I thoroughly enjoyed the stories and reflections found within this book. They both challenged and encouraged me in my own faith walk, as I was reminded again of the varied, surprising, and many times delightful ways God speaks into our lives. The testimonies within these pages truly are, to borrow a phrase from Jerry Pattengale, "unexpected gifts." I hope they are for others as well.

-Stacy Hammons, provost of Indiana Wesleyan University

I love this book. It's full of inspiration, encouragement, and a realistic look at life from a Christian perspective. The authors have captured everyday life through the stories of people who sit in the pew without others knowing what they are dealing with each day. My faith was increased and my heart warmed after reading this book. I highly recommend that pastors and churches purchase large quantities of the book to distribute to church leaders. I believe it will increase sensitivity to the needs of those in the church, raise the faith level of any person who reads its pages, as well as increase compassionate outreach to the community in which they minister.

-Stan Toler, bestselling author and speaker

There is nothing more riveting than a good story that reveals the heart of God for his children. This wonderful collection inspires, convicts, teaches, and reminds us of God's goodness and kindness. It is profoundly moving to read and will be a gift to share.

-Emilie Wierda, president of Eagle Companies

The everyday stories recounted herein represent diverse voices, which makes this collection relatable and refreshing. Simultaneously, these voices are uniformly authentic, which is hardly an "everyday" phenomenon, and thus makes this collection powerful and challenging as well.

—Jeff Zurcher, executive director of The Arington Foundation

FAITH MADE REAL

EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF GOD'S POWER

Edited by Jerry Pattengale with Steve DeNeff and Emily Vermilya



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FOREWORD

In response to God's promise and calling in Psalm 78:3–7, we share this treasury of true stories. While some of them are embedded in tragedy and great loss, they are also immersed in great wonder and joy in the midst of finding God's faithfulness. Special thanks to Jerry Pattengale, who has been a part of College Wesleyan Church for more than three decades, and selflessly collected all these stories without any financial compensation. Also, our gratitude to the people of College Wesleyan Church who, with great courage, shared glimpses into their personal journeys and some of what God is doing in their lives. They are living proof that miracles still happen and real transformation is possible in the lives of ordinary people.

As you read, we hope you are inspired, encouraged, and even surprised; but mostly filled with great hope. And wherever you may find yourself, be assured that you are part of God's great story.

O my people, listen to my teaching. Open your ears to what I am saying. For I will show you lessons from our history, stories handed down to us from former generations. I will reveal these truths to you so that you can describe these glorious deeds of Jehovah to your children and tell them about the mighty miracles he did. For he gave his laws to Israel and commanded our fathers to teach them to their children, so that they in turn could teach their children too. Thus his laws pass down from generation to generation. In this way each generation has been able to obey his laws and to set its hope anew on God and not forget his glorious miracles.

INTRODUCTION

Most of us love engaging stories, especially about real people and actual events. The church is no exception.

Though most of my career has revolved around publishing, it took me twenty years to gain the courage to write parts of my story. My childhood poverty embarrassed me. How would publishers of my academic work react to tales of life with my alcoholic father and renegade relatives? Would my most cherished memories and heartfelt lessons make any difference in the lives of readers? I basically wanted some guarantee that my honesty was worth the risk. However, there is no guarantee, and those contributing to this book realize that we trust our work to God alone. We write with prudence but also become personally vulnerable.

Publishing personal reflections in any form certainly wasn't part of my career plan and perhaps could submarine vocational possibilities. But when God called me to transparency, not for my sake but for others', the articles, now numbering more than 250, began. I soon found great fulfillment in the process, but the first few were especially painful and agonizing to write. I know many contributors in this book join me in taking a step toward transparency.

Early on, perhaps I wasn't ready, or mature enough, to share personal material. Whatever the reason, I lacked the courage to talk about my childhood in the backwaters of Buck Creek, Indiana. But during the past two decades, these stories seem to have resonated with audiences ranging from the *Chicago Tribune* readers to editors at McGraw-Hill. People like to laugh, and at times cry, as they relate to someone's journey. Themes such as "unexpected gifts" have uplifted readers. I think of the story about

our family of ten finding our lawn covered with presents on Christmas Eve. Or "embarrassment," the day I swished a thirty-foot jumper in a packed Hoosier gymnasium . . . into the wrong goal. Or dealing with loss, failures, or impatience. But I've also written of God's provision, such as the day during grad school when I prayed for two dollars to buy drinks at lunchtimes until payday. I got off my knees, and while walking to the car I found two dollars in my yard. Yes, I should have prayed for a million. And yes, it was a moment that sustained me through many times of trial.

