

## Chapter 1: My “Burning Bush” Experience

My junior year of high school was off to a great start. By the third day, I had finally memorized my class schedule, my locker combination, and most of my pep-squad routines. I can still remember getting ready the morning of August 29, 1984, slipping on my new jeans and jelly sandals, grabbing my books and pompoms, and kissing my mom good-bye. It was a ten-mile drive to school from our house in the country. As I got into my little brown Plymouth Champ, I grabbed my seat belt, realizing, *I never remember to wear this thing, but I may as well put it on now that I'm thinking about it.* I drove down our oil-topped road and onto the highway that would take me to the interstate. However, I never made it to the interstate that particular morning.

As I came over a hill, I remembered that I still needed to put lipstick on. I adjusted my rearview mirror for a quick application. As my eyes returned to the road, I caught a glimpse of something moving, then felt my car jolt suddenly. In a split second it occurred to me that I had hit something. My initial thought was perhaps it was a cow or other farm animal out of its pasture, but I had a sinking feeling that it was something much worse.

As I unlatched my seat belt, flung open the car door, and ran back several yards to see what I had hit, my sinking feeling was confirmed. I stood trembling in shock over the body of a curly-headed woman lying face down in the grass next to a mangled bicycle. I wanted to turn her over to see if I could help her, but I knew I couldn't waste precious time in calling for an ambulance.

There were only two houses in sight, so I ran to the closer one as fast as my jellies would take me. Pounding on the door, I pleaded for someone to open it. When there was no response, I ran to my car and drove back the other direction, passing the scene of the accident en route to the other house. I was relieved when an elderly man opened the door and quickly moved aside to allow me use of the phone. I called 911 for an ambulance, then called home and asked my mom to drive down the road until she saw me. I couldn't bring myself to tell her anything else.

By the time I got back to the scene, another car had stopped, and a gentleman was standing on the side of the road, near the woman. He looked at my car and asked, “Did you hit her?”

I responded through my tears of panic, “Yes sir, but it wasn't a hit-and-run. I only left to go call an ambulance.” My mother arrived within a couple of minutes, and I tried to pull myself together as she ran toward me with her own tears of panic. As we waited for help to arrive, all I could think about was that the woman I had just hit was probably someone's mother...someone's daughter...someone's wife. How would I ever face her family after what I had done?

### WAITING IN VAIN

It took forty-five minutes for the ambulance to arrive. When a paramedic finally examined the woman, he coldly explained that we would have to call a funeral home because there was nothing he could do. He said it appeared as if she'd been killed on impact, which made me feel as if the past forty-five minutes of hoping and praying had been in vain. Minutes later, the justice of the peace arrived and pronounced the woman dead.

I left the scene not even knowing who she was. The next two hours were a blur. I remember collapsing on the living-room sofa, sobbing, then waking up later when a policeman knocked on the door, asking to question me. I kept thinking, *This wreck was all my fault. I should have been the one killed, not her.* Terrified of facing the woman's family, I considered suicide more than once that afternoon. But my parents had already suffered the loss of one daughter when my eight-year-old sister died suddenly of an aneurysm in 1972, so I couldn't bring myself to cause them even more pain.

After the officer left, I went outside and reviewed the damage to my car. I realized I must have hit the back of the bicycle with the passenger's side bumper, throwing the bike (and the rider's body) into the windshield and roofline of the car. In fact, the impact had forced the roof on the passenger's side all the way down, causing it to touch the floorboard of the back seat. If anyone had been riding with me, he or she would have been split in half. I thanked God that none of my friends had tried to hitch a ride to school with me that morning.

However, I noticed that it seemed as if an invisible shield had protected the driver's seat. I reached for my pompoms in the backseat, behind the driver's side. As I picked them up, shards of glass flew everywhere, yet I had not received even a single scratch. I remembered how something (or Someone) had prompted me to put on my seat belt that morning, which was an unusual act for me at the time. I now sensed that God must have placed a hedge of protection around me. Wondering if He perhaps had spared me for a reason, I vowed not to commit suicide, regardless of how painful facing the woman's family might prove to be.

### **A SHOCKING WAKE-UP CALL**

Later, when my mother told me I had a phone call, the man on the other end said he was calling to inform me that the woman's name was Marjorie Jarstfer and that he was her neighbor. I didn't know either family, although both lived just a couple of miles from our house. The caller also informed me that he and his pastor had driven to McKinney, Texas, to tell Gary Jarstfer that his wife had been killed in a car accident. My heart sank. The family now knew. I was sure they probably wanted me dead too.

The caller continued, "Shannon, I want you to know that Gary's immediate response was, 'How is the girl? Was she hurt? Does she know it's not her fault?'" I couldn't believe that this man's first response to such devastating news was concern for me, the one responsible for his pain.

How could he even think of me, when I had just taken his wife from him? I was even more stunned when the caller said Gary wanted me to come to his home the night before the funeral, an invitation I wanted to decline but knew I couldn't. The next night when I went to see him, I got out of the car with my heart racing and more lumps in my throat than I could count. As I walked toward the house, I felt as if I were walking in to face a firing squad.

