

<i>the</i>	GOOD
<i>the</i>	BAD
<i>the</i>	UGLY

And the rest of the story...

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~ 1 ~

AUTHOR'S NOTES

This book is about life.

It's about my life; the Good, the Bad, the Ugly, and sometimes, the Very Ugly.

It is about the ups and downs, the hills and plains, the mountains and valleys, twists and turns, the storm, the eye of the storm, enjoying life, and even entertaining the thought of suicide.

It is about real stuff—transparent, straight talk from the heart. This is not a novel or fiction. It is about me facing life head on and getting up when I was knocked down, even with a smile on my face (*after all, that is what is expected of pastors*).

It is about learning how to hurt when circumstances are not in your favor.

It is about seeing the big picture in panoramic style and recognizing that, in the end, there was (and is) God.

Pastor Reggie

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THE
GOOD

A PERFECT BEGINNING

I am convinced the early, formative years of a child's life have enough impact to set in motion the powerful mental psyche that will guide his or her life. It is foundational.

Behavior is learned for the most part. Hatred is learned from those who teach it. So is love. The racial divide is a 100% product of what is taught in our world. Two babies born on the same day from different races do not hate each other. Hate is a concept unknown to them. It is only when they are exposed to their teachers' prejudices that they learn how to hate.

Although we grow up learning from many teachers, our parents, grandparents, etc., are primary in

our lives. It is from them we learn how to view life and conduct ourselves in ways that are either good, bad, or ugly.

For me, I had the absolute best beginning possible. It started in 1950 on Christmas Eve as I arrived in Mobile, Alabama. My mother carefully and lovingly anticipated my arrival for nine months. During this time, she and my dad, along with my older brother, Ron, waited patiently each day until the announcement came, "It's a boy!!" Even though I do not have any firsthand knowledge about that, I believe it is accurate. (I'm not quite sure about my brother though. He was only eight years old, and the only child. He had to make room for me).

I grew up in a small family and we were all very close. During the

50s, the world was much different than it is now. We actually knew our neighbors. We played outside with the neighborhood kids, and even could be found at their home eating a meal with their family. We did things to entertain ourselves like playing a game of marbles. During that time of my childhood, my parents instilled within me the values of not taking advantage of others. That lesson was even taught through the game of marbles.

There were two ways to play the game. First we drew a huge circle in the dirt, and each player placed a certain number of marbles in the center of the circle. One specific marble was tagged as the “money marble.” Each player would have a shooter marble in his hand with which to hold and shoot—using his

thumb. The object of the game was to make contact with the marbles within the circle and knock them outside the circle. Each player would, in turn, use his "shooter" to attempt to hit another marble. As long as a marble was being booted out of the circle, the player could keep shooting. The object was to obtain the most marbles to be declared the winner. However, a little twist was also a part of the game. If a player was successful in booting out the "money marble," he got to keep all the marbles left in the circle.

I remember one time I came home with more marbles than I left with. Of course, I was strutting around the house with gladness. My dad asked me where I got the extra marbles, so I told him that I hit the "money marble" and got to keep all

the ones left. I had no clue that I was about to learn a life lesson from my dad. He made me return the marbles to my friends because I obtained something I did not work for. I benefited from someone else's wealth only because I was lucky. It was that life lesson that instilled within me the value of work for what I got. As a child I learned that there is no such thing as a "free" lunch. Someone has to pay so that others get it free. I was taught to be on the paying end of things.

My mom and dad both were incredible people. To me, they were bigger than life. They are my heroes. My mother was the sweetest person I have ever known (except for my wife, of course). She was a role model for mothers. She had a hard life growing up

before the Great Depression. Life was tough. Yet, when she married my dad, she married him for a lifetime. She served him in every way imaginable to make his life comfortable, as he himself worked hard to provide for his family. My dad worked shifts in the cotton industry. As he would come home from working all night, he had to sleep during the day. In Mobile, Alabama, the summers are hot and muggy, and we had no air conditioner. We only had a window fan. The noise outside as the kids were playing would keep him awake. My mom would do everything possible to keep us kids away from the window near his bedroom. She would place tin foil over the window to darken the room to simulate night sleep. She would prepare his favorite meals

everyday (which always included rice).

I witnessed my mother sacrifice herself and her needs to serve others in her family. She made sure that Ron and I always had clean clothes, home-cooked meals, and her loving arms every day. Her daily routine was the greatest teacher we had. From her, I learned how to serve others and care for their needs. This lesson was the foundational principle I needed for my future life's calling: to serve others as a pastor.

My dad also taught me many valuable life lessons. One of the greatest lessons learned from him was "respect." Respect—especially toward our mother—was not an option in the Whiddon household. It was a way of life. I had many spankings while I was growing up

(some of which I deserved); however, there is one I will never forget. I was around 16 or 17 years old, and was in a disagreement with my mother. Little did I know that my dad was in the next room when I told my mother to "shut up!" Perhaps you can imagine what happened next, but just to make sure there is no doubt, let me say that I never repeated those words again—ever! My mother was always right from that point on, and I quickly relearned those two precious words: "yes ma'am."

Every day, I learned some additional valuable lessons by observing my dad. He was always honest, and never took advantage of anyone. He would take a personal loss rather than obtain something that was not honestly

his to take. His word was his bond. If he committed to something, to him, it was a promise to keep. Nothing would stand in the way of keeping that promise. His integrity was at stake! He would not rest until his given word was fulfilled. Being on time for everything was a way of life for him; I never remember him being late for anything. Actually, being on time really meant arriving at least 30 minutes early; therefore, anything less than that was pushing the limit.

The foundation of my life was formulated by two incredible parents. The fabric and make-up of my life's value system is largely due to the impact of Claudia and Edward Whiddon. I could not have chosen a better pathway to learn how to live, nor better teachers to

teach me—by example—the simple, yet sometimes hard-to-accomplish values that get me through life.

Even though I had a great foundation in my early childhood years, life has not been a rose garden. It has not been served on a silver platter to me. I am who I am today largely because of the values I learned to embrace early on, and our loving Abba Father has kept me through it all. I am confident that both my parents and my Abba Father are responsible for directing my path. The balance of this book will give you some insight into that path and you will see: the good, the bad, the ugly, and even some very ugly.