In reality, each local church is filled with similar stories of people's unique highs and lows, of their histories, and, more important, of God's faithfulness and providence—the miraculous among the seemingly mundane.

The same is true of your church, wherever you attend. We've entered an era in which "reality" is captivating listeners. Not all people are ready to share their stories, at least not alone. Some need help articulating a glimpse into their journeys. I've been asked to assist with that in this collection. Others who share in this book, however, are brilliant communicators and could help most of us with our own stories. One of the contributors in the following pages has authored dozens of books over a lifetime of celebrated leadership. Another is a coauthor and illustrator of two *New York Times* bestsellers, in addition to hundreds of other book projects. Yet for many, this is a first venture into public disclosure—which is a key element of this book's special appeal. Whether in Buck Creek, Baltimore, or Burbank, we all have learned lessons along the way.

Members from any single church represent assorted gifts and stories. Their life situations—whether by choice, accident, inheritance, or surroundings—bring a variety of different perspectives. From stories of redemption and restoration, to saintly lifestyles and selfless neighbors, we find our way more easily in such light. Think about those with whom you worship, those who greet you at the church doors or work in the church offices. Reflect on conversations you've had with church janitors, youth

pastors, or board members. All of them have journeys that helped inform their spiritual lives and likely yours.

I've spent nearly thirty years in the church where the authors of these stories attend. Some of the written recollections introduced me to these meaningful aspects of their journeys. Although I was familiar with several of the writers' histories, their articulation of key episodes from their lives enriched mine. My hope is that this project encourages you to gather stories from those with whom you worship. And perhaps to learn the biggest lesson I learned in this editing process: to be more observant to the real-life stories already before you.

—Jerry Pattengale

PART 1

THE TRUTH
OF GODLY
INFLUENCE

A COMMUNAL ADVENTURE

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF HOSPITALITY

FRIN CRISP

Editor's Note: Few things would tax me more than sharing a house long-term with another family, let alone splitting its mortgage. Before getting married, I lived for almost two years alone in a two-room cabin near Glendora, California. No phone, radio, or TV. Even the entrance to the area had a security gate. Though I love people, and most friends know me as a socialite and (I think) a lot of fun, the truth is that I crave my quiet space.

Against this backdrop, Erin's story prompted me to think about the benefits of communal living, if only for a season, and to ponder a fuller view of biblical hospitality and community. Most of our friends can sit around our dinner table and swap stories of those tough young adult years. Of using a card table and folding chairs until real furniture was affordable. Of the old AMC Pacer or Impala that somehow kept running long after it looked drivable. Of knowing the cupboards were bare when unexpected visitors dropped by. Erin's journey has that, but a whole lot more. Except for college dorms and church camps, it's an experience I'll likely never have, but one I've enjoyed catching a glimpse of from afar.

7 7 7

I was twenty-five years old and life seemed picture perfect. Our three boys were happy and healthy, ages six, three, and one and a half. I worked part time as the children's ministry director at the church where my husband, Eric, served as youth pastor. I brought my baby to work with me most days, and in every way we had all that we needed and more. In my heart of hearts though, I was bored. Is this it? Is this the Christian life: women's Bible studies, craft bazaars, scrapbooking, and house parties of every variety? Participating in church activities—it seemed like the ministry-spouse thing to do.

Fast-forward eight months, and Eric and I sold our home and half of our belongings. We moved to Wilmore, Kentucky, for seminary, leaving all of our extended family and security behind. I felt alive again. Finances and friendships weren't easy, and neither was establishing a new normal. But I was hungering and thirsting after God's presence in life-giving ways.

We hit it off with two couples that we welcomed into our tiny living room every Sunday evening—eating, laughing, and learning together, for long, fulfilling hours.