As I entered the house, I looked down the entry corridor to see a big, burly middle-aged man coming toward me, not with animosity in his eyes, but with his arms open wide. Gary Jarstfer scooped me up in the warmest embrace, and the tears that I had been fighting back were now flowing freely onto his flannel shirt, with his own tears flowing onto the top of my head. I couldn't stop repeating, "I am so sorry. I am so sorry."

Once we regained our composure, Gary introduced me to his pastor and two of his adult children. Then he took me by the hand over to a window seat and proceeded to tell me things he wanted me to know about Marjorie's life.

"My wife was such a godly woman, and we've served many years with Wycliffe Bible Translators. There was no limit to how much Marjorie loved the Lord," Gary explained. "She had a very close, intimate walk with God, so much so that she's actually been telling me for a while that she sensed the Lord would be calling her home soon. She lived every day as if it would be her last on earth, and she never left this house on her morning bike ride that she didn't hug and kiss me as if she might be saying good-bye for the last time. She was so convinced she'd be leaving this world soon that she just recently took out additional life insurance. Just days ago she even played the flute and gave her personal testimony at our church about how she was ready to leave this world anytime and go to be with God for all eternity."

Gary had my full attention as I tried to wrap my brain around the idea that someone could be so close to God that she would know when her time on earth was about to be up. But what followed astounded me even further, as Gary continued, "Shannon, God was ready to take Marjorie home. Even though this has caught us all by surprise, it comes as no surprise to Him. You may be wondering why God allowed this to happen to you, but I want you to look at it this way. He knew you would be strong enough to handle this, and that's what I want you to do. You can't let this ruin your life, Shannon. God wants to strengthen you through this. He wants to use you. As a matter of fact, *I am passing Marjorie's legacy of being a godly woman on to you*. I want you to love Jesus without limits, just like Marjorie did. I want you to let Him use you for His glory, Shannon."

These weren't just empty words Gary was using to ease my pain. He lived his life just as Marjorie did, trusting in God's sovereignty and submitting to whatever the Lord had in store for his life, regardless of what it might cost him. How do I know? Because of his actions in the weeks, months, and years that followed.

Shortly after the accident, we learned that there had been some confusion about which ambulance service should have come. The wreck occurred just outside of the Greenville city limits, and a policy had recently gone into effect that Greenville ambulances would no longer service calls outside of the city limits. The forty-five-minute wait could have been reduced to only a few minutes if we had not had to wait for an ambulance from a neighboring city. A newscaster approached Gary and asked if he was going to sue the city because it had taken so long for an ambulance to respond. Gary replied, "Of course not. Marjorie died instantly. There is no reason for any kind of action."

A few weeks later, Gary was told that he could likely sue my parents for more money than our insurance policy would cover, and yet again he refused, saying, "What would be the purpose of adding to that family's grief by making their lives more miserable?"

The district attorney wanted to try me for involuntary manslaughter, but months later when it was time for the case to be tried in the Hunt County Court, Gary insisted they dismiss the

charges without a trial. He had a perfect opportunity to seek justice, yet he chose to extend mercy instead.

*The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct in humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, the Muslim code of law—each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional.*

—PHILIP YANCEY, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

I kept waiting for Gary to come to his senses, change his mind, and finally dish out the punishment I deserved. However, time proved me wrong. For weeks after the wreck, Gary continued checking in on me occasionally, calling or dropping by where I worked just to see how I was doing. His periodic newsletters and annual Christmas cards have been a staple in my life for the past twenty-plus years. When my husband, Greg, and I were entering the mission field ourselves, Gary and his second wife, Betty Ann, came hundreds of miles to our home to pray with us and encourage us.

Gary's merciful actions, along with his challenging words to me that night before Marjorie's funeral, would be my source of strength and comfort for years to come. God took this horrific event and turned it into something beautiful. As a result I can say along with the apostle Paul, "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3–4, NIV), and "In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28, NIV).

I gradually went from feeling "to blame" to feeling "chosen," chosen to carry the mantle of being a godly woman who loves Jesus beyond measure. I *wanted* to be completely His, not just with my lips, but with my life. However, like most Christians, I've had to learn to love like that. It wasn't something that came naturally or even supernaturally overnight. It's been a long process that continues to this day, a process I'd like to walk you through in the coming chapters of this book.

### **MY FIRST REAL GLIMPSE OF GOD**

Even though I grew up attending church and singing "Jesus loves me, this I know...." I don't think I ever really knew Jesus personally, understood the depth of His mercy and compassion, or fully experienced His love until I met Gary Jarstfer. His response toward me, the one who had caused him indescribable pain and loss, has served as a vivid reminder of how Jesus Christ endured all that pain on the cross, yet His first concern is always for us, those who nailed Him there.

While I'll never be glad the accident happened or that Marjorie was killed, God used it to get my attention in a big way, just as He used a burning bush to get Moses's attention. In the third chapter of Exodus, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and informed him that he was His chosen instrument to deliver the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery and usher them into a new land. But Moses had a skeleton in his closet, literally.