I hope that, in the end, you will also understand and be encouraged that God has your life

in the palm of His hand. No matter what your path, He is now, and always has been, there with you. You will have a better idea of the meaning of the Prophet Isaiah's words recorded in chapter 61:1-3 which declares:

61 "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me

*To preach good tidings to the poor;
He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted,*

*To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;*

*² To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD,
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn,*

³ *To console those who mourn in
Zion,
To give them beauty for ashes,
The oil of joy for mourning,
The garment of praise for the spirit
of heaviness;
That they may be called trees of
righteousness,
The planting of the LORD, that He
may be glorified.” (NKJV)*

THE

BAD

AN EMBARRASSING NIGHT

I was a great kid growing up. As I look back, I have no regrets about my behavior—well sort of.

I never really gave my parents any trouble. I was a typical boy during those days; I was shy and not too outgoing. I pretty much stayed at home, or close by, and never got into trouble at school. I was raised in a very conservative setting by parents who themselves were not perfect, but who did their best to provide everything we needed.

I was not particularly fond of school, although I did enjoy the socialization. I attended public school for all 12 years, during which time God was still honored every day. Every morning, prayer and Bible reading with the teachers was the norm. Reciting the Pledge

of Allegiance occurred every day at the beginning of class. It was a way of life. The worst discipline issues the teachers had to deal with was the students talking and chewing gum in class. We had no guns, violence, drugs, bullying, etc. Occasionally, a couple of boys might get into a shoving match over a girlfriend.

The worst thing I ever did was skip class one day while I was in high school. That day, my best friend and I never made it to Mrs. Tyson's class. After all, it was only Woodshop and we wanted to see if we could skip without getting noticed. We never left campus, but instead went to the incinerator out back where the custodians burned trash. We were there feeling pretty good about our scheme until the principal walked

up. Emotions changed quickly. Only a few minutes later and we found ourselves in his office with a paddle being applied. We never skipped class again.

I was a socialite in many respects. Although I gave no trouble at school, I did not like to apply myself. It was not a matter of ability, or lack thereof, but rather of laziness.

I often found a way to pass tests by taking a peek at my neighbor's test. I knew how to cover my eyes with my hand to allow time to glance at his answers. Actually, I got rather good at doing it. I did it just enough to get by and pass the test without much study on my part. My grades were not anything above average, which I was satisfied with. After all, I never considered that I would one day go

to college and need the skills of studying.

I will never forget my last day of high school. On that day I was taking my final test in English. My grade going into the test was a D+. The final test was a weighted test, counting more than a regular test. With my grade of D+, passing the final test was mandatory to passing the course.

The test was very hard for me, since I did not study adequately for it. This time, it was going to take more than a glance or two at someone's test answers. It was going to take looking at several answers. I remember looking around the room to see if I could catch a moment when the teacher was not observing, so that I could ask the student across from me to loan me his test for a minute or

two. I found the perfect time to ask and the exchange was made. I quickly copied enough answers to be able to complete the test with a passing grade. Again, I looked around to find the perfect time to return the test. The teacher, Mrs. Berry, was at her desk looking down at some papers when I decided to make my move. As I was about halfway in returning the test, she happened to look up directly at me. My heart sank.

Did she notice me or not? She never said anything about it, so perhaps I escaped being obvious. I got up from my seat at the end of class and turned in my test. Again, she never said anything. As I walked out the door, I remember breathing a sigh of relief and under my breath saying, "Hallelujah!"

I did it! I finished all my classes at high school, now, on to graduation night in three days.

My high school was large and had a huge graduation class each year. We marched across the stage in alphabetical order. Because my last name is Whiddon, I was in the rear. As we were lining up to enter the auditorium to begin the ceremony, we were all adjusting our caps and gowns. Several teachers and administration staff were present as we were doing our last minute checks. The auditorium was filled with guests waiting for their loved ones to enter the room. Of course, my mom and dad were there, along with some family friends. It was an exciting time for sure.

Just before we were to enter the auditorium, the assistant principal

was going down the lines congratulating the graduates. Then he got to me. However, the next words out of his mouth were not "Congratulations Reggie," but something totally unexpected and life-changing. His words were, "You can step out of line because you are not going to graduate tonight." In total shock, I asked him, "why not?" His reply was, "You made a zero on your final English test." I was speechless.

To make it an even worst nightmare, I had to go and face my mom and dad with that news. It would be a gross understatement to say that I was nervous. I was not nervous; I was terrified!

As I told my parents, of course I acted like I had no clue why this was happening. Surely, it was a mistake. It was not a happy night.

Matters got even worse the next day when my dad and I went to the school system administration office to find out the details of my test grade.

I was 18 years old and thought my life was over at that point. I disappointed my mom and dad; I embarrassed them and myself. I made a series of bad choices that ended up in disaster. Little did I realize that even in that situation, God would use it one day, and bring good from it. Could He really turn ashes into beauty?

THE WOW EXPERIENCE

As I look back on my post high school days, I often wonder why I chose the path I did. There were so many things that happened within the following three years, which it all seems to run together and overlap in my mind. Perhaps because I was no stellar student, I took the road of least resistance as my pathway. Looking back nearly 50 years ago, I realize that I was like a ship without a sail, or direction. It was my Abba Father who kept me in the palm of His hand, even though I was clueless of my direction.

Without a high school diploma, I certainly was not college material. I had no clue what to do except get a job. I entered the workforce that first summer working with the same company that employed my

dad. My job was manual labor, shift work, with low pay, and no room for advancement. I think I was the youngest employee there because most of the students my age were planning on college. I worked in that industry for about a year and decided it was not where I wanted to be.

Still trying to “find my place,” I obtained a job at the Mobile Gas Service Corp, as a mail room attendant. There, I sorted and delivered inner office mail, ran errands, etc. During this time, I again was very miserable with the direction of my life. Nothing was satisfying that deep struggle within. I could not even identify or express the inner turmoil I was experiencing; however, I was dealing with it every day.