When these new friends stopped by unannounced, I didn't scurry with embarrassed attempts to clean up. They saw our house dirty, our kids angry, my hair messy, and our lives in all seasons. They even used our washer and dryer. When they received the call that a parent had died unexpectedly and tragically, we were together folding laundry.

Eric and I recognized the work God was doing in us as we opened up to authentic relationships. God revealed my pride, self-centeredness, impatience, distrust, and insecurity as I submitted to the Father of Christian community. I wanted more. We sold our home once again and bought a house with one of the couples—all four of us on the mortgage.

In the process of moving in together, we wanted our home to continue to be a place of hospitality. Hadn't hospitality originally brought our little group together? And every time we opened up to others, God blessed our own lives. We were hooked. We all committed to keep at least one bedroom of this new home open and available for others.

During the two years we lived together, we hosted some special guests. Mr. Stephen, a Nigerian ministry student, stayed for one year. Others hailed from Lebanon and Kenya. Several travelers stayed for a week, attending intensive classes or conferences. Every guest was a blessing in one way or another. We usually say that people are a blessing when they give us something—they cook us a meal or write us an encouraging note. But my definition was expanding.

Mr. Stephen hadn't seen his son, still back in Kenya, for nearly two years. When he showed me a photo of his son, who had been given a birth-day present of three small glass bottles of soda and a used baseball cap, he blessed me. He provided a living, breathing mirror that reflected my own excessive relationship to my possessions. It wasn't shame or guilt that I felt (OK—maybe a little shame) but rather the glaring awareness of the Holy Spirit. Eric and I reevaluated "things" in our lives.

Such glimpses into my soul would sometimes cascade like a flood until I was gasping, "OK, enough, God. I get it. I need more of you." And so this became my daily plea. I took walks often and breathed this prayer while I inhaled, "More of you, God" and exhaled "Less of me." I literally inflated my lungs with God's goodness and mercy and breathed out the selfishness he was revealing in my soul. Was it easy to confront my own sinful nature? No. Was it a blessing? Absolutely.

Today these precious house-sharing friends remain closer to us than family. We live in separate states and speak to one another only a few times each year, but we always spend a summer week together, our times as sweet and rich as ever.

So what has been the long-term impact? Eric and I don't live communally anymore (although Eric's parents live with us for part of the year), but the remnants of those times remain. Extraordinary hospitality transformed my

soul. I don't waste opportunities to deepen friendships. I don't worry as much about oversharing, and I don't second-guess my actions. No more, "I should've said.... Why didn't I say...?"

I wasn't cured of selfishness, materialism, or self-criticism. They still occasionally nip at my heels, but I think they're more recognizable. After a taste of what deep community feels like—the beauty of shared laughter and tears, the unconditional love—there is new value in gathering together with God's people.

Because of my time in our "commune," I am more aware that we are all flawed and we need one another. We need much more than lectures or contrived accountability. We need genuine friendships, where real people with real needs show their vulnerability. We need to offer even the little we have to one another and accept offers of help. We need to ask tough questions and listen carefully to others' stories. We need to need one another, because where there is opportunity to show love, there is greater opportunity to receive it.

HE'S BEEN FAITHFUL

A SONG FOR MY LIFF AND MY FUNERAL

TERRI SMITH

Editor's Note: Sometimes we read a refreshing piece and try to determine if it's the story, the style, or both that prompts our reflective smile. Not everyone has the ability to satirize the mundane like Erasmus, describe intriguing scenes like Dorothy Sayers, or draw us to the page like Harper Lee. For most of us, just glimpses of such success would be fulfilling not for our sake but for that of our readers. Below is a reflection pointed in that creative direction, from a church member who didn't even begin college until nearly forty years of age. Terri Smith gives a punchy appraisal of her journey. It's replete with honest notions of being human in the presence of the divine and of recognizing departures in our actions from our deeply held attitudes. She invites us to think about the music that would best capture our lives at our funeral, no less. For her, it's a song by Carol Cymbala, who helped her husband build the Brooklyn Tabernacle: herself a self-taught choir director of considerable fame. I'm not sure what my funeral song will be, but Terri got me thinking about it. And more important, I'm trying to identify a song that best captures my long walk with my Savior.

