

LIFE IS HARD BUT



by Lela Ewell

Life is hard.

My parents were Christians. We had to get up every Sunday morning and go to Sunday school and church. We had to go to confirmation class and, eventually, be confirmed. After that, our religious instruction at home was complete. We were no longer obligated to go to church (though we were supposed to want to do so).

My parents were alcoholics, which brought with it a bushelful of other realizations: family holidays would usually end up in a physical altercation between the parental units; dinner often got thrown to the floor in a fit of anger, so the dog(s) could feast; cigarette butts were put out on the dishes that sat around for days on end; at a very young age, you learn your family is different, so you didn't have friends for fear that they would want to come to your house to play; you rely on your older siblings for guidance, comfort, and love - who, by the way, took very good care of you; and you grow up ... dysfunctional.

My grandfather molested me for as long as I can remember. Did my parents not know because they were alcoholics? The rumors flew around throughout the family so, even as alcoholics, how could they not know? Was it that they just didn't care? I have a huge family (50 first cousins), and many of my female cousins were also molested. I knew it wasn't my fault but I didn't know how to make it stop. I blamed this God that I was forced to learn about because I prayed and prayed and prayed for God to make my grandfather stop. He never did.

As a child, the happiest day of my life was the day that my grandfather died.

God failed me, *God* was not someone I wanted to believe in, to have faith in. What kind of God would ignore the plea of a child? I turned from God; I boldly denounced God. I even secretly talked to Satan. This went on for many years.

As I came upon my teenage years, my older siblings were gone. My sister, and my oldest brother both married and started families of their own. My older brother, Ken, left me, for the Marine Corps. Thirteen years old and I was left all alone. Oh, don't get me wrong... I had parents! My mom would go to work every day, come home, drink, and pass out on the couch; my dad was in rehab (again).

A pastor came to our house one day to invite us to church. Although my mom was passed out on the couch, I thought for sure she would get up for him but I could not wake her. He left his

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card with me and said that if I ever needed anything to call, no matter the time, day or night. I told him that I pray to Satan. He looked at me with love and compassion, as though he were going to cry. He spoke a blessing over me and reminded me that if I ever needed anything to just call.

As fate would have it, the very next weekend my younger brother arrived home from a night of partying, tripping on LSD with the top part of a broken soda bottle through the palm of his hand and blood flowing down his arm. I tried to wake up Mom. That wasn't happening and I was starting to freak out. Blood was everywhere. Shawn was laughing, demanding that I look at the bottle stuck through his hand because it was "so cool," explaining how he had been running on the tracks with a train chasing him when he fell on the glass and how he was thrown off the tracks by the wind just as the train was about to run him over. (Mind you, he was tripping on LSD so I don't know what *really happened* but that was his story.) As I was panicking, trying to wake up my mom, I saw that pastor's card sitting on the coffee table. Two o'clock in the morning – but I remembered, "if you ever need anything, day or night" – I grabbed his card, ran for the phone, and said, "God, please don't let me down, again – this time it's my brother and I love him. Please take care of him!" The pastor came, took my brother, and told me everything would be OK. That pastor brought Shawn back the next morning, his hand was stitched and wrapped. He spoke to my mother (who was a delightful woman when she was sober) and everything was OK, just as he said it would be.

That was the first time that God had sent me an angel (although I didn't recognize it as that until years later).

I was pregnant at 17 and swore that *my child* would never have to live through any of what I did. I would love and protect *my child* and no harm would come to

him. I quit partying. No more drinking and no more drugs for me. My baby was going to be healthy and strong. I gave birth to my first son at 18, my second son not even a year later, and received my GED and married their father by the time I was 20 (but only because my dad told me I was living in sin).

Life is still hard.

Twenty years of raising three kids on my own. Financial struggles, relationship heartaches, poor choices. I desperately wanted to find that "Little House on the Prairie" lifestyle where the husband and wife are one and there is mutual respect and admiration. I wanted to find someone who would love and cherish my wonderful kiddos as much as I did. But more poor choices!