During those years, our government required everyone at age 18 to register with the Selective Service. This was for the purpose of a military draft, especially during war time. At the same time I registered for the draft selection, I also visited a local Army Reserve Unit in Mobile to put my name on their list also.

The draft selection was based on the birthday lottery. As fate would have it, my birthday, December 24, would be the second pick. I received in the mail my "Welcome-to-the-US-Army" letter. When I received my letter in the mail, all hopes of the Reserves were gone. I prepared myself to go, as ordered, to Fort Jackson, located in Columbia, SC. It was during this preparation to go to Fort Jackson that my future became more

focused and I realized life was not a game anymore; actually, it was never a game. As I was being prepared to ship out to Vietnam, I realized that this was serious stuff. I had no control over my schedule, deployment, or future. I remember the first time it really hit me was when I received word that a great friend, and high school classmate, Joe Edwards, was killed in Vietnam, and this was the place I was going. Although I was willing and preparing to go, there was something deep within me that seemed to be saying, "I have a different path for you." I had no clue how to deal with that instinct.

As the time drew near for me to board the plane from Mobile Alabama, I received another letter from the 696th Maintenance Battalion informing me that I was

assigned to that unit. After I completed Basic Training and AIT, I was ordered to return home and serve within that unit. Still unsure of my total path, I accepted this gladly and began getting very serious with God about what He wanted from me.

While I was in Basic Training, the most rewarding thing happened, naturally, it seemed. I just did not fit in with all the off-color jokes being told and the use of colorful language as common place. I was not raised that way, so it was foreign to my thinking. I suppose I stood out in the crowd like a sore thumb. However, the guys seemed to like me and treated me like a team member. I noticed that several of them would come to ask me to pray for them and ask my advice for their situations. This

made me somewhat of an unofficial "pastor" of our barracks.

During this time is when it hit me squarely in the face. God finally got my attention; He has called me to be a career soldier, not full time in the U.S. Army, but a career soldier in His Army. (At nine years of age, I knew this, but had lost my focus until this point.)

After my training at Fort Jackson, I returned to Mobile as ordered. Unsure of how to proceed with the deep calling within me, I visited my pastor, Dick Braswell. As I told him of my inner feelings and calling, I asked him how to proceed. His advice was golden to me. He wisely instructed me to be sure that I was hearing the voice of God, not just some personal career choice idea. He prayed a prayer that I will never forget. In his

prayer, he asked God to send someone to me within seven days to totally surprise me with the conversation her or she would bring. He asked God to bring a stranger to me—who knew nothing about my life—and confirm that I was called to be a pastor.

It was on Sunday night when Pastor Braswell prayed this prayer for me. The next thing that happened totally makes me stand in awe of God. On Tuesday afternoon, a man whom I only knew by name, came to me and asked me the following, "Reggie, when are you going to begin being a pastor?" Then he turned around and walked off without saying another word! Now, I was completely blown away by that.

What was I to do next? I was young, inexperienced, basically

uneducated with no high school diploma (I did get a GED while in Basic Training). I went back to my pastor to report to him what happened. He then suggested I apply for admission to Liberty Bible College in Pensacola, FL. Without a degree, my options would be limited, so I applied.

Again, God proved to be God. Even though I had no impressive transcript from high school, the College Board accepted me and within one month, I found myself moving to Pensacola to begin a journey of education that I failed from just two years earlier. If I told you that I was apprehensive about the whole thing, would you believe me?

A VERY BUMPY BEGINNING

A few months before I left for Basic Training, a friend of mine introduced me to an attractive, high school girl. We first met on a blind, double-date. I was smitten with her and wanted to continue seeing her. We seemed to hit it off very well and dated regularly during her senior year. During the months of January-May of 1971 while I was at Fort Jackson, we wrote each other every day. We talked about marriage as soon as I returned home.

She was only 18 years old and I was 20, both immature. My parents recognized this and advised against marriage at that time. However, that was not the wisdom I wanted to hear, so I persuaded my dad to sign the permission for a marriage license.

Against his better judgment, he reluctantly agreed.

Wanda graduated from high school on Thursday night, June 3, 1971. We had wedding rehearsal on Friday night and were married on Saturday night, June 5.

We had a beautiful wedding in the church. We were so happy! Everything was perfect. We had marital bliss until the honeymoon ended, three days later.

After the wedding pageantry and short honeymoon trip to New Orleans, LA, we returned home to begin our new life together.

I think we both could, at that time, identify with Adam and Eve when they crossed the line by eating from the forbidden tree. They experienced a WOW moment when they realized what they had done.

They had to face the consequences of their decision. We, too, had that overwhelming feeling. We had made a permanent decision to be married, but were too immature to successfully navigate through it. We certainly had a difficult journey ahead of us.

To add much more stress to an already stressful situation, I introduced the idea of moving to Pensacola, FL so I could attend Bible College and be a pastor. The dynamics of that idea brought on a whole new set of challenges.

However, we did move to Pensacola in November 1972 to begin our new journey. Although we were only 60 miles from Mobile, it felt like we were across the ocean. We were two kids trying to find our way, and we had to grow up very fast.

After we moved, the pressure started mounting instantly. I had to get a job, attend classes at night, pay for my college classes, be a husband, and soon, a father to our first born child.

My first job was a day job, delivering appliances and TVs to customers. I earned \$85 per week. We quickly understood the meaning of "poor preacher." Working during the day and going to school at night was not easy, especially since I was not even a good student, and had no clue how to study. Besides that, it was not "cool" to cheat in Bible College.

I did so poorly the first quarter that I was placed on Academic Probation for the following three quarters. I was going to be dismissed from school due to poor academics, but the president of the

college issued a special request to the board to retain me on probation. Thankfully, they extended the probation a little longer. After struggling academically for a year, I finally got the hang of it and started making Bs and Cs. After another year, my grades changed to a few A's, but mostly B's. Today, as I look at my transcript, it brings back many memories.

During our early years there, Wanda and I were blessed to have our first child, our baby girl, Shelley. Wow, another challenge! I remember thinking I knew how to deliver appliances, and I could even pass a class on my own, but, how in the world do I become a "daddy?" All I knew was that I watched my dad do it to me, so I

would try to do it like him. I found out quickly that it wasn't easy.

