

Testimony

I was born on July 17, 1954 in Seneca, South Carolina at Oconee Memorial Hospital. My mother, Geraldine Evelyn Owens was not married. I never knew nor met my biological father. Despite the hardships, I am still thankful for my mother and grandmother. They both always loved and cared for me.

My mama taught me much about the love of God.

What's amazing are God's unconditional love and His sacrifice for us~ Although I was born in sin and out of wedlock, the Lord still loved me and had plans for my life! Regardless of what we believe about ourselves, the truth is that God truly loves us. He speaks to us in His Word—John 3:16, 17.

The Lord wants us to know Him. Because of His great love for us, He died on the Cross. There is no sinless perfection. We have all sinned. He realizes that we've made mistakes yet his love for us doesn't ever change. His love is eternal and unconditional. Since He is the creator of the universe, there is nothing impossible with God.

In 1934, my mother, Geraldine Evelyn Owens was born and raised in the poor backwoods of Walhalla, South Carolina. Mother had two brothers, Bill and little Jay. Grandpa worked at a local tobacco mill where he was probably exposed to tuberculosis. He became very ill and was transferred to the State Park Sanatorium in Columbia, South Carolina. 1942, at 8 years old, my mother lost her father. Thus, a real struggle began for the family.

Grandma and her children's lives had been crushed. Grandma had to rise up strong and navigate her family through this valley. She began looking for work in Walhalla but nothing was available. Desperate, she resigned to work at the Dunean Cotton Mill. She'd have to travel by bus from Walhalla to Greenville. Sadly, mama and Jay were appointed to live with grandma's extended family. Mother felt so abandoned.

Understandably, mama and Jay struggled to live with their relatives. Still grieving for her dad, Garnett Owens, she probably wondered, "Will life ever be normal again?" Sounds reasonable. At that stage in my mother's young life, her life seemed bleak. But the Lord had not forgotten my precious mother. He would provide.

Life with extended family wasn't easy. Mama learned to get along with everyone. Without any choices, she was obligated to help cook, clean house and pick cotton. She went to bed at night sobbing. Oh, how she wished for grandma's hugs, kisses and encouragement. Mama wanted her life and family back! Grandma's home-cooked meals, trips to the park, and family time were missing. Through it all, mother learned to persevere. My grandmother had many burdens to

bear and the battle wasn't over. In life, we never know when the next battle will begin. God does.

In 1947, our beloved great-grandmother, Mary Jane was hit and killed by a drunk driver at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. She was spending time with her beloved sister whom she hadn't seen for years. Grandma was not prepared for this! She collapsed in pain. "Why was God allowing this?", she wondered. My grandma felt like her world was caving on her; but she had to keep walking.

Mother and Jay relocated to the DAR—Daughters of the American Revolution. This boarding school was located in Salem, South Carolina. Quite a trek from Walhalla. Mama felt so isolated and frustrated. Early morning chores, peer pressure, school work, and anxiety thrust mama into despair. Yet, she learned to work and stay focused on her responsibilities—she would survive this with her brother Jay.

Finally, in 1948, Grandma left her mill job, and moved back to Walhalla. She was so relieved to be home. At that time, Mama was 14, Jay was 11, and my Uncle Bill was 17 years old. Everyone was so happy!

My dear mother was a very attractive and smart young woman. Mother often sought the attention of young men—she'd lost her father at 9 years old. Mama grew up without much affirmation and protection from a caring father. She'd never had a strong, father figure in her life. Every daughter needs a godly father as a role-model. Mama never did.

Around 1950, mama met Jack Mathis. She was only 16 years old. Jack's mother was opposed to this relationship. However--within a few months, Jack joined the Army and was transferred to South Korea. Mama would never see him again. Tears of anguish flowed when she learned of his death. He was killed in the Korean War in October 1950. He was buried in Westminster, South Carolina.

Glenda was born on February 21, 1951. She'd be a pleasant reminder of this precious relationship. Mother was only 17 years old. Most of her youth had been stolen by hardships.

In the winter of 1953, my mother, Evelyn, became involved with James Smith. They enjoyed a short-lived relationship and I was conceived. I was born on July 17, 1954 in Seneca, South Carolina, at the Oconee Memorial Hospital which is now the Lila Doyle Nursing Home. After my birth, James Smith disappeared from our lives. Sadly, I never met my biological father.

James Smith was a handsome, young man who was enjoyed pursuing women, drinking and gambling. I am not sure if he was a Christian. He worked as a mechanic at a local Walhalla gas station. His parents lived in Westminster.

During the summer of 1975, James Smith and Wayne Fricks became acquainted. Later on, Darrel Brown appeared on the scene. Fricks planned to rob a local convenience store in Walhalla with the help of Smith and Brown. They

robbed the store at gunpoint. Although no one was killed, the police were hot on his trail! Fricks became worried and panicked. He decided to eliminate James Smith and Derrill Brown. He knew exactly where Smith lived—he drove over to Prather's bridge near Toccoa, Georgia. Fricks shot and killed James at close-range with a shotgun. Fricks also gunned down Derrill Brown in cold-blood. Eventually, Fricks was arrested and sentenced to life in prison. Did any of them ever consider the consequences? Their family and friends were heartbroken—I cannot imagine their grief.

Somewhere around the mid 50's, Calvin wooed his way into my mother's life. I was two years old and Glenda was five—we didn't know or trust this man who stole our mother's heart.

