

TREASURES  
IN DARKNESS

# TREASURES IN DARKNESS

A GRIEVING MOTHER SHARES HER HEART

SHARON W. BETTERS



P U B L I S H I N G

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For our grandchildren—

Cori Lee

Mark Nathan

Danielle Nicole

Katherine Eileen

Mollie Elizabeth

Benjamin Charles

Emma Grace

Nathan Gregory

Abigail Lynn

Caleb Mark

And those yet to be

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:14–17*

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Our children and their spouses—their lives of faith, joy, and ministry in the context of sorrow encourage me to go and do likewise.

Our grandchildren—some day they will know how much their lives, tears, and laughter energize me to obey God’s instructions to live and tell His story to the next generation.

My prayer warriors—they held up my arms when I was weak.  
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The staff of P&R Publishing—they made the vision of this book a reality.

Those who walked this pathway before me and called back, “God is faithful, you can trust Him.”

My God and Savior—it’s all about Him.

# INTRODUCTION

I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. (Isa. 45:2–3)

God is keeping the promise of Isaiah 45:2–3 to me. In this book I share some of those treasures of darkness. It's my prayer that one day they will be your treasures as well.

When death grabbed my youngest child, Mark, and tried to destroy our family, I wondered how my heart kept beating. In my grief I felt estranged from God. For more than twenty-five years I had taught women to believe that God will make beauty out of ashes, that he is the Repairer of broken walls, that they could trust him. But on July 6, 1993, I concluded that I had lied. How could God ever bring beauty from the ashes of the sudden deaths of our sixteen-year-old son and his friend Kelly? How would I ever trust my heavenly Father again?

Because of my rich spiritual heritage and role as a pastor's wife and Bible study teacher, it's possible that people who knew me well imagined that my response to deep sorrow would be great faith. Instead, my long journey into the abyss of grief fright-

ened our closest friends and extended family. I raged against God, demanding that he give me back my child, demanding that he show himself to me in the way I wanted. At other times, I sobbed quietly, exhausted from the constant presence of the ghost of grief, surrendering to God's silence, longing for what had been, concluding that never again on this earth would I know joy or happiness.

Early in my journey, I often envied those who experienced similar loss but seemed to be in a cocoon of peace and strength. Though their grief was as deep as mine, they never seemed to question God's presence or love. It seemed that I, indeed, was in a cocoon, but one characterized by darkness that blinded me to God's presence.

Why didn't God grant me peace and strength? Why did I have to struggle to trust him once more? My personal journal is filled with questions like these—and more.

I never expected to open this journal for others to read, but the following account of a woman's grief over the loss of her two-year-old son gave me the courage to write this book and include some of my entries, to help others in their journeys. Jill and Dennis lost their child, Scotty, when their pick-up truck rolled down the slope of their yard and crushed him. In *The Velveteen Woman*, Brenda Waggoner describes a conversation with Jill, the bereaved mother, months after the tragic accident:

“The books I have read mostly frustrated me,” she confided. “Especially right after Scotty's death. Nobody seemed to identify with my anger and loneliness.”

“So, it might have helped if someone had put those feelings on paper? The anger and loneliness they experienced as they mourned before they came to resolution of their grief?” I asked hoping to gain understanding.

“Yes, I think it might have helped,” Jill explained.

“Although I’m honestly not sure anything could have eased the pain. But that’s when I felt most alone, most in need of someone to identify with, to connect with.” Jill went on to say that she’d consoled herself by reasoning that the authors had written their books several years after their losses. Once they had regained some energy and strength. Jill admitted that although she’d tried, she had also been unable to vulnerably express her feelings in writing during the time of most intense pain. “I just survived,” she said. “I think that’s all you can do for a while. You survive.”<sup>1</sup>

When I read this, I immediately thought, Oh, I know exactly what you mean about just surviving! But I did record my fresh, gut-wrenching grief. God, is it time to share some of that in a book, to help guide broken people like Jill through this terrifying journey?

