live, but I would not change anything about it. It led us to following God in ways I would not have thought possible. We have lived in the extraordinary, where we have had to rely on God to provide and where we have seen His hand actively working in and around us.

Part of the reason I wanted to write this book is to encourage and challenge other families to live differently—to get out of their box. I want others to have courage to

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seek His will rather than their own and to let Him use them however He wants in His bigger plan. His plans don't look like the world's definition of success, but they always include lasting, eternal purpose and value. They also include His presence, leading and guiding us into adventures and valleys we wouldn't necessarily choose for ourselves. Through them, I believe God wants more of us living counterculture to the world's ways. Sometimes it may even mean we go against a lot of the church's "religious" traditions. But in choosing His ways, we will live in the miraculous!

I look back on my family's journey, and I see God's hand everywhere. I see His phenomena. I see His faithfulness in taking our simple Australian family and leading us to the other side of the world and doing things with us we would never have thought possible. Our lives are a living testimony of believing God's promises and trusting His timing and His ways—even when circumstances didn't make sense and were not easy. He was always there.

Our journey has been an amazing one we never would have planned for ourselves. There has been a lot of loss—at one point we lost everything—yet God has redeemed every one of those losses beyond what we could have hoped for or imagined, which is why Ephesians 3:20 is one of my favorite verses: "Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think."

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This book is a look back from this mum's viewpoint of my own family's transformation from living more in the world's way into God's way. It's filled with life lessons that, hopefully, you can apply to your own life and to your own journey. David and the kids would have their own perspectives, perhaps slightly different from mine, but I can only speak from what my experiences have been and the memories they bring—some good and some not so good. In some small ways, I wish I could go back and do some things differently, which I'll touch on. But in most ways, I wouldn't change a thing. What we've been through is what makes us who we are today and molds us into the instruments God has wanted us to be for bringing Him the glory in our lives that He deserves.

What is exciting to me is I know and fully believe that the faithfulness and favor God has shown me—shown all of us—is the same faithfulness He shows to anyone who fully commits their life to Him. It is my hope that from our story, you will be inspired to step outside of your box and embrace God's plans for you without fear or hesitation. When you do, His peace will carry you no matter what you face, the same way it has carried me.

PART ONE

**IN THE
BEGINNING**

CHAPTER ONE

FROM HEAD TO HEART: A STRONG FOUNDATION

*I will ask the Father, and he will give you
another Advocate, who will never
leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into
all truth. The world cannot receive him,
because it isn't looking for him and doesn't
recognize him. But you know him,
because he lives with you now and later will be in you.*

John 14:16–17

As I've come across people over the years, many are amazed at my family's story. Our ministry and musical outreach have been so large for so long, spanning the life careers of Rebecca St. James and for KING & COUNTRY. There's a surprise from others about how these two entities came out of one family and curiosity about how we all came to be who and what we are today.

They want to know how it is we've worked and stayed together through obstacles and detours most "normal" families don't encounter.

There isn't one response I can think to give. Our journey has been filled with a variety of faith-stretching occurrences that could only have been orchestrated by God, both in their inception and in His miraculous outcomes. But for me, as a mum who loves Jesus, I am convinced that nothing we have accomplished or overcome would have happened without His divine intervention and our commitment to follow His lead, regardless of how unusual or against the flow His plan seemed.

I'm also convinced that a person won't realize the incredible magnitude of what God has in store for them unless they are all-in in their relationship with Him.

With that, I'm very intrigued with the interaction between the dual inputs of our head and our heart and the decisions we make. By that, I mean that sometimes we learn things through our head knowledge without experiencing them in our heart.

I realized this when I was growing up as a Methodist minister's kid. I grew up in the church and was involved in church and Sunday school every week. At the time, we lived on one of the busiest street corners on the northern side of Sydney in a quaint English-style parsonage next to a beautiful, historic stone church in Chatswood. It was expected that my brothers and I would be actively

involved in my dad's ministry. At times we were his secretaries answering the phone, and I knew and often interacted with the church staff.

It was there in 1968—at thirteen years old—that I went forward at a Billy Graham crusade. After listening to him, I realized I had never actually made my own decision to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior, and I was ready.

Looking back, I know now that it was a decision I made with my head, and it changed my life. For the first time, I had an incredible thirst for reading my Bible and acquiring knowledge about God—something I had not done before. I also had a deep hope that my strained relationship with my mum would heal. I was the youngest and only girl, with three older brothers.

My mum told the story that, after she gave birth, the doctor said, "It's a girl."

Mum then said to the doctor in amazement, "Are you *sure* it's a *girl*?"

And he said, "Yeah, I can tell the difference between a boy and a girl!"

The problem was that as I grew up, she wanted me to dress in feminine styles and do indoor things that girls traditionally did back then. But I wanted to be one of the boys.