In December 1956, Calvin and mama "tied the knot" at the Walhalla Courthouse. They began their life together in Walhalla and seemed to be so happy. Unfortunately, this happiness wouldn't last for long. I believe they loved each other, but mother was so naïve to Calvin's emotional issues, addictions and alcoholism. He had grown up in the country as a sheltered by his foster parents. My sister, Kathy was born in May 1957.

Calvin had never traveled far from Long Creek. Oh, how he longed for adventures outside his city limits! He was excited to travel and seek his greener pastures. So, in 1958, my dad's Chrysler was prepped for a long-distance road trip! We were young—I was 4, Glenda was 7 and Cathy was a just a baby.

For several months, we lived near the coast in Santa Maria, California. We enjoyed living close to the Pacific. The beautiful sunsets, rolling waves, the birds and the calming effects of the sea created an idyllic setting for us. For some reason, we didn't stay long.

Within a couple of months, we returned home to Westminster, SC., near our grandparents. We never knew how long these moves would last.

In 1959, we moved to Tampa, Florida. Mother wasn't happy that Bill Owens, Ollie and his children moved with us. We rented a small house but it wasn't ideal for two families. Calvin was the only one working and we could not afford to house and feed Bill's large family. Bill's lack of work and income was creating financial issues-- mother suspected that Ollie was stealing food and clothing for her children. The home atmosphere was unhealthy. Life had to change.

Much to our delight, Uncle Bill and his family returned home to Greenville, South Carolina. Our home life improved.

I loved going to school because it allowed me to get away from home and make some friends. We couldn't ever invite anyone to our house—for unknown reasons, Calvin didn't like company.

One day, a classmate invited me to walk to her home. I got in trouble for not asking permission. I'll never forget that spanking.

On March 26, 1960, my sister, Judy Faye was born. She was a beautiful baby with platinum blonde hair. We all loved her! She was a big baby. In the summer, we loved going to the nearby park. We'd have lunch, play games and play with each other. My sisters were actually my best friends.

On July 29, 1960, Tropical Storm Brenda crashed the Tampa area. The flooding was dangerously high in the area where we lived. Everyone had to evacuate! Mama quickly packed up our belongings! We packed our car and headed home for safety. What a terrible experience!

Returning home to our family in South Carolina was exciting. Grandma Pearl, JR, Robert, Aunt Dessie, Nannie and Grady were always glad to see us. We loved staying at the farm in the summer. Grandma Pearl always made us feel special by preparing a home-made meal and chocolate cake. She worked hard caring for her family. Thankful that JR and Robert were always there to help her. Nannie and Grady were also a blessing. Grandma Pearl never approved of Calvin's drinking or his lifestyle, but she loved him.

In late summer of 1961, we headed to Tucson, Arizona—this trip would be the last major one. The trek from South Carolina to Arizona was exhausting. We were cramped as we drove through the Mohave Desert. We'd never seen cactuses before. We could hardly wait to get unpacked and settled. The car was extremely hot and humid since we didn't have an air-conditioner. Back in those days, we used fans! We spent one night in a local hotel! What an experience.

Calvin was able to rent a small three-room apartment close to town. The apartment was located near Mount Lemon! In our apartment complex, there were other children! Finally, we'd be able to make friends in our own backyard. Within a week or so, mother enrolled us at the local school. Living in Tucson was definitely challenging, especially with many Hispanic children. Some seemed quite prejudice and unfriendly.

Within just a few days, Calvin began working at a nearby Esso gas station. Calvin was a mechanic by trade—he enjoyed pumping gas and mechanical work. Mother enjoyed staying at home with us. Lots of cooking, cleaning and overseeing the home front was hectic at times. Mother was our super-mom!

Life in Tucson was so interesting! Mother would plan little excursions for us. I'll never forget visiting "Old Tucson" a large theme park where Western films were produced. The sights were awesome—bar fights, cowboys with their pistols, log cabins, horse-drawn buggies and women in long dresses.

We wanted to visit Mount Lemon. The tall, snow-covered peaks towered majestically behind our apartment. Although the roads were very narrow and dangerous, we loved the thrill! Calvin was a good driver.

Occasionally, mother would take us shopping at the thrift store! I loved to shop for cheap clothing and especially high heels! What fun it was to dress up like a queen--especially in my Cinderella outfit.

Our local neighborhood had several cafes of home-made Mexican food. The tacos, burritos and enchiladas were so tasty. Mother taught us to appreciate the good times and not dwell on the bad times. Enjoy every moment. We tried.

Although Calvin worked and provided for our physical needs, he was never the compassionate, loving father that we desperately needed. At times, he struggled with bulimia. The drinking, smoking and abuse were his spiritual strongholds in life. Honestly, I believe that he was physically abused at the Butts house.

One evening, while eating dinner, Calvin lost his temper at our baby sister, Judy. Mother remained quiet. Glenda defied his authority, and immediately regretted it. Calvin slapped her so hard that she was knocked into the wall. I'll never forget this—it was so traumatic. My poor sister was the target of his abuse—mother never tried to thwart his attacks. We lived in fear and anger. Sometimes, we wanted Calvin to leave us forever. We'd never had a normal home with him.

On June 23, 1962, our baby brother, Jimmie was born. Sadly, my brother would never have the kind of father he needed. Jimmie would eventually become a man just like Calvin. Every child deserves a godly father.

That summer, mother was diagnosed with cancer. She had a total hysterectomy and survived the cancer. She was my hero. Mama regained her strength within several months.

Toward the end of the year, Calvin decided to move us back home to Westminster, South Carolina. Sadly, I spent 1963-64 repeating the 3rd grade! What a life! That year was tough!