I dreaded reviewing my journals for this book, because I expected to see word pictures of an angry, bitter woman, fists raised against God. That picture is there, but there is another one as well. It is of a brokenhearted little girl, begging her Father to explain his actions in her life. And I can see that he is holding me tightly in his lap, refusing to let me go no matter how hard I pull against his grip.

I have concluded that God gave me the gift of wrestling. At first I think I wrestled with him in order to win—to change his mind. But soon the wrestling was for the purpose of resting in him. I learned that he is not afraid of our confusion and needs no one to defend him. But neither is he obligated to answer all of our questions.

A friend of Amy Carmichael, missionary to India, once said, “The woman who has no experiences in the dark has no secrets to share in the light.” This statement challenged me with a choice

in the aftermath of Mark's death: Would I accept midnight sorrow as an opportunity for God to reveal his secrets of the darkness? Or would I refuse to open my eyes and hands to treasures designed to turn my heart toward him? In time, desperation to understand my heavenly Father and experience his power drove me to place my hope in what I know about him, not in what I do not know. That's when I began to more clearly experience the treasures in the darkness and riches stored in secret places.

Learning to see when the lights went out took me back to the foundations of my faith, where I unpacked each belief and examined it through the grid of God's Word. I needed to know that what I had believed and taught for more than twenty-five years was absolute truth. Through tear-filled eyes, I searched for God's presence everywhere and in every event. No detail was insignificant. It still isn't.

My journal is a written record of the many times God responded to my pleas for relief. It gives me tangible evidences that before I even expressed my sorrow, he had sent treasures to turn my heart toward him. I know now that he prepared many of those gifts before the foundation of this world, with plans to send them to our family at just the right moment.

One other event convinced me that it is time to offer my gift of wrestling to others as a means of comfort. On September 11, 2001, I watched in horror as terrorists rained down grief into the secure lives of thousands. By choosing the World Trade Center as a target, the terrorists dragged families in many countries into the terrifying, lonely land of grief. The Iraqi war broadened the mourning, and the tsunami of 2004 shattered thousands of families. Our generation, like others before us, has realized that bereaved people do not "get on with their lives" easily. I hope this book will find its way into the hands of some of those brokenhearted family members and that God will use this message to help turn their hearts toward him.

## INTRODUCTION

At first I thought this book was just for bereaved mothers, but now I know it's for anyone who is learning how to see when the lights go out. More than one professional has concluded that the hardest loss a human endures is that of a child. If God is faithful in that midnight, he will be faithful to his children no matter what they are experiencing. It's my prayer that this book will help fellow wrestlers record their journey through this broken world.

Each chapter identifies a treasure in darkness—a word or phrase that names a bountiful gift that I received or benefited from in my grief. I trust that one or more of these treasures will help you as you walk the pathway of grief. Chapters also include a midnight principle that identifies a truth—practical and/or theological—that I learned to appreciate and appropriate on my journey. This principle is an expanded version of the treasure. Chapters end with a treasure of hope that is helping me more than survive this trauma. This section gives practical ideas for you to try. Here I include Scriptures for your personal reflection. Meditate on these Scriptures as you are able. You may also come back to them later in your journey.

Rather than being simply my story, my personal grief journey is a platform for teaching practical application of sound theology in the midst of great sorrow.

No one responds to life's circumstances in a vacuum of life experiences. Just as life didn't end when we lost Mark, it didn't start when God gave us our youngest child. So before I tell you about the darkness, let me give you a glimpse of my life before that tragic day.

# BEFORE DARK

THE TREASURE OF SCRIPTURE KNOWLEDGE



**MIDNIGHT PRINCIPLE:** God's Word is a light to my path. God builds a reservoir of spiritual nutrients into my soul as I hear, read, and learn his Word.

