



A Trophy of God's Grace

The Life and Testimony of
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Often, events happen in our lives for which we have no answers. However, these are frequently defining moments that God uses to mold us into His perfect image. Nothing has ever, nor will ever take Him by surprise. God ordains every event in our lives. Every individual has to choose what to do with the circumstances that God permits. Some individuals will rebel, and harden themselves toward God, while others will choose to surrender and allow God's mighty hand to do His perfect refining work. Below is a story of these very such defining moments in my life and how God revealed Himself through them.

Hello, my name is Mariela Carmona. I was born in Colombia, South America, to a family whose hopes and dreams would soon be shattered by the death of a loved one. My father's grocery store in the village gave him his great wealth. However, with this wealth came great responsibilities. Every day he made his rounds and delivered produce to each store that he owned. On one occasion, the air was extremely hot. As my father's wagon pulled into sight, I could see that he was overheated and completely exhausted. He immediately jumped off his wagon and plunged his head into a huge metal barrel containing rusty old rainwater. Sadly, he never took his head back out. Though I was very young, the Lord has allowed this memory to forever hold a place in my heart. I cannot tell you the particular nature of my father's death, but what I can say is that my life was never the same.

My mother, mourning the loss of her husband was now left to tend to several children on her own. She was overwhelmed, desperate and ill prepared for such an enormous task. From what I understand growing up, she was a street child at a very young age. Consequently, her peculiar upbringing shaped the steps of her adult life. She married my dad when she was only 15 years old. He was her knight in shining armor. My father was very wealthy and cared well for my mother – something she was not accustomed to. It appeared that they had the perfect relationship until death came and tore them apart. The world once again seemed cold and unloving. Her fear drove her to a desperate search to fill that void in her life. Practically to myself and baby brother this meant being dragged to nightclubs and the homes of strangers. Day after day we watched mom get stoned and sell her body for money. If only she knew that the blood of Jesus Christ could satisfy her desires. If only she knew that God would provide all her needs through His riches. Sadly all she knew was this wounding behavior that seemed to continue for an eternity. Then one day it all changed.

When I was 5 and my brother was 2, my mother left us in the care of her sister. It quickly became evident that our aunt had no affection for children. My brother and I were beaten daily. My aunt would tell us over and over that she hated us and that our beatings were well deserved. Up until this point I was unaware of not only the word hate, but also the emotion. Despite everything prior, I was still a happy-go-lucky sort of child - yet slowly my heart began to change. This next dreadful event in my life was a defining moment for me. It was laundry day. This was not an easy task as the river was our washing machine and the sun was our dryer. My aunt demanded that my little brother stay behind and take a nap while we went to the river. I pleaded with her to let me take him. I knew he wouldn't sleep and would only cry the whole time we were gone. She simply said, "He needs to learn not to be such a spoiled little brat and learn that he can't always get his way." I knew my brother was anything but spoiled. We had no one to spoil us. The only affection he received was from me. He was like my own little boy. I loved him with all of my heart. Despite my pleadings, he was left behind alone in his crib. We were gone for 3 hours, during which time his death wail never ceased. Even above the noise of the river I could faintly hear his pleas for help. When we arrived at home we went into his room to discover that the pin on his cloth diaper had come undone and had plunged deeply into his side. His little body was bloated and his face was beat red. My aunt tried to console him but to no

avail. She then handed him to me. I can still remember the desperate look upon his little face as he looked into my eyes as though pleading for help. But I was helpless. No amount of love or affection was going to take his pain away. She then handed his bloated body to me. He breathed his very last breath as I cradled him in my arms that day. As I held his lifeless frame, my heart began to turn to stone. I suddenly became bitter and angry at the whole world - especially God. The only person who loved me and needed me was suddenly snatched from my life. When my mother heard about his death she was wrought with grief, and came and attempted to throw herself into his grave as though it would bring him back or ease the pain. Though I was angry with mom, I equally loved her. My devotion to her did not cease, but continued as a bond that seemed to be unbreakable.