After working all day, I would go to school at night. After getting home from school, I would have homework to complete before the next class, so I would often stay up late. What was an additional surprise to me was that our newborn girl did not care that I had only a few hours in which to sleep. When she got hungry at 2:00am, she let us know about it, very loudly.

I knew that my dad was always there for me, so I had to be there for Shelley. I would get up and give her a bottle and rock her back to sleep. She seemed to like this arrangement because she repeated it day after day for what seemed like an eternity. However, I, too, loved every minute of it. She was

my little girl! The joy she brought to my life was indescribable. I was learning how to be a pastor, but more importantly, I was learning how to be a dad.

I will never forget the first experience of being in the spotlight in front of fellow diners at Morrison's Cafeteria. It was Sunday morning after church, and many of my fellow students and professors were having lunch together. Wanda and I were at our table, and Shelley was in the baby carrier sitting on the floor. She started crying, so I picked her up to hold her so others around could enjoy their meal without a screaming baby. Suddenly, I sensed a foul odor nearby. As I began to investigate its whereabouts, I looked down at my white shirt and tie. To my dismay,

my white shirt was not white any longer, nor did it smell fresh from the laundry.

I suppose that was my first lesson on being in the spotlight and people noticing how I respond. It seems to go with the territory with being a pastor. I was gaining some on-the-job-training experience in preparation for my future requirements.

A VERY BUMPY ENDING

As a part of the graduation requirements of Liberty Bible College, a student must have an intern experience under the oversight of a seasoned pastor.

One of Liberty's former students was serving as pastor of Liberty Fellowship Church in Brewton, AL. For my internship, I requested to go there and serve under him. It was supposed to only be for a few months, and then I would return to Pensacola to finish my remaining courses. However, after we arrived in Brewton, our hearts were knit with the people and the pastor asked us to stay and finish my course work via correspondence. The college was not completely on board with that idea; however, they gave me the blessing to do so.

My first responsibility there was to be the director of the new Christian Academy the church was starting. That certainly was a challenge for me, given my history in school. However, I am convinced beyond a shadow of doubt that it was an appointed time by God to project me into the future calling upon my life.

The timing of our presence there was perfect because the pastor and his wife went through some very difficult marital issues and, eventually, resigned from his pastoral duties at the church.

At that point, I was not ready to take the leadership of the church, so another experienced pastor came on board. I worked under his supervision; however, soon he left to go to another ministry. Again, I was still not ready to

become the head leader, so yet another pastor came to provide the pastoral duties. This pastor was from California and his style was not compatible with the folks in a small, south Alabama town, so his tenure was short-lived also.

Since I had served with three pastors as their associate, and was still in love with the church, the leaders asked me to step up as pastor. "Wow!" I thought. I have come a long way from being a high school failure to being given the opportunity to serve a congregation of people as their pastor. So, I gladly accepted the offer. My first pastorate!

Wanda and I were still very young during this time period. She was 22 and I was 24. We were still very inexperienced at marriage and parenting. Now we were taking on

the responsibility of leading a church.

I saw three pastors before me come and go, and I wanted so much to be a success. I could not allow any weakness within my marriage to be exposed. The pressures we were having as a couple could not be known, so I became very good at covering them up publically. At home, we were going through hell, but we had no one to turn to for help. There was no one who could know. I could not let the college leadership in Pensacola know because they would remove me from the position. We struggled with each other because of the demands of the church. Wanda was in a role as pastor's wife—one that she did not enjoy. Being a

mother was enough to keep her plate full.

After being in Brewton for about four years, with Shelley as a toddler, Wanda got pregnant again. When this baby was born, we thought we were mature enough to handle it. The day Ashley was born, she rocked our world. She was beautiful! I will never forget holding her for the first time; my heart was the size of Texas! Both Shelley and Ashley were "daddy's" girls. They were the pride of my life. How did I deserve such gifts, I wondered? Then another unexpected event happened.

Someone within our church approached us about her adult daughter who lived in another state. She was pregnant and did not have the ability to raise the

child, so she asked us to adopt the child when he or she was born. Just the thought of that was overwhelming to us. However, after we prayed and discussed it, we felt that it was the right thing to do. How could we say no to an opportunity to give this child a chance? So we said yes!

After Ashley, our second daughter, was born, only 11 months later, a baby boy was born to a mother who could not care for him. On his second day of life on this earth, we showed up at the hospital to bring him home with us. Within the next three months, the adoption was official. We were the proud parents of a toddler, an 11 month old, and a newborn, whom we named Jonathan (Jon Jon). We never thought of Jon as adopted or less in position than our natural

born children. He was a gift that God gave us to love and care for. Actually, he favored his sister, Ashley. They were only 11 months apart and very few people even knew that he was not a natural-born son. To us, he was our son!

I was a husband, a daddy of three children, a pastor of a congregation, a director of the Christian academy, and barely 28 years old. My plate was full. Life was seemingly going good, at least on the surface.

One Sunday morning several years later, a man attended our service. He actually was the founding pastor of the church years before me. I, of course, welcomed him the moment I saw him. He asked to speak with me at the end of the service, and I agreed to meet with him.

His visit was for only one reason: to inform me that he wanted to move back and assume the pastorate there again. He said that God told him to do so. I was totally shocked at his statement. As we talked, I informed him that if God told him to move back, then He would also tell me that he was coming. I informed him that I would pray and ask God, myself, for direction.

A week later he returned to find out my answer. I told him that God had not told me anything about this. I could not just resign because of what he felt.

The weeks following proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back with my marriage.

The former pastor had determined he was coming anyway, regardless

of what I said or felt. He started a new church in a hotel meeting room, posted an ad in the local newspaper, secretly visited our congregation and informed them that I was not the right pastor for them and I would not accept his offer to allow him back. This began to stir up dissent among some within our congregation and they began filtering out to his new church. As our church leadership decided to address this concern, they called a special meeting to discuss the concerns with the congregation. In the discussions, the church leadership asked how many people supported my decision to remain as pastor. I received 66% vote of confidence, while the other 34% either did not vote or voted for a change.