## JOURNAL INSIGHT

*November 20, 1992. Father, what is your grace? Teach me, Lord, change my way of thinking and living because of what you teach me.*

*Ephesians 1: Here I see that your grace is glorious and freely given. I have redemption through the blood of your sweet Son, Jesus. You lavish your love on me. I am forgiven! You have given me every spiritual blessing. You chose me before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in your sight!*

You adopted me as your daughter! You give me the privilege and hope of knowing you are in control, even when life seems to spin out of control. What courage I have when I know that one day, no matter how bad things are, I know that you will bring all things under your authority. You chose me to glorify you. You marked me and sealed me with your Holy Spirit. O Father, the riches of grace cannot be compared to anything!

Lord, as I read these verses my heart is warmed. It's nothing I haven't heard before, but I think it's beginning to sink in for the first time. Not by my desire or works, but by your mercy. Lord, without your mercy I am utterly lost—without hope. Without you choosing me, I would be lost for eternity. I do not see that choosing as my right. I think I have taken for granted your salvation. As I consider what you have done, I begin to wonder how I could desire anything but to serve you and love you. My motives for serving are always in question in my heart. Do I really serve you because of your great love for me and as acknowledgment of that love? I don't think so. Please, Lord, show me how to discern my motives—to discard self, people pleasing, fear of punishment if I do wrong. I want to serve because of your grace, your love, your mercy, gratefully and fully—completely. I need a fresh anointing of your power. My denseness is so frustrating—so hard to break

through. Soften and sharpen my comprehension and thinking ability. Make me raw with understanding of your mercy. Without it I would not even desire you. Forgive me for my hard-heartedness. Lord, I depend on your Holy Spirit to pray for me now, for I don't know how to express myself except to say I am sensing perhaps for the first time my lostness without you. My total depravity. My total and complete dependency on your mercy. Yet Lord, I do not fear you with terror but am overwhelmed by a deep, welling-up gratitude. I can't see this page because of my tears. Your mercy, so deep, so wide. Your love, oh, the power of it. Your redemption, your deposit of the Holy Spirit guaranteeing our salvation.

Psalm 63:7: "Because you are my help, I will sing in the shadow of your wings."

Lord, I'm in my kitchen, but I'm really in your sanctuary. I don't want to leave this place.

## WELL AWARE IN DELAWARE

When I think of the home my parents provided for me—and my two brothers and four younger sisters—two foundational influences come to mind: From my parents I learned the importance of family and of God and his Word.

### *Family Ties*

My mother was the oldest of seven siblings, and our house became the central meeting place for family celebrations and

holidays that drew together four generations—great-grandparents down to me, a youngster playing with dolls in the winter and catching turtles in the summer (to enter into the annual vacation Bible school turtle race competition).

Keeping her large family connected was important to my mother, but she also reached out to others, as a scout leader and, when I was older, hosting slumber parties for church girls, enfolding the “irregular child,” becoming a confidante for rebellious teens. Our home was not fancy, but it was a safe place. It seems the more children you have, the less you notice extra ones in the house.

My mother’s love for babies was not lost on me. My life was filled with women who loved being mothers, and I looked forward to having my own children one day. Even at age twelve I regularly worked in our church nursery. I babysat our pastor’s three sons for free so their mother could go to Wednesday night Bible study. My parents didn’t have much of a social life, so one year, hoping my folks would attend a church party on Valentine’s Day, I offered to give up a youth event and babysit my siblings. My mother’s response? “Sharon, these children are my responsibility, not yours. This is my time to be with them.”

When my two youngest sisters started school, my mother took a part-time job. She loved the work, but within a few months she quit. “I realize the girls need me at home now even more than they did when they were toddlers. Mothering them is my full-time job,” she said. I listened well. Mothering gave her such joy. I hoped to someday follow in her footsteps.

### *Grounded in the Word*

My grandmother was a charter member of a little Orthodox Presbyterian church we attended when I was small. In Sunday school and at home, I learned simple children’s songs that sowed ageless biblical truths in my mind: “Jesus Loves Me,” “This Little

Light of Mine, and “The B-I-B-L-E.” At my mother’s insistence we learned the children’s catechism. When she drilled us on Bible memory verses, she made us give the reference at the beginning and end of the passage, saying, “The reference is the home of the verse. You need to know where it lives in the Bible.”