Calvin rented a small four-room house in Westminster. Unfortunately, this Norton house didn't have hot water or a bathroom! We had to heat all of our water on the kitchen stove! Outside in the back yard stood our outdoor toilet. We didn't enjoy using it at night or early in the morning. Where was our bathroom?? We'd bathe in a large, aluminum tub in our bedroom. It wasn't nice like a tub or shower, but it worked.

Our wood-burning/coal stove provided the heat. It worked well and every morning, we'd run to the living room. We always learned to be content—mother never complained, and neither did we.

Mother always loved and cared for us—we never went to bed hungry, dirty or lacked for anything. Although we were poor, we had enough.

Calvin always worked but his income wasn't sufficient. Most of the time, we'd eat beans, potatoes or cornbread for dinner. We rarely ate meat for meals. Breakfast was eggs and grits or cereal. For school, we'd eat peanut-butter and jelly or egg-salad sandwiches. On rare occasions, we'd have a hot lunch in the

cafeteria. Sometimes, the kids on the bus would mock us for being poor. Mama encouraged us to be brave and stand up to them.

We remained in the Norton house while I continued attending the Westminster Elementary school. My 4th grade transition was not easy. I felt so uncomfortable. After all, I was always the tallest girl in the class and our dresses were bought from the local thrift stores. Sure, we were poor but I didn't care!

In 1965, I turned 11 years old, and we moved into a lovely home in Seneca—we had every comfort. Mother was so happy. We enjoyed lush, green grass around the house and lots of freedom to play and explore. Southside Elementary was close-by—only a few minutes away. My fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Pelfrey was a wonderful Christian. She encouraged each of us to strive for mastery and excellence. I enjoyed her class immensely.

By the end of the school year, we were packing up to move! This constant transitioning/moving was a huge emotional burden for us. When would all this traveling and moving around come to an end? We were all tired.

Over the years, Calvin's alcoholism severely impacted our family. He wasn't disciplined enough to save enough money for rent. Calvin was very stubborn and addicted to his alcohol. No one could make him stop. We lived on a week to week paycheck! Although Mother worked sometimes, she couldn't pay all the bills. There were arguments, strife and sometimes, physical battles. In addition, Calvin's hangovers had to be resolved with his employers. Mother was forced to call and give excuses for his absence. She was indeed an "Enabler!"

In 1966, we moved to a small house in Seneca, and I moved up to the 6th grade and we lived near downtown Seneca. Once again, we had to get adjusted to a new neighborhood and school. I was somewhat uneasy.

While our parents were away, Glenda invited some kids over to our house for a Séance. I had never been involved in a séance—and wasn't sure what would happen. After a few minutes, we could sense an evil spirit in our bedroom. We could see the curtains rise and roll upward! With my eyes closed, I felt something on my shoulders and became very frightened. All at once, the candle fell over and spilled wax everywhere. I jumped up from the table and ran out of the room. What a hard lesson we learned that day! Never again!

I was somewhat nervous yet eager to attend our new school. Our teacher was very friendly but also strict. She had a thick, wooden paddle hung up on the wall. We were warned that any arguing, bullying or fighting would be rewarded with her paddle! Of course, none of us wanted that. We were encouraged to obey her rules, be kind and be studious.

As the new girl in class, I struggled with being the tallest and skinniest girl in my class. In addition, my second-hand clothes and shoes made me more

noticeable. I was so naïve and self-conscious—I didn't notice that most of the girls were dressed just like me. We had lots in common—except my sensitive nature.

Outside the classroom, on the playground or cafeteria, some of the boys loved to tease me. Of course, I'd get offended and snap back. Who wouldn't since these words--skinny, giraffe, ostrich or long legs were so rude and If I walked past them in the hallway, they would laugh at me. There were others as well-- short or obese girls in our school were also humiliated! Of course, the teachers always knew.

My teacher encouraged me to ignore them and walk away. She felt these bullies had emotional issues. More than likely, their parents were probably at the source of their problems. Most of the trouble stopped when I ignored them. I'll never forget her my teacher; she poured wisdom and love into my life at a time when I really needed it. We actually became friends and I was able to help her at home. A little extra money was a blessing. I'm thankful that I survived that year.

Years later, I discovered that these experiences made me spiritually stronger. I learned to empathize and help other girls who were also bullied. I discovered that my identity in Jesus Christ is who I am. Although I love my family dearly, the God who created me is the One who calls me His daughter. I am a child of the King. He loves me unconditionally, and always will. This spiritual journey had just begun. Regardless of my past, my faults or mistakes, His love never changes.

My mother was growing weary of our constant moves. She longed to settle down and put down some roots. Calvin finally agreed. We moved to Fairburn, Georgia in the summer of 1967. It seemed surreal that our traveling was winding down. Our hearts were singing.

We moved into a small, two-bedroom house in Fairburn. We had a nice back porch where we could sit and talk. Forever are the memories of walking in my sleep. I'd climb out of my top bunk-bed and walk to the back porch. A few seconds later, I'd get scared and run back and climb into another bed with my sister.

I was excited and hopeful that this year would be different for me at Eastern Elementary as an 7th grader! I'll never forget making friends with Milana Thames, Kathy Vincent and a few other girls. I had to learn to quit comparing myself with my other classmates. One of my classmates, seemed to enjoy teasing me. One day, I finally stood up to her and threatened to meet her after school. For some reason, my problems abruptly stopped.

After we got settled, Pastor Jarrett came to visit us and invited us to Buffington Road Christian Church. He was very friendly and seemed so genuine and concerned for our family. I couldn't help but wonder if everyone was like him.

