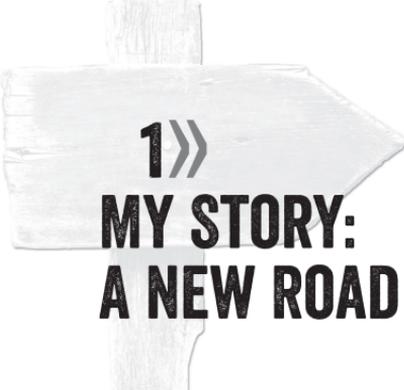


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1»

MY STORY: A NEW ROAD

AN EMPTY HOUSE, A STUFFED U-Haul, and exhaust fumes on the rise signaled the time to leave. Four-year-old Austin and six-year-old Natalie, eager to ride with their dad for the five-hundred-mile trip, left me in peaceful solitude in my own car. My week flashed back—crumpled newspapers, labeled boxes, and please-don't-leave hugs. As we ascended the ramp onto Interstate 20, leaving Dallas in my rearview mirror, I visualized God taking us in a new direction, on a new road, to a new life—in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

After an hour of driving, the Christian radio station faded. Now alone with my thoughts, I relived memories from the last eight years: three houses remodeled while living in them (marriage still intact), hunting for antiques in those smothering barns in Forney, and hilarious moments at Supper Club. A difficult pregnancy turned to joy when a daughter arrived. Two years later, a son. Those tender years glued us together as a family, and we grew. Snapshots etched in my mind reveal a snowman and two frozen-cheeked toddlers, a blow-up swimming pool and dancing in the sprinklers. We'll always remember the Texas State Fair, Bagelsteins, the Mesquite Rodeo, and of course, America's Team and ours, the Dallas Cowboys. Friends gathered every Fourth of July for all-you-can-peel shrimp and homemade Butterfinger ice cream. Leaving Dawna, my let's-get-together friend, tugged at my

resolve. Together we had trudged through newlywed confusion and newborn exhaustion. That chapter now closed.

The blessings in Texas would have made it easy to stay, but new opportunities waited for us in Mississippi. God's proven faithfulness assured me of special things ahead. Fear of the future would not rule the day. High hopes carried me to my destination.

We bought a seventy-year-old house, already remodeled by the previous owner and surrounded by trees—big, tall trees. We made new friends, joined a dynamic church, and got busy with life.

A year went by. Nothing terrible happened, but a growing sense of disappointment loomed over me. It was not a mid-life crisis at thirty-five, but rather unfulfilled expectations. I was not where I wanted to be in my life. I made known to God my frustration and waited for His reply.

About that time, four new friends invited me to go with them to a Christian conference at Precept Ministries in Chattanooga, Tennessee, six hours away. If nothing else, I needed a break from the Mom routine, and I knew I would enjoy the fellowship. It's strange to me now that I look back on this conference as a turning point in my life.

One morning, while singing songs, the worship leader saw someone she knew in the audience and called her to the front spontaneously. With giddy enthusiasm the song leader asked her friend to share some Scripture with this group of about 300. Without hesitation, this unnamed woman recited from memory the entire book of Colossians. Awe-inspiring! I sat in my chair mesmerized by what I had just heard. The wheels turned in my mind. I wondered what it would be like to really know God's Word, to have it so embedded in

my heart and mind that I would carry it with me wherever I would go. What would it mean to my relationship with God if I really knew His Word?

I had become a Christian at twenty-one years old, while a student at the University of Florida. But I didn't grow up in church and had no Bible background or knowledge accumulated. In the years that followed, I read through the Bible many times. In fact, I held to a daily Bible-reading regimen. But I couldn't confidently say that I knew the Bible. My Bible knowledge resembled a tangled pile of disconnected wires.

I came home from the conference in Chattanooga determined to make a change. I had come face-to-face with the shallowness of my own Bible knowledge, and I longed to go deeper. But where would I begin? Since my inspiration had come from someone who memorized Scripture, I decided to follow her lead. I started with the book of Ephesians, an impossible undertaking without God's help. It took me several months, but I worked on it every single day and night, learning one verse at a time.