The end result was that, on Sunday night, we were told it would be best if I resigned so that a new pastor could come in and perhaps stop the bleeding of dissent. So, on Wednesday night, I resigned.

That was tough—very tough—to deal with. We had been there and poured our lives into, and invested in, that congregation for eight years. We had small children and no place to go. I was not a popular name-brand pastor that other churches would be anxious to have come. I was a no-name pastor.

We were totally disillusioned at this chain of events. We asked, “Is this what “ministry” is all about? Do they just throw you away?”

We had no choice except to move to Mobile with our parents. There

were five of us and a lot of furniture. We stored our furniture in my father-in-law's barn. Rats destroyed most of it. Our family was split between my parent's home and Wanda's parent's home. Neither home was large enough to hold all five of us for any length of time.

No one came to our side to help us find another church opportunity. I was a young pastor and not very well known, and certainly not marketable to the church community.

Discouragement began to set in with the both of us. We were, again, like a ship without a sail. We had no direction concerning church ministry. So, I began looking for a job outside of the church world that I so loved. I had

determined my career was over and I had to do something else.

I did find a company that was interested in me. It was a coffee company located in Mobile. The company was hiring route salesmen; however, that would require a move to another city: Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In desperation, I gladly accepted the offer and prepared my family to move to our new location and begin my new career. Little did I know what I was about to face.

THE

VERY

UGLY

TORN APART FAMILY

The relocation move to Tuscaloosa was necessary for survival; however, it brought on completely different challenges. We knew no one there, neither family nor friends. This also meant no church to work with and no support from a church family. Although it was somewhat nice to be in a place where no one knew who we were, there was a danger to that anonymity because there was no accountability to anyone.

It took us a while to adjust to our new surroundings, but we finally began feeling settled. I went to work every day and was home every night.

We connected with a local church there, but were not too involved. However, the church decided to

start a Christian school and the pastor asked for my assistance. Since that was right up my alley, I volunteered to help.

At this point, Wanda and I had been married for about twelve years. We had gotten married young and had our challenges. Early on, when we were in a small town and I was the pastor of a church, we were forced to keep up the appearance of a happy couple. Anyone looking at us probably thought that everything was fine. In reality, everything was not fine. Instead of growing closer, we were growing apart. She was not happy in our marriage and wanted a way to escape. Now, living in a much larger city, with only a few meaningful relationships, provided the perfect opportunity for our marriage to suffer even more. Our

children were still small, but they knew things were not right. They sensed the tension and often suffered the brunt of it. Ours was the perfect environment for the perfect storm.

June 5, 1986, was our 15th wedding anniversary. The children were old enough to stay home alone for a couple of hours while we went out for a celebration meal. While we were gone, they made some homemade Happy Anniversary cards to give us upon our return. However, while we were out, our discussion was about a separation.

From my perspective, she no longer wanted to be married to me because since her high school graduation night, she had been tied down to responsibilities. Her inner conflict was evident. My

inner conflict was dealing with the rejection of the church, and fighting with her. I was tired of it all, and I did not put up a fight to save the marriage. I allowed her to write the terms of the divorce, and agreed not to protest it.

We decided that we should tell the children in the gentlest way possible, and let them know that everything was going to be just fine.

When we returned home, we walked into the room to find them greeting us with their happy anniversary wishes. I will forever remember the look on their happy faces. That happiness would soon end as we sat down to explain to them that their mom and dad would no longer be living together. We tried to assure them that everything would be ok but, as I

recall, we failed. Our decision rocked their world completely. Their world—their normalcy as they knew it—was about to quickly change.

A BAD NEW BEGINNING

Because the petition for divorce was not contested, it did not take long for it to become official. We separated, but agreed to keep things as normal as possible for the children. We shared joint custody. Each of us had the standard visitation rights for holidays, weekends, etc. Everything seemed to be normal, as far as a divided family is concerned. However, underneath it all, I was vulnerable. I was lonely. I missed my children more than I can explain. The best way to express to you how much I loved my children is to tell you to watch the movie, "Mrs. Doubtfire."

If you have seen it, you will understand.

One evening, while I was at a local restaurant with some friends from

work, a young lady mentioned that it was her anniversary. I responded with the usual "Happy Anniversary." She then replied, "It's nothing special." Her comment provoked yet more conversation from me, and I explained just how *special* that day was. As the conversation continued, she shared that she and her husband were getting divorced anyway. That is when my "pastor hat" went on, and I tried to counsel her to not give up.

A few days later, she asked to talk with me. I thought perhaps she reconsidered her marriage and wanted some encouragement. I was dead wrong! She informed me that she wanted to get to know me more. I immediately resisted that idea. After all, she was married.

However, within a couple of weeks after that, her divorce was final.

I must admit, that even though I resisted her offer, it stroked my emotions. It fed something that my soul was crying out for. After her divorce was final, I felt justified in talking with her more. All along, interacting with her was feeding a deeply rooted craving within me. Even though I had seen her many times before, I never paid her any attention. However, it is amazing how quickly things can change. This hardly-even-recognized-before lady was now becoming the focus of my attention. My heart was smitten with her.

I never considered that the scripture addressed my issue in detail in Jeremiah 17:9, "***the heart is deceitful in all things, and desperately wicked, who***

can know it?" I was deceived for sure, but it felt so right.

Just as it must have felt so right for Adam and Eve to partake of forbidden tree, even after hearing the consequences from God, their strong desires and emotions overruled their good judgment.

I had the same principle at stake with my situation. There was a loving and wise pastor in Tuscaloosa in whom I confided. He knew the circumstance in which I had become involved and he knew that, at the beginning, it was innocent. He also knew I was deceived. In a loving and kind way, he tried to counsel me, but my heart would not yield to his wisdom. He knew that his warnings to me had to be strong enough for me to consider changing my mind. So, he

threatened to break fellowship with me should I continue along my path.

Even with all the counsel and warnings, I never looked back. I accepted the full responsibility of my decisions because I needed the emotional support I thought that I was receiving from this relationship. I threw caution and wisdom out the window and headed full steam ahead to what, ultimately, led to catastrophe of my soul and almost of my life.