When we moved from Middletown to Newark, Delaware, my parents settled us in another small Presbyterian church within walking distance of our home. If the doors of the church were open, my parents expected their seven children to be there. And there I learned how to navigate the Scriptures—in competitive Bible drills. The youth leader would call out a Scripture reference, maybe John 3:16. He’d then say, “Charge,” meaning, “Open your Bibles. Go.” The first person to find the passage jumped up and read it.

Slowly, surely, the Word of God was entering and nurturing my heart.

### *Spiritual Choices*

But when I was eleven I was confronted with the need to know Jesus Christ personally. My parents never discussed family finances in front of us; they believed children should not carry adult-sized problems. Even so, I knew money was tight, so when our church announced that the child who brought the most people to the annual missions conference won a free week at a church camp in Pennsylvania, I eagerly took the challenge. And won!

One evening as we gathered around a crackling campfire, a speaker told us that sin takes over our lives in the same way leprosy devastates a body. I shivered as he warned us that unless the sin was cleaned up, we would burn in hell. I realized I needed more than church programs and Bible drills to give me a relationship to Jesus Christ. I asked Jesus to forgive my sins and come into my life that night.

But throughout my high school years, I wasn't sure he had. What if I'd just been motivated out of fear, using God as a fire escape? Did that nullify my salvation? I felt like a second-rate Christian when I heard testimonies of transformed lives. Pride overshadowed my doubts, so I didn't tell anyone about them. Leading our church youth group, singing in a girls' trio, teaching our high school Bible study, being on a Youth for Christ Scripture-knowledge quiz team for which I memorized whole chapters of the Bible—of course, I was a Christian! *But was I?* an inner voice questioned. Maturing in my faith would come with pain and sinful decisions that only God could redeem.

All through high school I remained active in the church and faithful to its teachings, but shortly after graduation I questioned the Christian lifestyle. I'd grown up with so many restricting rules. I wanted to break free and enjoy life!

That fall I attended a business-secretarial school full time and waitressed part time. I didn't hesitate to sign up for the Sunday hours, though it meant I drifted away from the church and ministry opportunities. But I drew the line when my boss said I had to wait tables on Christmas Day or be fired. On December 21—my last at the restaurant—Chuck Betters and his young brother Ted walked in for dinner.

I recognized Chuck from high school; he'd played basketball and baseball and graduated the year before me. As we talked and laughed, his eyes and warm smile—in addition to the dark, curly hair—prompted me to give him my number. (And he claims he gave me a very big tip.)

The night of our first date, anticipating the evening, I ran up the steps to my third-floor bedroom singing, "Tonight, tonight, I'll see my love tonight." Dramatics aside, I had no intention of falling in love. And neither did he. We just wanted to have fun, and I saw tall, handsome Chuck as my ticket.

I quickly got to know his intriguing, Lebanese family. At their house life was never boring! I loved sitting around their table after a big family meal. They told stories that made me laugh till I cried. Chuck's dad and I would watch TV together. His mother and I talked for hours about everything. They welcomed me like a daughter.

Chuck intended to be a doctor; he seemed to know exactly what he wanted from life and worked hard toward those goals. I often met him at the University of Delaware library or student center where we studied together, sometimes visiting labs in the middle of the night to check on his experiments with fruit flies. Then there were weekend parties, maybe at the beach or after football games.

My family also got to know Chuck. He enjoyed them, and they liked him. On the surface things appeared to be idyllic, but, as my feelings for him intensified, deep inside I knew I was on a treacherous path. And so did my parents. Parenting young adults is difficult; as a parent now myself I better realize how difficult this time had to be for my family. I was twenty years old. They tried to treat me as an adult. But the more I loved Chuck, the more conflicted my relationship to my parents grew, largely because his religious background was so different from mine.