I had been back in relationship with God, but I was not close. I was living in the world. My sons were in Iraq during the War on Freedom, my daughter had cervical cancer ... if ever I needed God, it was then. I started reading scripture. I was going to school full-time and working full-time so I had no time to myself. My church was looking for volunteers, but I could not help because I had no time. I remember telling myself that when I was done with school, I would volunteer at church.

Through all this praying I was doing for my adult children, I drew closer to God. I came to realize that God didn't turn God's back on me when I prayed and prayed as a child to be released from my grandfather's tyranny. God made me a stronger woman, a stronger mom, and a stronger disciple. God shaped me into a woman who can listen to another's abuse and be empathetic yet faithful to God. I have had countless women and men confide their stories in me, being able to get it off their chest, saying the words that make it real enough to do something about. God didn't turn

God's back on me, God chose to use me—me of all people—to help others!

One day on my way to Buffalo, I was listening to the radio program *Living on the Edge*. Chip Ingram was giving a great sermon on stewardship, a sermon that was actually his personal testimony. I was at my wit's end with the boys at war and Brandi's cancer. My whole world seemed as though it could fall apart at any given moment. I had no savings and was barely getting by financially but Chip gave me hope. He spoke of a God of miracles, a God of mercy. It was a sermon on stewardship, so he was also focused on money.

He stressed the importance of tithing and trusting in God. At the end of the sermon, he challenged his audience to tithe for two months, just to see what would happen. I took him up on this challenge and started tithing at St. Stephen. I figured I was so rock bottom, I had nothing to lose.

Soon my whole world changed. I was promoted at work and received a 40% raise at my job. My daughter was told she was cancer-free and my sons were safe. I was reunited with Ira and we married, one of the happiest days of my life. I was growing closer and closer to God.

It occurred to me many, many, months later that this deep faith I now possessed all came from a challenge – a challenge to tithe and trust God.

Only after growing in my faith, did I notice how the men and women of St. Stephen had taken me under their wings and embraced me as a friend. I was done with school, my boys were safe, and my daughter's cancer ... well, that turned out to be a strange thing. She would be told that it was back, I would have our prayer warriors pray for her, she would have a biopsy, and nothing could be found. This vicious circle would continue for 10 years – she just recently had a checkup that said it was entirely gone. Praise God!

Shortly after Pastor John left to become a military chaplain, I truly felt I was on fire with the Holy Spirit. One of our interim pastors, Pastor Evan, made quite the impression on me. He would marvel at the fact that I rode motorcycle, telling me that he had always

wanted to do so but could not because of a sight impairment that he possesses.

I felt comfortable with Pastor Evan so I made an appointment to talk with him. I was somewhat embarrassed because by this time, I was a leader on church council, volunteering all over the place, and feeling quite at home in the congregation ... but I had a question that just kept eating at me.

The conversation went something like this:

“I know I am a Christian, I know I have much to learn, I know I am saved by Jesus' blood and by nothing of my own doing – but I am different than I was. I am not the person I used to be. When my aunt told me she could tell I'd been saved and taken Jesus Christ as my personal Savior, I could only smile and agree because I know I'm saved and I know Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world and gave his blood to die for me ... but, Pastor Evan, I did *not* invite Christ into my life. He was *always there*, welcoming me. I was saved at my baptism, and even before, I truly believe that – sooooo, if I am not born again or saved and have not specifically “accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior” what is it called that we Lutherans do, because I *have* changed!!!”

Pastor Evan excitedly told me “You are experiencing the process of sanctification.” (I had to go look up the word to find out exactly what he meant.)

Life isn't hard any more. It *is* tricky. It has its challenges, it has obstacles, it has heartaches and disappointments. Alcohol still pulls people I love away.

But, in it all, God has still got my back and, because God is my focus, even on the challenging days I can laugh, I can sing, I can rejoice. I appreciate the good, I feel love... but most of all, I have God's peace.

And you know what?

The piece of stewardship that involves tithing and offerings, the money part that no one ever wants to talk about ... *that* is what pushed me towards trusting in God and having this awesome relationship with God.

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