My overriding motivation was the fear of quitting. At this point in my life, I couldn't handle the devastation of another goal abandoned. The day came when I shared, from memory, the book of Ephesians with my Sunday school class. As I concluded with "Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love," tears flowed and my heart pounded with joy. I saw others with tears in their eyes as well, but I didn't understand what it all meant. That day I reached a milestone in my life; the stepping-stones that preceded it were the months I spent devouring Ephesians chapter by chapter.

I couldn't say that I knew God's Word yet. What I could say was, "I know the book of Ephesians." And for the first time

in my Christian life, I felt as though God's Word was knowable. I had proven that to myself. For years I'd viewed knowing the Bible as something unattainable, or perhaps reserved for a select few. Now I was convinced that the knowledge of the Bible was not beyond my reach.

At the same time, I saw the inexhaustible nature of God's Word. Even within the book of Ephesians, after memorizing every single word, more discoveries awaited me. I had not yet reached the depth of its truth.

Another outcome grew out of many months spent in Ephesians—a sense of ownership, as if God had written the book just for me. Every time I heard anything from Ephesians mentioned, in conversation or at church, I immediately thought, *That's my book*. I had poured hours of my life into Ephesians, and it now belonged to me.

But why did God give me His Word, and where did He want to take me from there? I didn't know. I felt as if I were at a crossroad in my life. I couldn't go back, and I couldn't stay the same; those options seemed closed. I wasn't sure why or what was ahead, but I saw myself standing at a crossroad, calculating a move to the right or to the left.

On my upcoming fall schedule I planned to teach a Bible study on 2 Peter. Because it was several months away, I decided to memorize that book. With only three chapters I could do it over the summer. As I began in chapter 1, saying the words over and over, I noticed a theme unfolding.

Grace and peace be yours in abundance *through the knowledge of God* and of Jesus our Lord. (2 Peter 1:2, emphasis added)

His divine power has given us everything we need

for life and godliness *through our knowledge of him* who called us by his own glory and goodness. (2 Peter 1:3, emphasis added)

Through these he has given us *his very great and precious promises* so that through them you may participate in the divine nature . . . (2 Peter 1:4, emphasis added)

I meditated not only on the words but on the truth presented there. And I began to have a conversation with myself that went something like this: *Wow! These are very bold statements. How could they possibly be true?* This passage claims that through our knowledge of God

- we can have grace and peace in abundance,
- we can have everything we need for life and godliness, and
- we can participate in the divine nature; we can become more like Jesus.

Is this possible? I asked. Of course, I know God's Word is true "in theory," but if it is really true that we can have everything we need for life and godliness, through our knowledge of God, then how come more Christians aren't pouring themselves into the Scriptures so they can have all these things? I don't know! Then I asked myself, *Well, how come you don't?* I sat there contemplating my own challenge. Then I determined, *I'm going to! I am going to pour myself into God's Word until I get everything I need for life and godliness.*

That day I made the right turn at the crossroad. With renewed fervor, I plunged into God's Word as though there were no tomorrow—every free minute of every day and night. As a

busy mom with no extra hours in my day, I had to find ways to fit in God's Word. I agonized while determining which activities were truly essential. (Can you believe my husband, Ethan, thought cooking and cleaning should remain in the essential category?)

Over the next ten years, I memorized the Sermon on the Mount, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1 John, Revelation, a few Psalms, and other passages.

In order to keep from forgetting these, I set up a schedule to review one book every day, while learning something new. At that time, we didn't have a Christian radio station in Hattiesburg, so instead of what I used to do in Dallas—keep the radio on all day and listen to *someone else teach* what they learned from the Bible—I worked around the house *learning Scripture for myself*. I found it easy to do many activities at the same time, while learning or reviewing Scripture: showering, putting on makeup, vacuuming, folding laundry, cooking, cleaning, washing floors, driving all over town, and many other jobs that don't require thinking.

At the end of each day, physical exhaustion spread over me, but weariness did not. In fact, I felt victorious as I constantly battled the distractions of the day and still squeezed in God's Word. I began connecting the dots between God's requirement of me and the part I'm responsible for. Would God want me to know Him and spend time in His Word, but then make that impossible to achieve? No, but neither does He make it effortless. He will make a way when I put forth the effort and show my willingness to put Him first.