Chuck was committed to his liturgical church, and his family assumed I would embrace their faith if we ever married. They understood that my family was from a different denomination, but they did not know that I had been taught that I should never marry someone who did not share my faith. To me faith was a personal relationship to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. To Chuck faith was loving God and working his way toward heaven through good works.

Chuck was a brilliant debater, and our discussions often ended with me in tears and him angry because I accused him of not being a Christian. He couldn't hear my words, because my

life did not reflect what I demanded from him. Because I was acting outside of what I believed to be God's will by dating someone outside of my faith, disconnecting from church life and experimenting with things outside of what I knew was right, I continued privately to doubt my own salvation, while at the same time trying to convince Chuck of his need for a personal relationship to Christ. Disconnect? You bet. Guilty people who do not want to change put up barriers between themselves and people who represent righteousness. And that's what I did with my family. The more guilty I felt, the more estranged we became and the more Chuck's family embraced me.

Before long I loved him so much, I couldn't bear the thought of life without him. But God, known as the Hound of Heaven, would not let me forget my relationship to him. Unbeknownst to me, my mother asked the church women to pray for God to intervene. One of those women, a pastor's wife for whom I had babysat, was a heroine to me. Ruth Auffarth oozed the love of Christ and never treated me as though I was a kid, though I'm sure I acted like one. She invited me to come for dinner—and listened. By then, Chuck and I were regularly fighting. Even so, we couldn't sever our ties.

Through Ruth's exhortation at the end of the evening, God broke down the walls of my stony heart. She minced no words: "You must break up with this young man and leave him in God's hands. He's religious, but he does not understand your love for Jesus. If you marry him, your life will be filled with conflict. Run away!"

She stunned me with these concluding words: "I'm going to stay up all night and pray that you do what is right!" It was a promise, not a threat. I had no choice but to listen. That night I sensed God telling me that I could have Chuck as he was or trust Chuck to him, knowing the man I loved might not be God's plan for me. I knew what my choice had to be. "I can do everything

through him [Christ] who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:13) ran through my mind over and over again as I tearfully closed out my bank account and quit my job. My parents helped me move to Indiana, where my brother Ralph lived. I thought I would never see Chuck again. I didn’t tell him that I was going, though I did leave him a letter that explained that I loved him but had to break off our relationship because of the differences in our faith. I asked him not to try to find me and told him I was praying for him to understand his need for a personal relationship to Jesus Christ.

Sometimes the loneliest times are the best of times. That’s what happened for me in Indiana. Desperate for friendship, I attended Campus Crusade for Christ events, where I saw young people exhibiting an exciting and life-changing faith. One night to a counselor I admitted that though I’d asked Jesus to come into my heart, I wasn’t sure I was a Christian—because I didn’t *feel* a before-and-after difference. I didn’t have a dramatic testimony. She patiently used the picture of a train to explain that the engine pulling the train is faith, the coal car represents the facts of Scripture that fuel faith, and the caboose represents feelings. I suddenly understood that the train could run without the feelings but not without faith and the Word of God. She asked me to read out loud 1 John 5:10–12: “Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

She continued, “If you genuinely repented of your sin and asked Jesus to forgive you and come in to your heart but you doubt he is there, then you are calling God a liar. You are saying God is not keeping his word. Is that what you want to say?”

I knew God could never lie. At that moment I chose by faith to believe the promise of God to save me and trust him to give me feelings if that was best for me.

While God was changing my heart in Indiana, Chuck struggled in Delaware. Because I had not clearly communicated my faith, his family was stunned and hurt by my actions. They tried to help Chuck forget about me, but God had other plans. Chuck connected with my Aunt Connie, a committed Christian and my confidante. She befriended him and connected him to a pastor who showed Chuck what the Scriptures said about knowing Jesus personally. By this time Chuck and I were communicating again, much to my family's dismay. And I was writing letters to his mother, explaining why I had left and some key Scriptures, substantiating the need for a personal relationship to Christ. I didn't know Chuck was reading those letters; the power of God's Word was working in his heart.