We attended Buffington Road for several months. I really enjoyed my Sunday school class—especially my teacher. I was finally making friends. I began to feel at home in this small church.

Pastor Jarrett preached the gospel with compassion. He helped me to realize that life is complicated and we need a Savior! Life is easier with the Lord. God can help us navigate those valleys.

That summer, I was invited to a local Good-News Club for children. The host family was such a blessing to me. We played games and had lots of fun. The Woodard's love for Jesus Christ created a strong desire in me to know Him. I wanted what they had—I began to seek the Lord in my life. I needed forgiveness, unconditional love and acceptance. Although I can't remember the date, I will never forget that decision. In the summer of 1967, I was able to go to Christian camp. I will never forget some of the songs we sang—Miry Clay, I've got the Joy, Father Abraham! That summer reformed my life.

Looking back, I am so grateful that mama got us into church. Her decision made a huge difference in my life. Although it would take years for God to conform me to His image, I'm thankful that He never gave up on me.

Pastor Jarrett convinced Calvin to attend a Half-Way House. His alcoholism, drugs issues, and domestic abuse were devastating his family. Calvin would attend Rehab but it never helped. He refused to allow God to change his life. We all wept. Our family needed spiritual freedom from darkness—especially in our home. Oh, how we wanted Calvin to change but as far as I know, he never did. We prayed for years—so we never know for sure.

Earlier in 1969, mother was approved for a USDA home loan. Her dream of owning her home was finally becoming a reality. Everything she'd ever wanted was a dream come true—a large kitchen and living room, and three large bedrooms. For the first time in years, mama was ecstatic.

Within a couple of months, our family moved into our new “Hillandale” home. We were so excited at the prospect of settling down, making friends and being happy. In 1970, I began the 10th grade at M.D. Collins high school. Although I was quite nervous, I still was optimistic. Making friends wouldn't be easy—especially with my emotional baggage.

We made a few friends in our neighborhood. Most of them played with us outside. Lucky was about 14 years old, and he taught us the value of friendship. He was a faithful friend yet he suffered with seizures. About a year later, Lucky visited his grandparents and never returned home. We wept for days.

One of my other neighbors, Joy Carpenter became a loyal friend to me. She was divorced with two young children. She was always so helpful and supportive—especially when our home-life was struggling. We spent many

evenings sharing life over dinner and iced tea. For a short season, she and I drove down to Carrabelle, Florida and visited her parents.

Those fun summer days faded in 1973 when Joy met an amazing young man, Bruce whom she later married. They were so happy together. I will never forget Joy. She was an amazing friend.

Life continued to be disruptive at times. Sometimes at night, Calvin would come home drunk. He'd be out of control, cursing and hitting mother. We'd jump in the car and run away out of danger. I'm sure our neighbors were tired of it. Sure—it was embarrassing. Calvin became known as the local drunkard! I was so exhausted at the problems in our lives. Sometimes, I wanted to move away.

One summer afternoon, Charles, a young man from the church visited us. I was not expecting him at all. Out of the blue, Calvin showed up, and threatened Charles with a pocket-knife! Needless to say, Charles ran for his life, and never called again. We were so furious! I knew that we couldn't trust Calvin anymore—if only he would repent. Mother knew that she had to do something, but what? Calvin was a danger to our family. We honestly lived in fear--never knowing when Calvin would turn our home into a battleground.

One weekend, grandma arrived with a small handgun for protection. She'd watched Calvin's behavior and was concerned for our safety. Later in the evening, Calvin came home in a drunken stupor. He was cursing and slammed the door to their bedroom. He was angry. Mama cried out and we ran down the hallway. Grandma cornered Calvin in the bathroom, and shot him twice in the shoulder. Mother called the ambulance and Calvin was treated at the hospital. He was later released. No charges were filed. Within a few hours, Calvin returned home, wounded and sorrowful. Calvin would ultimately pay the cost. Our home life would never change until he was gone. We could hardly wait.

High school was a completely different battleground for me. M.D. Collins was a brand-new high school. Lots of new students flowed into the halls and rooms looking for acceptance. I was a naïve, and insecure teenager. I had hoped my Sophomore year wouldn't be too complicated. I didn't realize that social circles were so popular. All of us were looking for a friend or group to get connected. High school was a whole new world and sometimes, I felt like an oddball and so lonely.

In the meantime, I tried to focus on the most important things--my classes, a few friends, and my family. I thoroughly enjoyed art and home economics and gymnastics. My teachers were so encouraging. I developed a love for art, sewing and singing. My art class was so fulfilling for me-- ceramic pottery, wire sculptures, weaving and free-hand drawing was definitely therapeutic.

As our heavenly Father created us, therefore, we are designed for relationships. We all need people in our lives. Hopefully, the friends we allow into

our lives will be loyal and non-toxic. In my case, I followed anyone who would befriend me. Never considering the consequences of my choices, I was headed for trouble. I didn't see the storms arising.

During study hall, I walked outside the school with another classmate. I discovered a friendly group of teenagers. Most of them were puffing cigarettes, marijuana, or talking about their sexy boyfriends. These girls loved to party at the downtown disco, drink and spend weekends with their boyfriends. I was surprised. It wouldn't be long before I'd be doing the same things—smoking, drinking and partying with the wrong kind of people. After all, birds of one feather, fly together. “The people we surround ourselves with either raise or lower our standards.” Matthew Kelly. “We all need people in our lives who remind us of our essential purpose, and challenge us to become the best version of ourselves.”

My standards were definitely flying downhill quickly. What was I thinking?