Before moving to Sydney, we had lived in a small town in rural New South Wales where there was room enough to roam. I loved being outdoors with the dogs and chickens and playing games with my brothers. Sometimes I'd

even take off on my bike with a friend and be gone all day without anyone else knowing where I was. So there was a constant underlying tension between my mum and me, and I was all too glad for my dad's sweet, kind, and fun demeanor that acted as a buffer.

By the time I turned fifteen, things changed for my family. Mum, who was quite energetic, took off on a foot race with my brothers down a hill and slipped a vertebra in her back so that it began pressing on her nerves. She had to go onto bed rest for three months. It was a difficult season because, at the same time, my dad was getting discouraged in the ministry. He had a strong, simple faith, and I admired him for his love for people and his humble belief in who Jesus is. But he wasn't seeing the Holy Spirit working—people weren't coming to Christ. Plus he was growing tired of the continual drain of being a pastor.

It was then that my mum's doctor, who was a Christian and attended our church, told her and Dad about a faith healer coming to town, and he wondered if she might be open to going. So they did. Mum went forward for prayer, and God touched her in a very real way. The next morning, she was able to sit in church for the first time in three months! She didn't receive complete physical healing all at once, but there was a noticed improvement that brought her hope and continued healing as time passed. Even more, she and my dad experienced a spiritual change that opened up both of my parents to the charismatic

movement and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that occurred in Australia in the early 1970s.

Eventually, they brought all of us kids to the gathering, and it was then that I went forward once again—this time to receive the Holy Spirit—and experienced an encounter with Jesus I'd never felt before. My faith went from the head decision I'd made the year before to a full-on heart decision. I knew then that I had the Holy Spirit inside of me, just as His Word says He will do if we ask Him (John 14:16–17).

It was completely transformative—and it was the beginning of seeing my mum in a whole new light. I began talking with her and Dad on a deeper level, and Mum and I were finally able to begin repairing and healing the years of strain and brokenness, for which I am so thankful.

Dad also changed and developed a renewed passion for Jesus. Over the next year we continued to become more involved with the charismatic movement and watched it transform the church. Dad was seeing more conversions and believers having an added excitement about their faith. My brothers and I got very involved in the youth ministry, and for the first time I saw the Holy Spirit literally fill a room with His presence. I saw His Spirit break down the hardness of hearts, convict us to repent, and cause an outward expression of joy that only His forgiveness will bring.

It was revival. It was also when I met David.

Behind the Lights

* * *

A pastor's salary back then was not very high, and with four kids to feed, it was normal for Mum and Dad to take in boarders for the extra income and to help some needy young man. Besides, what was having one more young man around when they already had three sons? Needless to say, it wasn't uncommon for us to have an extra face at the dinner table.

Well, one Sunday night after the church service ended, I went straight home to change into my pajamas. Mum eventually came home and said, "Gosh, there's a nice young man I talked to at church tonight, so I asked him to go to the coffee hour afterward." That was where all the young people hung out after church.

Then she said, "It would be good for you to go over there too."

I said, "Eh . . . okay," and got out of my pajamas and dressed again. Then I randomly took our galah (a rose-breasted cockatoo) named Charlie out of its cage, put him on my shoulder, and left. I have no idea where my thinking was, but I guess that since I thought I *could* take the bird with me, I *would*!

I walked over to the gathering place, and as I was about to enter, the young man Mum had met walked out. He could not walk straight past me. After all, I had a galah on my shoulder.

He said, “Oh, you’re Helen!”

“Yes, how did you know?”

He went on to explain how he’d seen me in church and then seen some photos of the youth group with names and ages on the wall in the coffeehouse, and he recognized me in one.

Well, I was intrigued by his attention to detail, so we stood outside on the porch and talked for five or ten minutes, at which point David asked if I was only sixteen.

“Oh, no, I’m seventeen now!”

The entire time, Charlie sat on my shoulder, and I think David thought it was absolutely hysterical.

After that night, my mum invited David to a family outing and learned he was unhappy with where he was living. She also learned he came from a good family in Brisbane, so she invited him to live in our caravan (the Australian term for *camper*) that sat outside the parsonage. We were planning to relocate in three months to a new church about twenty minutes away, and she said, “You know, he’s a nice young chap, and I feel sorry for him. If after three months it doesn’t work out, I’ll just say ‘We’re moving! See ya!’ and that way nobody’s feelings will get hurt.”

Well, he moved in.

In the meantime, Mum saw how well we got along—we talked every time we could, whether on the porch, in the yard, on the phone, wherever. She told David that

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since I was still a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl and he was twenty-one, there could be no relationship with me, and she said as much to me about him.