One afternoon, running up the steps of a college dorm to meet some friends, Chuck, suddenly overcome with his need, dropped to his knee and asked God to forgive him. Unlike me, who felt no great emotion, Chuck immediately felt all the pressures of life roll off of his shoulders. His life would never be the same.

Chuck's new Christian witness devastated his family. As for mine, no one but my aunt and I believed Chuck's spiritual commitment was real. Suddenly he couldn't read enough of the Bible and memorized whole chapters. He knew things about the Lord that he couldn't have known unless God had opened his eyes. I understood my parents' concern, but a month later I came back to Delaware.

Chuck's parents told him not to bring me to their house. My parents were polite but distant. I found a job and my own apartment. Chuck and I started attending my aunt's Baptist church and later a Methodist church. We jumped into ministry, forming

a singing and preaching group of college and career-age young adults. God quickly showed Chuck that he would never be happy unless he preached. During his senior year in college, he knew God was calling him to pastoral ministry. He applied to seminary rather than to med school.

Our decision to marry was fraught with family tension. But ultimately God blessed our wedding day, in 1969, with the grace of family unity. From that day to this his family has treated me as their daughter, and my family found a son in Chuck.

### *Wife, Mother, Minister*

At the beginning of our life together, Chuck and I chose Matthew 6:33 as our life verse: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” When we moved into our first parsonage, we were so young—twenty-one—we had no idea what challenges or gifts lay ahead of us.

I loved being a pastor’s wife, but we were not prepared to lead any church. God used eight years of inner-city ministry as our schoolmaster. We lived on a poverty-level income. Sometimes I would have to choose between putting fifty cents into the offering plate or holding on to it so I could buy bread and bologna for lunch. But God, through his people, supplied our every need. We told no one of our financial situation, and yet. . . . A parishioner gave us a brand new car without knowing that ours was beyond repair. Doctors provided care free of charge. Our bills were dramatically met.

My own pastor’s wife had regularly taught women’s Bible studies, so I assumed I should do the same! The older women—some old enough to be my great-grandmothers—gladly came and patiently listened as I explained the Scriptures. They loved me in spite of myself—young, inexperienced, unaware of the life lessons that come with gray hair.

Three of our children were born during those eight years: Heidi, Chuck, and Daniel. My mother's dreams and passions became my own. I loved being a mother. Once a week each child could choose a bedtime activity to do with me, just the two of us. Heidi often chose tea parties. Chuck usually wanted to build with blocks. And they always wanted a bedtime Bible story. I loved reaching out in ministry. From the start we included the children as much as possible in our church life. Our young kids often found their way into the laps of our parishioners as we led Bible studies and other meetings in our home.

In our second urban church, in Philadelphia, young, athletic Chuck really connected with the kids on the streets, and our home became a safe haven for hundreds of teenagers. Once again, I taught women's Bible studies and tried to be there to meet the congregation's every need. The more people told me how wonderful I was, the more involved I became, until depression and weariness took its toll.

Instead of relishing my Bible-study preparation time or opportunities for hospitality, I dreaded each day's responsibilities. I hated hearing the phone ring and counseling requests. With my mouth I pretended to care, but in my heart I wished people would leave us alone. When my doctor warned me that I needed to get away from all responsibilities, Chuck arranged time away; we reorganized my church involvement. What had gone wrong? I hadn't understood that pleasing people is a dangerous motivation for serving God. I needed to get back to seeking satisfaction through the truth of Matthew 6:33: "Seek first his kingdom and all these things shall be added unto you."

We didn't stay long in Philadelphia. Chuck ultimately urged the denomination to send a black pastor to continue the work we had begun. Chuck accepted a call to our home church in November 1976.

When we moved back to Delaware, I was—unexpectedly—pregnant. Right after the birth of our third child, Daniel, my doctor told Chuck that another pregnancy would be dangerous for me. So the news of a fourth pregnancy set off warning bells for Chuck, who hovered and fussed over my health. Some people thought the pregnancy was irresponsible. Large families were “out.” My safety was at risk. But I didn’t care. I loved being pregnant and wanted a large family. I saw this child as an unexpected but already cherished treasure from God. I even hoped I would have twins!