The weekend parties were a big mistake. Couples were hanging out behind closed doors. I felt very uncomfortable and guilty. There were times that I could hardly drive home! The Lord was definitely looking out for me.

My Mother never knew—after all, she worked full-time and was too busy trying to keep her family together. Mother had her plate full-- stress, anxiety, and physical fatigue. She simply couldn't handle all the issues in our family. Calvin didn't help at all. His issues with alcohol, adultery and abuse were destroying us.

Unfortunately, my mother failed to set boundaries for her girls. We could actually come and go as we pleased—day or night. We never had curfews, rules or guidelines for relationships or discipline in our home. Oh, how I wish we had.

In 1972, I quit school after I finished the 11th grade. Our family was falling apart and I was tired of the high-school cliques. I was unable to build any solid friendships. Every social or sports endeavor was a loss for me. I simply didn't have the motivation to be proactive. I was tired and restless. I honestly felt like a failure and struggled with discouragement.

In the summer, Calvin deserted our family and run off with another woman. Sadly, we lost our home, and my mother became sick. I went to work at JC Penney's to help Mother but I was laid off after Christmas. I was struggling to find a purpose in my life. I didn't want to simply survive, I wanted a better life. In 1974, I made a decision to get my GED---(General Education Development). This test replaced the high school diploma. In January 1974, I joined the US Army. I was desperate to experience a happier, normal life—if such a thing existed. For some reason, I was excited for this new experience!

I signed up for Germany and spent my first 6 weeks in Basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama. What an experience! Our military post was situated at the foothills of the beautiful Appalachian Mountains!

Basic training would change all of us! Our female drill sergeant was very strict and proficient at yelling and tongue bashing. Rising at 5 AM was so hard. Following strict schedules, dress codes and behavioral demands were very challenging; but nevertheless, they helped me become a more disciplined person. In the spring of 1974, I graduated from basic training a better person. I couldn't wait to start the next phase of Army training.

My girlfriend and I were transferred to Fort Knox, Kentucky with an military combat occupation. Since women weren't allowed combat occupations, we were given the opportunity to choose another job. It was a miracle! I wanted something different and challenging. Donna convinced me to join ranks with the military-police! We transferred to Fort Gordon, Georgia and became roommates at the women's barracks. We enjoyed our time there—had lots of great experiences. I experienced my first romance! I'll never forget my dear friend, Pat Shook—she was a great encouragement. Eight weeks later, we graduated! Before flying overseas to Frankfurt, I was able to visit my family.

When we arrived in Frankfurt, I was assigned to the 385th Military Police Battalion. I was the only female police-officer in our company! Of course, I knew that competition was inevitable. In order to win the respect of my male peers, I'd have to work hard and not expect an easy road. After several months, I won a couple of awards and was promoted ahead of my associates! I finally earned their respect by demonstrating my skills.

Living in the women's barracks was challenging. I am so thankful that I passed those tests. During that season of my life, I was thankful to be accomplishing something worthwhile.

During the fall of 1974, I asked to be reassigned to Goeppingen, Germany. My older sister, Glenda and her husband, Bob Hammond were stationed there at Cooke Barracks. I couldn't wait to be reunited with their children-- Bobby, Michelle, and David. We were all excited!

Within days, I moved to the women's barracks at Cooke Barracks. I was excited to finally be in a place with family and friends.

I don't recall how this happened, but the Lord brought Debbie Chesser, Janet Holloway and Lucy Clark into my life. I was a carnal Christian and was not living for the Lord, yet He knew I needed godly influence. Isn't it interesting that He knows everything about us, yet He still loves us?

In 1975, Debbie and Lucy invited me to the Billy Graham Crusade in Brussels, Belgium! For the first time in my life, we traveled by train to Brussels to the Heizel Stadium. In a huge room, we camped in our sleeping bags with dozens of other young women! What a wonderful experience!

Every morning, we participated in Bible Studies and prayer with our group leader and several other people. Afterwards, we watched skits and other programs.

During the day, we fellowshiped with other young people. I cannot recall how many people I met from all over the Europe!

In the evening, we all congregated to the stadium. We really enjoyed Billy Graham's inspiring messages. I can never forget these words, "God loves you and He has a purpose for your life!" Personally, I was spiritually challenged at his powerful preaching. During the altar call, I saw dozens of young people kneel in prayer. What a joy to see so many come to Jesus.

A huge revival broke out in that arena. I praise the Lord for this amazing opportunity in my life. Memories that will never fade.

God used that event to remind me of His great love and faithfulness. Isn't it incredible that He can orchestrate events like this?? He is powerful. His love for us "never changes" regardless of our attitudes, sin problems or disobedience.

At the conference, someone gave me a Good News Bible. Inside the front cover, I had written my testimony of salvation. My mother kept that Bible for many years! I was indeed thankful for Chaplain Nelson and the other godly leaders at Cooke Barracks. God used Chaplain Nelson and others to draw me closer to the Lord. I clearly saw the Light of the Gospel in his life.

In 1976, I departed the military and returned home for a new beginning. I was happy to be back in Seneca, South Carolina with my mother and the rest of the family. I was surprised that Calvin and mother had reunited. His behavior had not changed. Alcoholism, drug addiction and adultery still controlled his life.

That spring, I signed up for classes at Tri-County Technical College. I couldn't wait to begin. I made a decision to focus on my classes, work hard and not get involved with anyone. I desired to make the Dean's List. English 101 was my most challenging classes. Thankfully, I made the honor roll! Mother was so proud of me. Later, I realized that I had underrated my academic skills and even my self-image. The Lord helped me understand that I was worthy—I was loved.