* * *

As David and I got to know each other, we were amazed at all we had in common and the similarities between our families. I came with three older brothers, the oldest named David. David also came from a family with three boys and a girl that was the youngest, and he, too, was the oldest. We both had dogs named Chip. And years later, I found out that when David discovered his mum was pregnant with her fourth child, he even suggested she name the baby Helen if it was a girl.

My dad was a Methodist minister, and David's dad was a Methodist lay preacher but bank manager by profession. My parents were strong in the Temperance Union—meaning clean living, no cards, no dancing, etc. David's grandmother and mum were the stalwarts in their town for the temperance movement. Both of our families moved regularly, so we both came from rotating, insecure lifestyles compared to most other families.

It was crazy, all the similar nuances and understanding we shared about each other's lives. Through it all, we became very close friends, and deep down, I knew I liked him. But there was one thing that held me back: David wasn't serious about Jesus. He had the head knowledge

but not the heart relationship I had. Being that that was more important to me than anything, I decided against a close relationship. I knew it wouldn't go anywhere in the long run.

In the meantime, the three-month trial period of living in our caravan went by quite quickly, and my parents decided to invite David to join us when we moved to another Sydney suburb called Turrumurra. Dad started ministering at their new church in the beginning of 1972. Since David was not where I needed him to be spiritually for me to have a serious relationship with him, I thought I would keep my eye out for other eligible young men. For me, a new church meant a new beginning.

It was not long after moving that I met a young man who was the current youth leader at the new church. Bob was serious about Jesus, and we established a closer relationship over the next few months. Then one night at a Bible study and prayer time we held at the parsonage, David attended and sincerely asked for prayer. He knew he hadn't been walking with Jesus—he was walking on the edge of a relationship with Him. He wanted what we all had. He saw that our faith was alive and real, and he wanted it too. So we prayed for him.

Not long after, Bob quickly figured out that he and I were no more! I was a bit embarrassed, but there was no ignoring that the Holy Spirit had definitely ignited the element I had been missing in David. He became very

active in youth outreach, we renewed our friendship, and when I was twenty and David twenty-five, Dad married us. It was all really very sweet. I married my best friend, and afterward, David liked to quip, “We lived together before we got married, but we didn’t sleep together!”

* * *

Looking at our story, I say with complete sincerity how very important I think it is to have more similarities of background than not with the person you marry. It’s vital to be equally yoked and to share the Holy Spirit, not only in ministry but in daily living and in prayer together. Your similarities affect how you relate, they affect the level of understanding in how the other thinks, and they help to build a strong foundation as you grow and work through tough times as well as your successes together.

With that being said, even though David and I genuinely enjoyed each other’s company, we didn’t know just how vital our spiritual and relational backdrop would be for the series of events to come—events that would catapult us out of normal, traditional ways of living into adventures that would stretch our faith beyond our wildest imagination.

About the Authors

Helen Smallbone is the co-founder of MUMlife Community and a podcast host with AccessMore. Her passion is encouraging mothers and families with the God-breathed wisdom she has gleaned over thirty-two years of active mothering. Born and raised in Australia, she dedicated her life to Christ as a young teen at the Billy Graham Crusade in Sydney. Now a mother to seven—five boys, bookended with girls—and grandmother to fourteen, she currently lives outside of Nashville, Tennessee, with her husband, David, and a small menagerie of animals.

Lisa Stilwell is a veteran in Christian publishing with twenty-plus years of experience and is the owner of Loadstone Literary, a comprehensive freelance editorial service that provides book development, editing, and ghostwriting. She's worked with best-selling authors such as Max Lucado, Charles Stanley, and Sarah Young. She is also the author of *God's Truth for Troubled Times* and *100 Days of Faith Over Fear*. When Lisa isn't writing or editing, she loves to be outdoors hiking and kayaking.



Check out these podcast series and more at
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MumLife Community exists to love, encourage, equip and disciple mothers of all ages by infiltrating homes with bible based principles, a life giving community and a life changing faith no matter where you are on your journey. We are a sisterhood of Mothers Uplifting Mothers!



In this special episode, the Smallbone family is hosted by Paula Faris and Rebecca St James. Together, Joel Smallbone, his wife Moriah Smallbone, sister Rebecca and their parents Helen & David share powerful stories of coming to America, trusting the faithfulness of God, and seeing God miraculously provide.





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Moriah and Joel Smallbone dig deep into their story for truths that have guided them through their career, marriage and creative endeavors ... You can expect vulnerability, honesty and humor in this cinematic podcast which speaks to the uniquely challenging, triumphant and (at times) preposterous moments of life in this cinematic podcast.



Rebecca St. James is back, and not only in the studio working on fresh, modern worship music, but she also has a NEW podcast to encourage you in daily life! Through authentic sharing with friends and family- tackling subjects such as faith, parenting, relationships and more- she reminds listeners they're not alone, and that we have wisdom for life in Jesus!