The power of emotions is an unprecedented force. Emotions can, and will, control you unless there are some safeguards in place that will not—at any cost—be violated. I did not have any at that time. I was fully deceived, heading toward a deadly collision.

In October of 1986 Anita and I presented ourselves to a probate judge for marriage. She had two children and I had three. Together, we composed a large family, led by two adults who did not even know what they were doing. Of course, there were some fun times along the way. All the children were basically the same age, with Shelley being the oldest. The kids were adjusting to their new environment as best they could. However, it was all a façade that would soon crumble.

I was enjoying my new lifestyle and additional family. Being married to a woman who laughed with me and made me feel good about myself was very refreshing. I was in love. Actually, I was not in love; I was deceived. What I

was in love with was love itself. I loved the feeling of being loved.

Only four short months later, on Valentine's Day, Anita abruptly left me and the children. She said that she was going to run some errands but would return soon. As the hours passed and turned into darkness, I had that sinking feeling in my stomach that something was wrong. When I finally reached her by phone, my emotions were destroyed as I heard her say that she was not coming back. Reality had returned to her, and she could not continue with our relationship. Going from being a mother of two to a mother of five, instantly, was more than she could handle.

Regardless of how much I persuaded her to return, her resolve was set in stone. She was gone. I was devastated—again.

I felt completely helpless. My life was a total wreck. I was rejected and, once again, I had lost everything that was important to me, except my children. They saw me hurting and confused, and they comforted me as only children could do. Had it not been for them, my life would have been over.

The only thing I could do at this point was to call my dad to come and help me load a truck with my belongings. My only option was to move back to Mobile with my parents. I was emotionally unstable and incapable of functioning coherently. My parents were the only stable relationship to which I could hold on.

As the next few days approached, my pain and dismay increased. I never experienced such pain

before. It was so emotionally intense that I decided that it was time for me to end it all. I could justify doing something that rash. My life flashed before me many times as I considered how many people I ministered to over the years, many of whom had thoughts of suicide. Yet, none of that seemed to matter to me any longer. I had to have some relief from this pain.

On a lazy Sunday afternoon, I plotted it all out. I made arrangements for my parents to keep the kids for a few hours while I spent some time alone. No one had any idea what was going through my mind. I drove to downtown Mobile and started walking and looking. I found a building across the street from the famous Bienville Square. The main

lobby was open so I entered and got on an elevator, stopping at every floor just to look around. Oddly enough, on the third floor, there were several empty offices with the doors unlocked. As I wondered in to look around, I neared the window. Then, the next thought hit me like a ton of bricks. This is the right time and place to end the pain. I considered it carefully, my mind racing rapidly. I came to the conclusion that it would be better than the alternative of pain.

I opened the window and stood on the ledge. As I was looking down in final preparation, I was determined to jump. Only one more time would I feel pain, and it would only last for a split second. Then it would be over.

In the Bible, Luke 15: 11-32 tells of the account of a man who left his father and wasted his life. As the years went on, he found himself completely destitute and in an unbearable situation due to his own foolishness. The Bible declares that, "he came to himself." This means that something happened within his mind—perhaps a thought or a memory—that compelled him to stop what he was doing and repent. After he came to himself, he returned home to his loving father and was restored.

While I was out on the ledge of that window, just about to make a fatal move, God's hand came upon me and would not allow me to lean forward. That is when I came to myself. I thought about what I was about to do to my children, my parents, and my life. I became

frightened and aware that I was out of control. I needed help.

I made my way back inside and left. I was in complete despair and I knew I must seek help immediately. I found a pay phone and called the emergency line for a help center in Mobile. God opened the door for me to connect with a female counseling psychiatrist. From that initial encounter, I met with her often during the next 90 days. Abba Father used this Christian counselor to guide me to, once again, gain control of my life. Healing was a slow process, and, in those critical days, I could not rely upon my own understanding of Biblical principles. I needed someone to reach out to me through intensive care of counseling.

I could not imagine ever being able to smile again. I forgot about the scripture in 2 Cor. 4:8-9 that testifies, "***We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed, we are struck down, but not destroyed.***"

God had everything under control, and a gift in place to restore me back to wholeness once again.

THE
REST
OF
THE
STORY

Three Strikes = Home Run

Many times, I have read the account of Job in the Bible. Each time, it inspires me to awe because Job was a man that lost it all: family, health, and fortune. He was blameless and did nothing to deserve his fate. After losing everything, he still maintained his integrity before God and refused to blame Him for his circumstances. At the end of the account of Job's life, God chose to bless him with twice as much as he had before. God completely restored him to better than the original!

The character and nature of God is to bring restoration to those who are devastated, and I was about to witness it firsthand.

After I got back on my feet emotionally, I returned to

Tuscaloosa to once again work with the coffee company. By that time, I had full custody of my youngest two children, Ashley and Jon. My oldest daughter, Shelley, was a teenager living with her mother.

My resolve at that time was to be the best dad I could. I was committed to keep my children from any further hurt or harm. They had experienced more than their share already. I was determined to live my life with integrity before God, and trust Him to help me accomplish the difficult journey ahead as a single dad. I was totally committed to that goal.

The coffee company I worked for was large, with locations in many states. Each year, the company held a top-notch Christmas party at a fancy hotel ballroom. It was a time when husbands and wives

would dress in formal attire, much like a high school prom. The food was always delicious; the entertainment was exciting and, best of all, all employees who attended received a bonus check.

I really did not want to attend because of the distance; Perdido Beach, AL. It was a long drive, and the prospect of going alone was not too exciting. However, I decided to go, and I took Ashley and Jon along with me.