Sadly, no one in our family was involved in any local church. Mother was working a full-time job at the De-Fore Plant in Clemson. She was extremely busy with work and her dysfunctional marriage.

Calvin was still abusing mama. I'll never forget the afternoon he came home. Mother had cooked all morning to prepare a meal for us. Calvin was intoxicated, and wasn't feeling well. He had the audacity to throw everything on the table onto the floor. I was outraged. How dare he treat her this way? He was out the door in minutes.

In the summer of 1976, I had finished my semester and was looking for things to do. My sister Glenda had divorced her husband and moved back home—without her children. Glenda had not changed.

She convinced me and Kathy to move to St. Petersburg, Florida.

Since I wasn't working, I thought, "Why not?" I drove my 1970 Volkswagen Bug with Kathy and her son, Jeremiah, and Glenda with all our belongings! I was paying for most of the expenses, including gas, food and the apartment! I should have known better. I was beginning to understand the insanity of my decision.

Within several days, Glenda had arranged an interview for me at a local Strip club. What was she thinking?? Of course, I'd could never, ever do this. About two weeks later, I managed to find work at a local T-shirt shop. I really enjoyed working there. I made some great friends. Glenda was too lazy to work! Kathy couldn't because of her son, Jeremiah. They both depended on me.

Unfortunately, at the age of 22, I was very naïve and unwise. While I worked, Glenda and Kathy enjoyed their free time in my car. In the evenings, Glenda and Kathy loved to drink and party at the local bars. One evening, I met a young man named Gordy. He was good-looking and super friendly. I was naively attracted to men who thought I was pretty. Gordy lived in a houseboat—that should have been a red flag for me. We started dating. He invited me over and consequently, I became pregnant. I felt so stupid for this.

My friends were happy for me, but I was scared. I called mother and she arranged for me to fly home. Now long before I left, Glenda wrecked my Volkswagen Bug! She drove it into a lake. I never saw it again. Oh, the valuable lessons I learned from this experience.

Once I arrived home, I was feeling very remorseful. Mother was happy to see me but also concerned for me and my future. I was only a few weeks pregnant and very confused. Mother convinced me to get an abortion. I had no idea what I was doing. I only wish I'd done my homework. No one warned me about the consequences of this decision. We went to Atlanta and I killed that unborn baby. Afterwards, deep down in my soul, I wept and realized that I had made a huge mistake. I tried to move on with my life, but I couldn't forget it. Those shameful memories would pop up unexpectedly. We simply can't sweep our sins under the rug! Only Jesus! Only He can help us overcome our sin and shame.

We can be sure that the Lord sees everything. He knew what I had done, and although it broke His heart, He still loved me. I am so glad that God's love carries me-- His work in my life will continue until He takes me home.

Only God could develop me into the woman I needed to be. I was definitely a mess! God knew however that I would eventually need healing from the shame and guilt of my sins. He would do it. The shame of my sin would cast a shadow in my life for years to come. Although I was a Christian, I wasn't spiritually mature to understand that all my sins had been forgiven—for all eternity. I simply couldn't forgive myself.

I enrolled at Tri-County Tech and was able to complete my second semester of college. Understandably, I still grieved over my losses. At times, I would get so

discouraged about the poor decisions that I had made that summer of 1976. When would I ever recover and learn how to thrive?

My mother was still living in the trailer park, and trying to remain optimistic about her life and marriage. Sadly, Calvin's spiritual life was greatly declining. He was still abusing alcohol and even drugs. Several times, she had discovered him cheating. The rose-colored glasses were slipping away; after twenty years, mother was beginning to awaken out of denial.

One afternoon, I asked mother, "Are you ready for change?" She sure was! I rented a nice home, packed the U-Haul and we moved away. Mama walked out of Calvin's life for good. Our lives improved without him. He never visited, called or bothered her again. She was finally free! His physical abuse, and adulterous lifestyle wasn't her problem anymore. Sadly, within three years, Calvin would be murdered. For the first time in years, mama seemed so happy.

In the summer of 1977, I also made some important decisions. I needed to change my life as well. In August of 1977, I rejoined the Army! I was assigned to Fort Dix, New Jersey to become a military vehicle operator-(64C). I learned to drive everything from a ¼ ton truck to a 5-ton tractor-trailer. Those six weeks of training passed quickly! I couldn't wait to return to Germany!

A couple of weeks later, I flew into Frankfurt and I was transferred to Kaiserslautern, Germany at Kleber Kaserne. I was assigned to the 64th Transportation Company. We had several female truck drivers in our platoon—most were very skilled and friendly. I drove the 5-ton tractor-trailer all over Germany and Belgium. We'd drive through the major cities, out in the remote field sites and throughout small, lovely towns.

My most difficult experience was the Inspector General's inspection in the women's barracks. All of us girls had toiled all night for this inspection! We were exhausted to say the least. The following morning, Sergeant Rice allowed us to go home and get some rest. Several months earlier, I had moved off base into a small German apartment. I was so worn-out, I slept for 48 hours! I never woke up! When I finally did wake up, I was frightened. How could I have slept that long?

The next morning, I reported to duty and was rebuked for being (AOL) Absent Without Leave. I received an Article 15 (form of punishment) and had to work for seven days straight overtime. I also lost a small percentage of my pay. I never repeated that again! This was my first offense in the military otherwise, it could have been worse.