Throughout this book, we peek at similar worries and self-perceptions from some amazing people. In each case, we learn a bit more about not taking

outward appearances or accomplishments for granted. If I were to ask Terri's husband, Mark, long recognized as a master teacher at his college, his opinion about this chapter, I'm reasonably sure Dr. Smith would quickly inform me that for decades he's realized who the real master teacher is in the family, with or without her degree.

7 7 7

Getting older surprised me. Gray hair came first, then thyroid issues. Getting down on the floor is a cinch; getting back up ain't pretty. You must never ever look in a twelve-times magnifying mirror, and don't, for heaven's sake, try to jump rope anymore: the shock absorbers you once had don't, well, absorb.

But those are the physical surprises. One of the biggest wonders for me has been both delightful and sobering. It is perspective: looking back on more than forty years of belonging to Jesus. It's something like the view from the top of a mountain or down a very long stretch of highway that lies behind. You can catch the glimpse while sitting at the wedding of one of your children or at the funeral of someone dear. You're seeing with a bit more clarity the big picture of life with a bit more clarity.

My husband and I joke about all the songs he wants at his funeral. It's going to be a mix of movie theme songs, Lennon-McCartney collaborations, and great hymns of the church; it's also going to last for hours.

I have my own list, along with the people I'd like to sing. Close to the top is a song written by Carol Cymbala, "He's Been Faithful." Nearly twenty years ago, I heard it for the first time, and I marveled at the way it portrays my life in Christ. I thought of the song as I've recently been reading through my journals that chronicle life's ups and downs, victories and defeats, heartbreaks and unimaginable joys. "He's Been Faithful," with its references to so much of my own Christian life—fear and pain, weakness and despair, doubt

and prayerlessness, selfishness and faithlessness—celebrates the goodness, greatness, miraculousness, utter devotion, and faithfulness of God. That song echoed in my mind as I read and remembered:

In my moments of fear, through every pain, every tear, there's a God who's been faithful to me.

I open the journals and recall when I entered the hospital to have our second child, with Isaiah 41:10 committed to my memory because of the fear of childbirth. Trembling as I changed into the hospital gown, I recited the words. The Lord Jesus filled that little bathroom with his presence and removed the fear. He also granted my request for a quick labor. Just a little more than two hours later, I held our second daughter.

I remember vividly, at age eighteen, telling my father that I was not going to college; I just didn't want to. Underneath my defiance was the fear of failing. God patiently and kindly broke through all that insecurity, and I stepped onto a college campus nearly two decades later, as a thirty-seven-year-old student. I made no promises and God made no demands. Just being there demonstrated his faithfulness to me.

For about thirty years, I battled irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). I saw family doctors and a specialist, and tried all that might help, but to no avail. I begged God to take it away. When he didn't, I abandoned hope of ever getting better. However, in the process, I began to thank him for it, because it kept me dependent on him. He gave me strength to endure and sixteen years ago, it disappeared.

The journal pages turn. Marriage is difficult at times, and ours has been no exception. Children can break your hearts, and ours did. Depression, like one of the Harry Potter Death Eaters, sucked out of me joy and the desire to live. We've now been married forty-one years, our children give

us great joy—as do the grandchildren—and my heart again sings for the sheer delight of a restored mind.

One memory invites me to linger: Our destination was Wilmore, Kentucky; my husband (Mark) was starting seminary in the fall of 1982. We traveled down in May to see if we could secure a place to live, a place I had prayed repeatedly would be near enough for Mark to walk to classes because we had only one car. We found a trailer and my heart sank. It wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but it was one block from the school. So we paid our deposit, and I tried to be grateful. Before we headed back to Wilmore in July, a group of people from First Wesleyan Church in Chillicothe, Ohio, banded together, promising to pay our rent for the two years until Mark got that degree.

God has promised his presence, and he's shown up at gravesides and in hospital rooms and in the everyday stuff of life, teaching me to love and accept our non-Christian son-in-law and taking care of our disabled grandson. God strengthened me in a very tangible way when I walked through a situation fraught with hurt and distress, when he spoke through the apostle Paul, "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27). I didn't hear those words as a command; instead, God spoke them gently, reminding me that he had made me worthy and that my baby steps in him brought delight.

