

My Spiritual Journey: Saved by His Death ... and His Life

Life is fleeting! We baby boomers are now becoming Medicare cardholders! Where have the years gone? And what grace has brought each of us to this point? Take my story for instance.

Edison, New Jersey was a typical, growing suburban town in the 1950s and 1960s. Those were the days of *Davy Crockett*, *Father Knows Best*, *Lawrence Welk*, and the *Mickey Mouse Club* (and my idol Annette Funicello). The “British invasion,” beginning with the Beatles, captured my attention in my senior high years, especially after the famous four made their appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The Vietnam War began and later claimed the lives of many of my male peers during my college days. It was Edison in the fifties and sixties where our family lived (except for a few years in Tucson, Arizona), all eight of us: mother, father, and six kids. And then, much to the surprise of all of us, when I was nineteen years old, we became nine with my baby brother, Paul.

During those growing up years in Edison, “The boss of the mob or the brains of the mob” was how my mom referred to me. Why? I was her firstborn, and I gave her a run for her money (according to my godmother/aunt). I was strong-willed, determined, and self-absorbed. My gentle, timid little mommy had her work cut out for her!

It’s that same Mommy, as we all call her, even to this day, that I claim as my hero. My dad wasn’t an easy man to live with as the years went by, though I know he was hardworking and loved us as best he could. But it was my mom who held our family together and pointed us to God.

My mother’s nurturing was used by the Lord to start me on the path to him. As a child, I remember reading the usual Nancy Drew mysteries and Hardy Boys mysteries. But more than those, believe it or not, I absolutely loved reading *Lives of the Saints*, especially the martyrs who suffered and died for Christ.

Like all children in my Catholic school, when I turned twelve, I began preparing for confirmation. This was a very important time for me. I remember really desiring to receive the Holy Spirit, which is what this sacrament promised. So I took it very seriously and counted on the fact that the Holy Spirit really did come to live within. In my search for the will of God in my life, I entered a convent after my freshman year in college. I had a mother superior who loved the Scriptures and taught from them. She also encouraged us to read them for ourselves. So I began to love and trust God’s Word during that time.

One of the places this love of the Scriptures took me was on a search for what Jesus himself said to do. I started to question whether every rule of our superiors was truly (as we were told) the will of God. So I went from being a perfectly obedient little novice to one who only would do what I saw in print in the Bible. A bit extreme, but God was doing a work in my life, even back then, to deliver me from legalistic living. It would take years, because later in life, when I moved from Catholicism to evangelical Christianity, I exchanged one to-do list for another one—not for my salvation but for my growth in Christ.

But all of this was not why I left the convent on July 5, 1968. (I had wanted to leave on July 4, Independence Day, but there was some paperwork to sign.) The real reason I left was that I struggled with not getting married or having a family. Was it really God’s will for me to give those up? After two years, I realized, through the counsel of my priest-cousin, that if I was doing the will of God, I would have peace. I knew I wasn’t at peace, so with that reassurance, I left the convent and returned home.

What a culture shock when I got out into society. Everything had shifted in those two years from 1966 to 1968—music, morals, dress, everything! How to wrap my mind

around it all? And on top of that, what would I do with just an associate's degree? The one thing I could do was to teach in a parochial school and save my money to finish college for my teaching degree. So that's what I did. I found a job teaching fourth grade at a nearby Catholic school, St. Matthias, in Somerset, New Jersey. How I loved my fourth graders, and how I adored teaching! One of the things I loved to do was decorate the classroom. One month, I did a bulletin board for my classroom with the caption: *JESUS IS THE ANSWER*. But I remember thinking, *What's the question?* Little did I know, God would soon answer.

As my fourth grade teaching year progressed, I made plans to go to the University of Arizona to complete my BA in education the following school year. Having lived in Tucson for a few years, I had kept in touch with a little girlfriend from my primary grades. Her mom invited me to come live with them to get started as a junior at the University of Arizona. (Go, Wildcats!)

The Jesus Movement was in full swing at the U of A in 1969. Students were coming to the Lord through many campus Christian groups. Within my first month in Tucson, I met some students from a campus ministry who clearly shared the *gospel* with me.

God loves me: But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8 NASB).

I'm a sinner and separated from God: For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23 NASB).

Christ died for my sins: Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18 NASB).

I receive Christ and his salvation by faith: For the wages of sin is (death, but *the free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23 NASB, emphasis added).

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who *believe* in His name (John 1:12 NASB, emphasis added).

Now it all made sense—how *Jesus is the answer*. He's the God-man who bridges the gap between God and us (John 1:14).

We don't work our way to God. We receive *eternal life* (the life of God, right now and for eternity) as a gift (Ephesians 2:8–9).

So then the good things we do and the godly character that's formed within us are the results of being a *new creation in Christ*. By faith, we allow the living Christ within to live through us.

It would take many years into my Christian life to begin to truly grasp the glory of the indwelling, living Christ fulfilling the will of the Father in and through me as I live by faith. I sat under a lot of great teaching in the evangelical Christian community, but also a lot that promoted what was already rampant in my *flesh*, that is, what I call "to-do list Christianity." I struggled while thinking, *If I just could get my act together, then the Lord could use me*. So I tried to be the perfect wife, the perfect parent, the perfect Christian doing the perfect *ministry*.

After years of turmoil, my health began to break. I was confused, sick (chemical and food sensitive), anxious, guilt ridden, and finally at the point of giving up. Then at the end of my desperation, I heard my Father say to my heart, *I love you, even if you never do another thing right again!* It took me two years to believe that God had really said that to me, that he truly loved me unconditionally. Every time I would start to trust in the Father's love, the Enemy would come in and whisper, *Did God really say that? That's too good to be true!*

Finally one day, I chose to believe that God truly loved me despite my level of imperfection. Nothing has been the same since. And you know what? I started seeing this very truth all over the Scriptures.

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called

children of God; and such we are! —1 John 3:1 (NASB)

The Father Himself loves you. —John 16:27 (NASB)

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. —Romans 8:38–39 (NASB)

Many years passed. The Lord had me on a journey into freedom and joy in him. It wasn't all smooth sailing, but eventually, he used a little book, *Abide in Christ* by Andrew Murray, to transform my Christian walk. I read that little volume over and over again until I began to really *get it*. That's when I adopted the motto "I'm just a branch." The life of risen, indwelling Christ, the Vine, flows in and through me as I just rest in him as a branch.

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for apart from Me, you can do nothing. —John 15:5 (NASB)

I'm so thankful for God's gracious working in my life. I wouldn't want to live any other way than from *my union with him!* Praise him that *he* continues to grow me up in his Son. He's doing the same for you too, if you know him by faith. Trust in him today!