An aroma of joy permeated my heart and my home. This frazzled mom began to change. An urgency to make up for

lost time replaced the guilt caused by spiritual neglect. I had a renewed confidence that God would help me raise my children according to His plan. His presence guided me throughout my day, in every decision, at every turn.

Where did the pursuit of knowledge fit into my understanding? Doesn't the Bible say, "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies" (1 Corinthians 8:1 NASB), and, "If I have . . . all knowledge . . . but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2 NASB)? Knowledge for knowledge's sake couldn't be the answer, but what about 2 Peter 1:3: "everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him"? The answer to this dilemma appears in the same chapter of 2 Peter.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5–8)

In other words, if you are not growing in your faith—adding to your faith—your knowledge becomes ineffective and unproductive. But if you are continually growing in your faith, your knowledge will have a positive effect. It will keep your knowledge productive and effective. The bottom line: Knowledge is meaningless without application.

People ask me, "What's the most difficult part of memorizing?" The answer? Living it! For example, memorizing the

book of James put me in a constant state of rebuke because so much in my life needed to be changed. I knew I wasn't living it.

James says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22). That's telling me that if I listen to, or read, or even memorize the Word, but I don't do what it says, then I'm deceived because I think I'm Okay, just fine, doing well, simply because I memorized the Word. James doesn't leave it there. He says that if you listen to the Word but don't do what it says, you're like the person who looks in the mirror, sees his flaws, but goes away forgetting to fix the problem (James 1:23–24). In contrast, the man who looks intently into the Word does not forget what he sees and makes the needed correction. This man will be blessed in whatever he does (see v. 25). The Word of God acts as a mirror, revealing who we are, inside and out.

A friend of mine, Beverly, worked with me years ago, volunteering at our children's school. One day Beverly came to school to help out. She'd been there for several hours and then went to the ladies' room. As she leaned over to wash her hands, she noticed in the mirror that she still had a curler on top of her head. She'd been walking around school with that curler on her head, and no one told her about it. But the mirror told her. Now, what do you suppose was the likelihood that after seeing the curler she left it there and walked away? None. She yanked it out immediately.

Two important factors emerge from this story: knowledge and application. Beverly worked at the school for several hours with no knowledge of the problem, so how could she take action? As soon as the mirror showed her the truth, she made the needed correction. So it is with God's Word. Application is vital, but we cannot apply what we do not know.

The connection between knowledge and application became clearer in my own life. Knowledge is meaningless without application, but you won't have application if you don't have knowledge.

God provided many opportunities in my own home to apply the knowledge I gained. But it wasn't as smooth sailing as it may have appeared from the outside. The more I got into God's Word, the more knowledge I acquired, and the more I felt compelled to apply it. But this became a heavy burden to me because I exposed myself to so much. For example, memorizing the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) nailed me with humanly impossible teachings. Jesus said:

But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? (Matthew 5:44–47)

Such powerful words and a call to a lifestyle so far from my own! I struggled to love everyday people, and now I was supposed to love my enemies?

Why did God give me His Word if it only pointed out my inadequacies and failure to live up to its principles? My own knowledge overwhelmed me! My constant prayer was, "Lord, I want to go beyond knowledge. I don't want to be one of those people who can quote the Bible but whose life disgraces

the cause of Christ. O God, I'd rather die than be that person.”

The Lord knew my quandary, but He had already shown me the answer in the book of Ephesians. How quickly I'd forgotten! Notice the word *power* throughout Paul's prayer for the Ephesians.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with *power* through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have *power*, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his *power* that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:14–21, emphasis added)

God alone gives the power to know the depth and breadth of His love, and only experientially knowing the love of Christ will surpass knowledge. On my own I am incapable of living up to His Word. God's power, working in me and through me, will enable me to go beyond knowledge.

Step by step, God was leading me in my understanding, teaching me what it meant to really know Him and walk with Him. I had tasted knowledge and found it delightfully satis-

fyng. I'd also become aware of the need to make knowledge more than word intake. I see now that God had me right where He wanted me. He was beginning to write His Word in my heart.