### *Let the Little Children Come to Me*

In May our dear Mark was born. Seven-year-old Heidi, five-year-old Chuck, and eighteen-month-old Daniel giggled with delight when they saw their new little brother for the first time. In light of the feared dangers of another pregnancy, we knew this little baby was a double treasure from God. Even strangers commented about his long eyelashes that framed beautiful, laughing blue eyes. Heidi became his second mother, and the boys loved cuddling their little brother. Daniel was so close to me that friends were afraid he would be jealous of Mark. Instead, from the very beginning, Daniel and Mark were joined at the hip.

Chuck was happily developing his role as pastor in our new church. He often arrived at the office early in the morning, worked until midafternoon, came home to spend time with the children or attend their school activities, then returned to the church for evening meetings or counseling. As happy as I was to have four children, handling them by myself on Sundays and during Wednesday night church programs proved difficult and reminded me of what single mothers must experience.

But dropping out of ministry was not even a question. Where I served, the children accompanied me. That first year I envisioned and help set up a church nursery. A friend and I took

four-month-old Mark on a shopping trip to buy the necessary equipment. Observing me all day my friend finally said, “They say that the more you smile at a child, the more the child will smile as he gets older. You are constantly caressing Markie’s head and looking into his eyes and smiling at him. He’s going to have some smile by the time he grows up!” My friend was a prophetess. Mark’s smile, coupled with his long-lashed blue eyes, was his signature.

Appreciating the command of Deuteronomy 6:6, we took every opportunity to impress on the heart of our children the Word of God—spiritual nourishment even as infants and toddlers. Most of the stories we daily read focused on Bible truths. We helped the children memorize simple Scriptures that taught theology in a nutshell, and they even learned those children songs I sang as a girl.

All four children asked Jesus to forgive their sins and come into their hearts when they were four or five years old. Daniel made this decision after a Maundy Thursday service that demonstrated the darkness of the night before the crucifixion. Within minutes Daniel was hysterical and terrified that Markie didn’t have Jesus in his heart. Daniel’s outburst stunned Markie, who quickly followed Daniel’s lead. To this day we laugh that Daniel asked Jesus into Mark’s heart for him.

We trusted that these childhood commitments were genuine but also watched carefully for changed hearts. Because of my own fears that my commitment to Christ was not real and that he had not forgiven me of my sins, I wanted to be sure that our children had the freedom to tell us of their own fears, even as we reiterated the need for them to love Jesus.

As the children grew, we fed their spirits with the Word and daily prayed that the Lord would use those nutrients to strengthen their lives—as it had my own and, though later in life, Chuck’s also.

## THE TREASURE OF SCRIPTURE KNOWLEDGE

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

Chuck likes to think of Scriptures as being like little sticks of dynamite, waiting to be ignited by the fires of life and then exploded by the Holy Spirit with power and conviction at just the right moment.

I prefer different metaphors: nutrients, yes, but also that Scripture knowledge is a jewel-treasure that lights the pathway, whether we are walking through sunny days or through darkness. In the midst of the thunderclouds of conflict, disease, and stress rumbling overhead, God always invites me back to what he has already taught me through his Word. Even as a young child I learned the Scriptures, and at every crisis point God reminds me of a verse or lesson from a Sunday school class, vacation Bible school, or teen Bible study.

The treasure of a firm scriptural knowledge was the foundation that enabled us to withstand the darkness that would engulf us when we lost Mark. That foundation is taught, as the hymn writer notes, in God’s “excellent Word.” Every time I sing this hymn, found in an eighteenth-century hymnal, I am struck by the truth of the third and fourth lines, “What more can he say . . . ?”