He had killed an Egyptian and buried him in the sand years before. Most likely he didn't want to go back to the place where he had killed someone for fear of what kind of music he may have had to face.

Like Moses, I had been responsible for the death of another, and I, too, believed I was automatically disqualified from ever doing anything great for God as a result. After all, can God really use a murderer to do His will? You bet He can. He chose to use Moses, He chose to use Paul (who intentionally executed Christians prior to his radical conversion), and I somehow knew that God was choosing to use me as well—although for what, I was still unsure.

In the coming years as I recognized that God was calling me into youth ministry to speak to teenagers about saving sex until marriage, I was tempted to “pull a Moses.” I questioned the sanity of God's selection, just as Moses questioned God's sanity numerous times in one conversation.

“Who am I that I should go?” “What if they ask who sent me?” “What if they don't believe me?” “But I'm not an eloquent speaker!” “Please send someone else!” (based on Exodus 3:11–4:13) Like Moses, I found myself telling God, “Surely You don't realize who You are asking! If You did, You'd send someone else!”

But God used the story of Moses to teach me several things. First, *He doesn't call the equipped, He equips the called*. It was okay that I didn't feel capable, as long as I knew He was capable of giving me what I needed to be obedient. Second, *our fears do not change God's plans, but understanding God's plans can change our fears*. My insecurities gradually disappeared, as I understood my ordained part in God's bigger plan. Third, *accomplishing great things for God doesn't require great talent, only great faith in Him*. As I have trusted God to equip me, to show me His plans, and to replace my fears with faith, I've discovered there's no greater, more euphoric feeling than knowing that the God of the universe is working in you, through you, and even in spite of you when necessary.

The car accident was my “burning bush” experience with God, and in the years that followed He revealed His desires for my life—desires I'm not sure I would have recognized had He not gotten my attention so fully.

He used that season to show me a side of Himself that I needed to see in order to more fully understand His immeasurable love, which is my source of strength and confidence as I continue to embrace this calling I've received from Him. As my relationship with God has deepened and grown more intimate over the past two decades since the accident, I've come to realize I'll never be satisfied with the kind of Christianity that far too many people settle for. I don't want to be an “I'll do the minimum to get into heaven” kind of Christian. I don't want to be a half-baked, half-hearted follower who submits to the Lord only when it's easy or when there's something in it for me. I want to love Jesus without limits. I want to be a woman who sees herself as the beloved bride of Christ, His chosen helpmate who joyfully pursues His presence and seeks to carry out His will with dogged determination, regardless of what it may cost me personally. I don't want to stop short of any goal God may have for me. When my body is buried in the ground, I want all the angels to say, “She shouldered her

burdens with great strength, maximized her opportunities to bring glory to God, and squeezed every blessing out of life that her Creator intended her to have.”

### **WHAT ABOUT YOU?**

While you may not have experienced such a traumatic event in your life, have you had your own unique glimpse of God’s character? Times when God’s presence or calling was undeniable? If so, I pray you will allow the Lord to stir the already-glowing embers in your heart and set your soul ablaze with His love as you continue reading. If not, I pray you will get your own magnificent glimpse of God through this book and the four devotional books that are part of this Loving Jesus Without Limits series.

The lead book, which you are reading right now, consists of many personal experiences and reflections of my own journey toward loving Jesus without limits, personal testimonies from other women, inspirational scriptures, and spiritual principles you can apply to your own life.

Each of the subsequent four devotional books will explore specific characters or passages of Scripture that can help you grasp more fully who God is and how you can appropriately respond to His limitless love for you. As you read this series, I hope you become convinced that: *You are not just anybody. You are God’s chosen. You are His beloved bride.*

If you’re like me, you may have some questions about these concepts. You may think the idea of being the bride of Christ sounds strange, or you may wonder what it even means. After all, how can we be helpmates to the Creator and Sustainer of the universe? How do we live out this role?

My prayer is that by the time you finish this book, many of your questions will be answered. But for now, rest assured that God understands your hesitancy, and He wants you to allow Him to prove Himself as the magnificent lover, protector, and provider He truly is. Allow yourself to be courted by the Creator, so you can grasp these truths and come to understand His rock solid, unchangeable, unwavering love for each and every one of us. While there is certainly no traceable road map toward a more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, I believe it begins with catching your own glimpse of who God really is—not just what He expects or wants from you, but a glimpse of His very nature. He wants you, dear sister, to know you can never exhaust His mercies. He wants you to recognize His deep longing to be in relationship with you. He desires for you to feel His unconditional, indescribably lavish love flowing through every fiber of your being and out toward everyone around you. He wants you to see Him as your heavenly Bridegroom and to see yourself as His spiritual bride.

Are you ready to be swept off your feet? To be courted by your Creator? To allow yourself to love Jesus as you have never loved anyone before? If so, keep reading. In the next chapter, we’ll explore how you can get your own glimpses into the very nature of God.