During my tour of service, I was able to travel to different cities. I'll never forget these extraordinary experiences to Bavaria, Heidelberg, Stuttgart and Innsbruck—especially the Neuschwanstein Castle. While I met and dated a few handsome guys, none of them measured up to my expectations. I am so glad that I waited for the right man. God knew exactly what I needed—and He provided.

One morning, I noticed an advertisement in the military newspaper for vocalists and/or musicians for the military band, "Entertainment Showcase." Several days later, I nervously auditioned as a country/western vocalist. Since my voice wasn't that good, I didn't think I had a chance. Little did I know what God was orchestrating in my life. During the audition, I met an amazing young man, Glen Williamson. He was the Assistant Director and he supervised all the auditions. He was very positive and mentioned that my voice was exactly what they needed. I couldn't believe that I had been accepted! I was excited! A few days later, I received a work release for three months from my unit.

Glen and I became good friends while traveling and performing around Germany. I was impressed with his work ethic and love for music. I learned that he was engaged to his high-school sweetheart, Cathy. I had to be careful with my heart since I did not want to hurt anyone.

Interestingly, as my friendship with Glen grew, I realized that he was one of the most remarkable men that I had ever met! He was good-looking, humble, hard-working, respectable and talented. For years, I never thought I would find someone like him--I was falling in love. Glen was the one I had been waiting for. Glen called his parents and informed them about our relationship.

Within a few short weeks, Cathy sent Glen a love letter on cassette and a photo of herself. Glen wrote Cathy a long letter explaining why he couldn't marry her. Of course, Glen didn't want to hurt her, but he was convinced that he didn't love her anymore. He loved me and wanted to marry me! I realized that Glen was the man that I had always dreamed about! "God had brought us together."

In March, we made the decision to drive to Copenhagen, Denmark to get married. We tied the knot on March 23, 1979 as husband and wife. I have never regretted this decision. Although Glen was not a Christian, he was always consistently loving, kind and respectable to me. Glen resigned from Entertainment Showcase and within a few weeks, began working as a mechanic.

In September 1979, we moved to Fort Hood, Texas where Nadyia was born—she was such a sweet baby. We rented an apartment in Harker Heights until government housing was available. Grandma Owens came to help me during my delivery and recovery with Nadyia.

In 1981, Glen was transferred to Wharton Barracks in Heilbronn, Germany. Our second, precious daughter, Cheri was born in 1983 at a German hospital. I began working for the Morale Support Division in the Arts and Crafts department. For the first time in my life, I had an amazing job with two wonderful ladies--Katya Sharply and Donna Van-Dyke. Cheri was about a year old when we left Germany and moved to Richmond Hill, Georgia.

In 1984, Glen was assigned to Fort Stewart, Georgia. Since we weren't eligible for family housing, we moved into a nice home at Piercefield Forest in

Richmond Hill, Georgia. I was overjoyed with living closer to my mother and family in Seneca, SC. At last, our children could build relationships with their cousins and grandparents.

I am convinced that the Lord routed us to Richmond Hill for His divine purpose. Since moving into a private house, our cost of living had increased, and I had to find work. I began working at Military TV and Stereo in Savannah. We enrolled Nadyia and Cheri into a day-school, Castle Heights. Our new life wasn't easy but it was definitely meaningful. Cheri and especially Nadyia loved going to the school. We were building a new life, a future and a community.

Just a few weeks later, I mentioned to Glen that Nadyia and Cheri had never been to Sunday school! What in the world was I thinking? Was God working on my heart? After all, I hadn't been in church for many years. He was in control. He had planted us in this place for a divine purpose.

God was working—someone was praying. Just a few days later, Mrs. Cooper (pastor's wife from Bethel) and another Christian missionary came to visit us. Mrs. Cooper was very friendly. We invited them inside and got acquainted. Of course, she invited all of us to visit Bethel. I allowed Nadyia was able to attend Sunday school with Mrs. Cooper. She really enjoyed it.

At this time, Glen was busy on the weekends. He was moon-lighting as a musician in clubs and bars. He wasn't opposed to me attending church but he had no desire to attend. Later on, he actually promised that he would go—just once for me. I kept that commitment in my heart.

On Sundays, I felt guilty for not going to church with Nadyia. I was working fulltime, and I was tired on the weekends. But still I understood that the Lord wanted all of us in church. I couldn't escape this conviction.

Coincidentally, Glen's band was cancelled for Saturday night! He would be free on Sundays!! I awakened early on Sunday morning and asked him—very politely, if we could go to church. He had already promised! I was excited.

Pastor Cooper was a powerful, compassionate preacher. His message was definitely compelling. He mentioned several times that everyone needed to know 100% if they were headed to heaven. Everyone was really friendly and of course, I wanted to return just to make friends. I was very lonely.

Understandably, Glen had no desire to go back to Bethel Baptist. The message really bothered him. He mentioned that I could return but he wouldn't be. Of course, I understood his heart—he was raised in a dysfunctional home. His parents attended church but they were alcoholics. Glen simply didn't understand that real Christianity was different. He was about to discover the truth.

The following week, Pastor Cooper and Elmer Walker visited us at home. They were excited to meet with us. Pastor Cooper asked me about my relationship with the Lord. I accepted Christ at a Good News Club in 1968 in College Park,

Georgia. Being brought up in an alcoholic home, I wasn't proud of my relationship with the Lord—I had made so many mistakes. Thankfully, I realized that God hadn't given up on me. Looking back, I was humbled and forgiven so many times. God is so full of Grace, Mercy and Unconditional love.