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,  
Is laid for your faith in his excellent Word!  
What more can he say than to you he has said,  
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

Each verse of this hymn emphasizes a core value of our faith—that God will never forsake his children. The hymn writer, like the writers of Scripture, is honest about the hard places in life. They will come. But when we know Jesus as our Savior, we will never face them alone:

Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed;  
For I am your God, and will still give you aid;  
I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,  
Upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand.

When through the deep waters I call you to go,  
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;  
For I will be with you your troubles to bless,  
And sanctify to you your deepest distress.

When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply;  
The flame shall not hurt you; I only design  
Your dross to consume and your gold to refine.

E'en down to old age all my people shall prove  
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;  
And when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn,  
Like lambs they shall still in my bosom be borne.

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,  
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;  
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!

At times, after losing Mark, the Scriptures were like black marks on a page. Determining what to read every morning was

difficult, and I needed a plan. Because the psalmists often struggled with questions like mine, I began reading a psalm every day. There are only thirty-one chapters in Proverbs, the same number of days in a month. So I read the chapter in Proverbs each day that corresponded with the date of the month. I added the short daily selections from two classic devotional books of 365 readings: *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers and *Streams in the Desert* by Mrs. Charles Cowman.

When the darkest midnight of my life threatened to choke the life out of my soul, God reminded me through scriptural knowledge of the firm foundations of my faith, precious in the light, but even more valued as a treasure in darkness.

## TREASURES OF HOPE

### *Scriptural Gems*

Read Psalm 63:7: “Because you are my help, I will sing in the shadow of your wings.” Try to sing a song—any song, even if it’s angry or wordless—to God.

Read Psalm 119:105: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” How does this Scripture help you in your dark night?

Read 2 Corinthians 12:8–9: “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take [a thorn] away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ ” Choose to thank God for this promise even if your emotions deny its truth.

Read Ephesians 1:3–7, which is the passage I mentioned in the journal entry at the beginning of the chapter. Mark the phrases that are difficult for you to believe in your circumstances.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

It’s possible that this passage might raise questions for you more than it brings comfort. As you think of my story, remember that I had to choose to believe that God loved me and chose me; I then concluded that if that were true, I was on the pathway marked out for me by him. I will address some of your questions throughout this book. In the meantime, tell God how you feel right now and ask him to begin clearing away your confusion and doubts.

### ***Songs in the Night: How Firm a Foundation***

Read, and sing if you know it, “How Firm a Foundation,” which reminds us that Jesus—the Word—is our refuge and that we know this through the foundation of God’s written Word. Note that the hymn itself is based on Scripture: Isaiah 43:1–3.

### ***Other Hopeful Ideas***

Ask God to remind you of the foundations of your faith that have carried you through life. If you cannot identify those firm scriptural truths, it’s possible that you do not know Jesus as your personal Savior and Lord. Ask God to open your heart to the love

and forgiveness of his Son, Jesus, and to begin building that strong foundation of his love and compassion.

Your soul may be so inflamed by fresh grief that you are unable to remember any Scriptures. Or you may be a very new Christian with virtually no Scripture gems stored in your heart or mind. Even so, ask the Holy Spirit to remind you of his love, his presence, and promises—as you open a Bible or devotional book, as you listen to a friend trying to console you, even as you dream, at night.

Chapter 2 discusses the treasure of journaling. But even before you read that chapter, try to write a sentence or two that expresses your heart to God. Try to thank him for one person, place, thing, or action in your life.

It's amazing how God often designed one simple statement out of an entire book, song, or sermon that met me right where I was. In my grief I couldn't remember very much, so those statements became my lifeline to his truth.

As you read the rest of this book, pick out statements that grab attention and strengthen your heart. Write them in your journal or on a 3 x 5 card to carry with you. Write out on cards Scriptures that remind you to think biblically and put them in strategic places around your home, car, and workplace so that God will put them in front of you at just the right moment.

### ***Prayer: Open Her Heart***

Dear Father, I pray for each one who is fresh in her grief and despairing of life. Open her heart to your love and the gift of your Son, Jesus.