There was nothing unusual about that party: food, bonus checks, and dancing. Immediately after the meal and receiving my bonus, I decided to return to my room where my children were asleep. As I was making my way through the crowd in the busy hallway, I heard my co-worker, Jim, call my name. I turned in his direction and saw

him standing with a female friend who worked in the home office, located in Mobile. He introduced me to Cathy, and we exchanged greetings and had a pleasant conversation. During the conversation, we discussed how we both made a last minute decision to come to the party and that neither of us really wanted to come except to receive a bonus check and a great meal. Since we had some things in common, the conversation had an easy flow. The longer we three talked, the more intrigued I became. Finally, Jim dismissed himself from our presence, so Cathy and I decided to take a walk and talk about our lives. We had so much in common that it seemed unreal. We spent the next several hours just talking and getting to know each other. By the end of the night, it felt as

though we had known each other for years; I felt as though I had met my best friend for the first time. Something was happening inside of me that was very scary. I did not have a good track record with the last lady I met. However, this was different, very different this time. I found myself smiling on the inside. A smile that I thought was gone forever had come back. I felt like a teenager again. I thought to myself, "This is going to be good!"

The next day Cathy wanted to meet my children. I carefully introduced them to her, not knowing how they would respond. To my surprise, they really liked her too! We walked on the beach for a while and then Cathy invited us to come to Mobile to meet her family. Since it was on the way

back to Tuscaloosa, I agreed to do so. We had lunch at a restaurant with her parents and two girls, Chantel and Sherle. Amazingly, they were just about the same age as Ashley and Jon.

We had a very enjoyable lunch and fellowship with her family. Her dad was a pastor, which made the interaction even more interesting. Again, it seemed like we were old friends; yet we had just met.

After we had a terrific time at lunch, we departed for our long ride home. On the way home, all I could think about was the last 20 hours. Something was very special about it, and I wanted some more of that.

Over the next several days and weeks, we talked on the phone every night. Our children even

engaged in those conversations at times. Things were moving in the direction that brought about thoughts of our future together. We both seemed to feel like our meeting was a divine appointment—totally unplanned and unscripted.

During the Christmas week, we went to Mobile again to visit Shelley, my parents, and, of course, I wanted to see Cathy again. To my great pleasure, I found myself smiling again, on the inside. It felt so good to smile. I had been depressed for so long that I forgot what a smile does for the soul.

We were obviously on a path designed for us, by God's love. Everything was right about this. We were perfect for each other. So, I asked her the obvious

question, and she replied with, "I will pray about it." "What is there to pray about? I am not letting you get away," I thought to myself. I was completely convinced that God brought us together, so I asked her father for his blessings. He jokingly chuckled and said, "Sure, I am glad to get rid of her." We had a good laugh. Things could not be better.

Within a few days, I received a phone call from Cathy telling me her answer. As I patiently waited for her to say the word "YES," she answered differently. She said, "March the 4th." That day sounded like a lifetime away; however, I rejoiced and began the countdown.

The wedding took place in a small church building with a crowd of people who came to celebrate with us. Her father and two additional

ministers officiated the ceremony as we exchanged our vows. This time, I was determined that my marriage was on solid ground. I had a beautiful wife, beautiful family, and a beautiful smile, all surrounded by three preachers, praying for us. It could not have been any better!

An Amazing Turn of Events

I was happy—very happy. My life was taking on some new meaning and I was being healed of the past hurts and devastations. I continued working as a route salesman and was resigned to the reality that I would never be accepted in any church again as a pastor. Pastors and divorce just do not sit well with most congregations, regardless of the circumstances. I could attend church, but never serve as a leader.

One evening, quite unexpectedly, I received a phone call from an old acquaintance. I had not heard from Dave in many years. I was very surprised to hear from him and wondered how he had found me. During the call, Dave informed me why he called. He wanted me to know that he had recently given

my name to a man named Lowell Lundstrom. I was puzzled why he did that because I did not know Lowell Lundstrom. He continued to tell me that Lowell was a nationally known evangelist who held crusade meetings, much in the same way as Billy Graham, in civic centers, auditoriums, etc. The Lundstrom ministry was looking for a crusade director to add to their team and Dave thought I was perfect for the position. He said that I would be receiving a call from Lowell within the next few days. I really was not interested, but agreed to listen should Lowell call.

About a week later, my phone rang one night and I answered. On the other end was Lowell Lundstrom. We exchanged greetings and then he proceeded to tell me about the need for a crusade director. He

described the duties, which involved meeting many pastors around the country, and speaking in their churches. I would be the front man preparing the churches for the crusades coming to their city.

After hearing all the details, I told Lowell that I did not think I would be a good fit, and I further explained that I had been divorced and was now happily remarried. I explained that I just could not deal with any more rejection, and I was basically finished with church leadership duties.

The next part of the conversation proved to be the most powerful event ever in my life. Lowell spoke the following things into my life. He said, "Reggie, I have heard all about you and your past. I am calling you because God wants to

restore you completely and give you a second chance.” He continued saying that he held crusade meetings 300 nights a year, preaching about a God that restores and heals. “God is not concerned about your past,” he continued, “but about your present and future. If you can trust Him and let go of the past, He will restore you into His ministry.” After that, I was speechless. I wanted to be restored, but never considered that anyone would ever want me.

Lowell invited me to come to one of his crusade meetings in Elk River, MN. So, I decided to board a plane in Mobile and go check it out. While I was there, I felt the presence of God ministering to me like never before. I began feeling a strong desire, once again, to do

what I was called to do, minister to people. After several days there, I accepted the opportunity before me and agreed to join the crusade team. However, it required relocation from Mobile, AL to a small town just outside of Minneapolis, MN.

The move to Minnesota was exciting for our family, and offered a new environment, fresh start, and lots of snow! I traveled all over the US, Canada, and to some parts of Central America, setting up crusades. During that time, I witnessed thousands of people being touched by the Word of God. Many came unto Salvation through accepting God's message of hope. I was, once again, in my element of comfort, doing what I longed to do: touch people's lives.

Doing crusades 300 nights a year comes with a price: a lot of travel and significant time away from home. I was on the road, averaging 23 days per month. Even though Cathy fully supported me, she was the one who was paying the greatest price, being a mom to the children—teenagers—at home. During those years, the children needed a visible dad every day. During the seven days a month I was home, I tried to spend quality time as a father and husband. However, they all needed more of me. Leaving for the next crusade was sometimes very bitter sweet.

ANOTHER PHONE CALL

I had a pastor friend, Bob Hellman, who lived in Huntsville, Alabama. We started attending Liberty Bible College at the same time in the early 1970s. Over the years, we hardly kept up with each other because our paths never crossed; however, he know me quite well and of my love for Christian education within the church.