My father rejected our first grandchild and wouldn't speak to our daughter. Our grandson, you see, is biracial. Long years of bias surfaced as Dad raged against a marriage, and then the child born from it. But one day, three and a half years after Brady's birth, we came home from church during a visit to our hometown in Ohio, and there at the head of the table was Dad—talking to, playing with, and feeding Brady. If ever there was an impossible in my life, there it was: my father's heart changed, literally overnight, by a faithful God.

I recently heard someone say that when you become a Christian, your greatest sins could still be ahead of you. And that was true of me. Still,

though I was, and am, faithless and disobedient and wandering, I've found myself pursued. It makes no sense in our bottom-line, greatest-maximum-effect world. All I can say is that the best of shepherds did a Luke 15: he sought me out and brought me home.

I met with God most mornings on the sofa. But even when I couldn't pray, Jesus drew me in. I was losing my best friend and our biggest cheerleader; my mother-in-law, Jane, was dying. I went to that couch with tears during those days and the Spirit of Jesus whispered, "Just come sit with me." One morning, the Spirit stopped me as I read Paul's words in Romans 8:18: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Later, after Jane had died, I had a dream. Jane and I were talking on the phone and the conversation was coming to an end. I told her that I loved her and she said she loved me. I told her I missed her and she did not reply. In that dream that, I think, was something a little more than a dream, I realized that God showed me the meaning of that Romans verse. She is in a place where love is still affirmed for those she loved most and not diminished by our (current) absence. The glory has been revealed. Jesus comforted me.

I am an addict, given to seeking after what makes me feel good, what I can do (sometimes so subtly that you'd never know it) to make myself feel or look good. Reading is at times an addiction. I've been known to resent setting a book aside in order to meet family demands. Then one night the Spirit clearly told me to put that desire into his hands. When I did so, reluctantly, Jesus graciously provided times to read, and I found those times so much sweeter than the ones for which I had previously grasped.

The verses in another song I want at my funeral read, "prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love." The Shepherd's sheepdogs, named *grace* and *mercy*, have nipped at my heels and nudged my sides. Some of those "sheepdogs" have other names: Mark Smith, John Stott, David Seamands, Peter Lord, Jane Smith, Glaphre Gilliland, J. I. Packer,

Craig Barnes, Tamera Rehnborg. I look beyond their words or faces, and there's Jesus, keeping me in his fold.

One particular night during a desert time, I was in bed. In my mind's eye, I lay by a tiny stream, trying to get some of the water, because I was so thirsty, so desperate, for Jesus. And then, for a few fleeting moments, the veil that separates the seen and unseen parted. I was bathed in the sense of an overwhelming love. The words that immediately came to mind as I tried to name this experience were *immense affection*. I have no explanation other than this: God came.

And so I am, as one pastor said when he was sixty years old, on the last lap of a four-lap race. I think often about the previous three laps. I reflect on life in general, on my own in particular. The chorus of "He's Been Faithful" says,

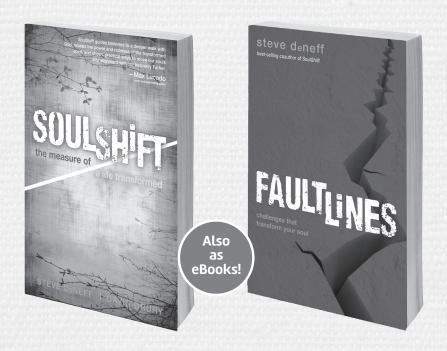
 $\label{eq:Looking back His love and mercy I see.}$ Though in my heart I have questioned, and failed to believe . . . 3

So much questioning, so much unbelief! But when my life ends, when this song is sung, I also will be singing to the saints and angels (because I will finally be able to really sing), and affirming this great truth: *He's been faithful*.

NOTES

- 1. Carol Cymbala, "He's Been Faithful," MetroLyrics, http://www.metrolyrics.com/hes-been-faithful-lyrics-damaris-carbaugh.html.
 - 2. Robert Robinson, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," public domain.
 - 3. Cymbala, ibid.

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