Pastor Cooper asked Glen about his relationship with the Lord. Of course, Glen wasn't completely truthful. Pastor Cooper challenged Glen. He mentioned that most professing, authentic Christians attend church, read the Bible and served the Lord. Glen realized that he had to make some choices. We began attending Bethel Baptist regularly. The Lord was definitely moving in his life. One afternoon, Pastor Cooper asked Glen to work with the choir. Within a couple of weeks, Glen asked for some music/preaching tapes. Glen promised that he'd listen to Oliver B. Greene. On his way to work one morning, Glen was listening to the message, "The Other Side of the Door." His heart was breaking. He pulled off the road and begged the Lord to save him. He returned home that evening a new man! I couldn't believe the changes God had made in Glen's life. We cleaned house that week—every bottle of alcohol was emptied and ungodly movies were trashed. Everything in his life changed. 2 Corinthians 5:17

At Christmas 1984, Evangelist Bobby McGilliard and his family visited Bethel Baptist Church. His wife shared an amazing testimony. At one time, she had questioned her salvation—thankfully, she got it settled one day. The more I thought about her words, the more I questioned my own conversion. I struggled with the besetting sins in my life-- anger issues, impatience, unconditional love and lack of discipline. I desperately wanted to be the godly wife and mother for the sake of our family. Sadly, I didn't realize that spiritual growth doesn't happen automatically. I misunderstood so much. My relationship with the Lord had to be cultivated. Like any relationship, I had to be proactive in my faith. What did this mean? Being faithful to Jesus--reading the Word, praying, worshipping God in our home, loving my family, sharing my faith and being obedient to church. Of course, my faith journey was never based on a list of rules, it was based on His love and our relationship. I learned that my love for Jesus Christ helped pave the way to complete surrender, obedience and faithfulness. There was nothing I could do to make Him love me more or less. When He died on the cross, I was still a sinner. Romans 5:8

During those days, the enemy taunted me. I felt so unloved and sinful. I thought my sins were too great for forgiveness. Yet, I hungered for that peace and joy that she had talked about. Glen asked the church to pray for me. The Lord heard my prayers and I realized that He had forgiven me years ago. Christianity is never a spectator sport. Although I definitely remember praying to receive Christ, I had never grown spiritually. No one ever explained to me the importance of serving the Lord at home and in the church. I definitely needed to be taught. This

valuable spiritual lesson opened my eyes. We are living in a fallen world—there are temptations everywhere. Pastor Cooper taught us to serve the Lord with Joy—not legalistically. It’s our Joy that helps us to run the race. One day, we will see Him, face to face. Hebrews 12:2 “Looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith; who for the Joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Not too long afterwards, we began praying for a son. Glen had been adopted, and we desired a son to carry on the Williamson name. Everyone was praying for us. Within three months, I was pregnant with Benjamin. We applied for family base housing and were accepted. We moved and Ben was born at the hospital on base. God was and is so merciful to us. The Lord provided a nice home for us. I was overwhelmed at His goodness toward us. My precious mother came down to help me with the children. Our relationship with Bethel grew. God gave me many precious friends during those years. A pastor’s wife, Joyce Vicks gave me a book to read, “What is God doing in your life?” She must have known that the Lord would eventually call us into full-time ministry.

It is so important to grow in this relationship by reading the Bible, praying and serving God and sharing our faith with others. I am truly grateful for Pastor and Mrs. Cooper for their example of faithfulness and sacrifice at Bethel.

After much prayer and counsel, we felt the Lord was calling us into the ministry. In 1986, we sold most of our furniture and moved to Jacksonville, Florida to attend Trinity Baptist College. At first, life was difficult. Glen lost his job upon arriving, but God made a way for us. Within six months, he got hired at Vistakon. For the next five years, this job provided most of our needs. We learned to live on a very small budget, be content and faithful in everything.

We were thrilled at all the opportunities to serve. I loved working with the teens and kindergarteners in Sunday school. All these experiences prepared me for our future ministry. The Children’s Dealing Center with troubled children, and the bus ministry enlarged my vision for helping children from dysfunctional families. The following summer, we hosted a Five-Day Club with Children Evangelistic Fellowship. A couple of years later, we hosted a Good News Club in our neighborhood. I learned to be devoted in everything—including Thursday visitation while Nadyia, Cheri and Ben went to Awana. They loved the Awana program. Nadyia actually earned the Timothy Award. She memorized hundreds of Bible verses.

The Lord blessed me with godly women leaders in our church who taught me much about serving the Lord. Many of these important skills prepared me for overseas missions.

We learned much in Jacksonville, Florida at Trinity Baptist Church! Through our trials and disappointments and failures, we discovered that God

would never abandon us. He promised that we'd experience tribulations, setbacks and illnesses, but the Lord never once forsook us. In every need, He always provided for every single need. We experienced many victories and witnessed many people surrender their lives to the Lord.

Glen graduated in 1992 and went to Ukraine on a survey trip. The Lord provided the funds for his trip, a translator and a place to stay for about one month. During those weeks, he was able to preach in hospitals, universities and rehabilitation centers and other Ukrainian churches. Many men and women prayed to receive Christ. God gave Glen the privilege of working with Vashya who was an amazing translator. He's with the Lord now.

Glen returned to South Carolina rejoicing over how many people heard the gospel. In the fall of 1992, we began deputation. At that time, we had very few supporters. The Lord provided every need. Including a van for us! By the spring of 1994, we had raised 100% of our support. During our deputation, the Lord provided the house we'd need in Kiev. He also provided the translators for our future ministry. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering." 2 Peter 3:9

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want." Psalm 23:1