Pastor Bob was operating a very successful church that included a Christian school. The school needed some leadership, so Bob thought of me. With a few phone calls, he was able to locate me to discuss his needs. He offered me the opportunity to come visit Huntsville and the church to see how I liked it. After some consideration, Cathy and I agreed to check it out.

When we arrived at the church, we considered the benefits of me being home full time and serving, this time, as a school pastor. This opportunity was something that ignited both my interest and excitement. It seemed like a perfect match.

I discussed it with Lowell, and although he was disappointed about my decision to leave, he fully understood and left the door open for me to return anytime. I continued doing some crusades on a part-time basis.

Our move to Huntsville proved to be the perfect path for us. God had brought my life full circle and back to ministering within the church as a full time pastor.

There are a few times in my life that I have experienced a real

WOW moment. I compare it to Moses at the burning bush, where God spoke to him in an audible voice. While traveling to a crusade city in Colorado, I had my burning bush experience with Him.

I remember quite well the situation. I flew into Denver and rented a vehicle to drive to Pueblo, CO. While driving on Interstate 25 South between Denver and Colorado Springs, I had the radio on, listening to Rush Limbaugh. That is all I remember, because the next period of time, the Holy Spirit invaded the vehicle with His presence and clearly gave me specific instructions and a vision for my future work for His kingdom. The vision was so profound that I took the next exit to find a pay phone to call Cathy.

In that vision, He specifically spoke to me with instructions to return to Huntsville and start a Christian school within our home. He described in great detail how I was to proceed, even what I was to call the school.

Without ever doing anything like that before, I knew I must obey His voice. So, after I returned from that crusade, Cathy and I made preparations to begin Huntsville Christian Academy (HCA).

We had no money to start anything. We only had a few students; five of them, our own. However, we proceeded every day at our dining room table, conducting school as I was told.

A few months later, I received yet another phone call from an elderly

lady whom I had met only one time, several months before at a crusade in Port Charlotte, Florida. She was 84 years old. She asked to come to Huntsville to meet my family. Of course, we welcomed her. During her visit with us, she asked me about what I was doing with the new HCA at our home. She then asked how much it would cost to take it to a public location, so that growth could occur. Since I had never thought about that before, I just came up with a figure of \$10,000 just to get started. The next five minutes she explained why she had to come to Huntsville. She was on a mission from God to find out about our needs and to provide whatever amount I stated. She handed me a check for the full amount with the instructions to "now go and fully obey God."

WOW! What a mighty God we serve!

That experience was the birth of HCA and bringing into full circle what the enemy almost destroyed in my life. What the enemy intends for evil, God turns it around for His glory.

HCA has been in existence since 1993. I have been restored by God to another awesome privilege of serving as a pastor to His people. We have a small congregation called The Olive Branch. We are a dedicated fellowship of believers with the goal of reaching out with the Truth of God's Word, which includes honoring Him on the Sabbath day, weekly. His message of love, acceptance, and forgiveness is our theme. It is not about greasy

grace, but about a dedicated lifestyle of obedience unto Him.

A PANORAMIC VIEW

As you have read, my life story has been anything but boring. It began with a foundation of having wonderful, God-fearing parents. They made rich deposits of love and discipline into my life.

I had an early awareness that God had a divine plan for my life. I found out, through many life experiences, that life is not easy. It never was meant to be. Therefore, total dependence upon the Creator—by design—is absolutely mandatory.

The lesson I learned from the overview of my entire life is that my Awesome God never let go of me, even in my darkest hours. Even though I had lost my way, He never lost me. Even though my life was out of control, He still

maintained control and was working all things out for my good.

The author of Romans 8 experienced the same thing; he declared that he was convinced through life experiences, that nothing shall be able to separate him from God's reach.

I have learned that the most important thing is not how well you run the race, but how well you finish. Throughout the marathon of life there are hurts, disappointments, hills, mountains, valleys, thorns, and storms to overcome. Sometimes, bad decisions are made, both intentionally, as well as innocently.

There is a biblical principal always at play in decision making. It simply means that the outcome is directly related to the input. It is

called the law of sowing and reaping. That Biblical law is in operation in my life. However, I have also learned that life is truly a marathon. The race is designed for you to finish strong. If you do, you are a winner, no matter what the journey looked like.

As I look back at the marathon (still in progress) of my life, I stand amazed at the goodness of God. I started strong as a young man, then had a series of lonely valley experiences, then traveled into deep depression with a desire to prematurely end the race. While in that frame of mind, my Abba Father visited me and kept me safe in the palm of His hand. Then He held me close to His heart and nurtured me back to good mental and spiritual health. As a surprise bonus, He restored the passion and

gave me a fresh start in the ministry to which I was originally called.

I am a blessed man! I have a beautiful, godly wife who shares my life. She and I serve together, everyday, in the Lord's vineyard. We are responsible for leading a Christian school of 125 students. She is a vital part of the overall vision. She is often in the background; however, God sees her as on the front line, and she shines!

Together, we have five grown children. We are a blended family of diversity, and our children now have life responsibilities of their own, running their own marathon. It is painful to see them stumble and struggle; however, I stay reminded that the God who was with me, is also with them.

Each of our children has given us grandchildren to love and enjoy. I heard someone say this about grandchildren: "If I knew they were this much fun, I would have had them first!" I totally agree!

So, I am only a few weeks away from completing 65 years of this marathon. I am still in the race, going strong, and I am determined to finish strong. Life still is not always easy; however, I can smell victory in the air. What more could a man ask for? I have a great life!

God has restored my broken life and turned the ashes of the rubble into a trophy of His grace. Truly, God had given me "beauty for ashes ... the oil of joy for mourning, [and] the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness" (Is. 63:1). The most beautiful part about the message of this book is that He is

no respecter of persons. What He accomplished in my life, He will do for all others who will obey Him.

I leave you with the following blessing from the Hebrew Scriptures found within Numbers 6: 22-27:

Yehovah bless you and keep you;

Yehovah make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

Yehovah lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace!

Shalom!