After my brother's death, I lived with my mother once again and the cycle continued. I was dragged from one man's house to another. Finally, she met a man who claimed to love her and we moved in with him. Sadly, he did not claim to love me. His first words to me were whispered in my ear, "I hate you, you better never cross my path or I'll kill you." Neither of us ever made this conversation known to my mother. As far as she knew, he loved me and we lived together as a *family* for about a year. I was responsible for cleaning the house, cooking and taking care of my stepbrother. Daily my stepfather would taunt me and tell me that I did not deserve to live and that the air that I was breathing belonged to my stepbrother. Needless to say, these remarks created resentment toward this innocent little baby. I longed so much to be accepted as part of the family, yet I knew this would never happen for I was a girl and not his own child. I longed for one morsel of love to fall my way as my physical hunger was only surpassed by my emotional starvation. I longed for it to be my turn.

Despite what seemed to be one human tragedy after another, God continued to sustain me. My mother and "stepfather" were accustomed to taking many overnight fishing trips. On one of those trips, I was responsible for cooking a big stew. As I was lifting the big pot of boiling water from the stove to move it to the sink, I spilled the whole thing all over myself. My neighbors found me lying on the floor screaming in agony. Although I suffered second and third degree burns, the Lord did not allow one scar from that accident. On another of their fishing trips, I was left with no food to eat for three days. Being the resourceful child that I was, I snuck into my neighbor's house to find food. She was a devout Catholic, so I knew that she would be gone most of the day at Mass. On her stove was a mouth watering pot of stew. I couldn't resist! With all the strength I could muster, I grabbed that pot and hid under her bed inhaling the entire thing. Boy it felt wonderful to have a full tummy! Unfortunately, I lost track of time and fell asleep under her bed. I awoke to hear my neighbor proclaiming the missing stew and that the culprit was most likely me. Instantly, I heard my stepfather's booming voice through the whole house. My heart felt as though it were going to jump right out of my chest. I was quite sure they could hear it beating. I held my breath as they paced back and forth in front of the bed. Just as I felt confident that I was safe, he peered under the bed to find me shaking and trembling. The worst had finally come true! He grabbed me by my hair (which was down to my waist if not longer) and dragged me across the street to our house, he stripped me, hung me by my waist using a rope from the ceiling, and then he proceeded to beat me with a dried piece of cow's leather. The beating went on till there was blood pouring from every part of my body. This became his normal, almost daily way of punishing me for small or large offences. After the beatings he locked me in my room for about three days to think about what I had done wrong. I began to question why I was even alive. The days had become dark and the injuries unimaginable. At the hand of my stepfather, I had been raped, stabbed, shot and repeatedly beaten. My mother tried to stop the abuse, but sadly whenever she interfered she met some of the same fate. I also had a very strong will that my mother did not possess. At this point God was

using it to allow me to survive. I refused to let my stepfather ever see a single tear drop from my eye. I would mentally force my body to ignore the pain so that he would have no satisfaction in hurting me. As I look back at this time in my life now, I rejoice that my Lord allowed these sufferings in my life. First so that I can know Him better through His sacrifice on the cross for me (Phil 3:10) and second so that I can comfort those who have suffered as I have to the Glory of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:4). We must never live our lives defeated by our past misfortunes. God can and will turn them into something beautiful for His glory if we allow Him to.

As God continued to allow events in my life to bring about change, I will never forget the time I was in town when suddenly I got this horrible feeling that something was just not right with my mother. I ran all the way home and frantically burst into the house searching for her. I followed her sobs to their bedroom. I was horrified at the sight that I found. My mother's face was covered in blood and my stepfather had a gun in his hand pointed at her. Adrenaline pumping, I jumped in front of my mother as a shield and screamed, "You will have to kill me first if you want to kill my mother." He of course was delighted to hear this and said, "Fine I'll kill you both, that won't bother me." To this day I can only explain this next incident as God's mighty hand intervening in my behalf. I quickly flung her across the room, just as he let go of the trigger. Somehow I managed to duck just in time as the bullet embedded itself into the wall behind me. I then ran to the police station next door to report this violent act. After an hour of desperately trying to get a policemen's attention, a little old lady finally forced one to listen to me. They came and arrested my stepfather for just one day. When they questioned my mother as to how she received the bruises she said she did it herself. He completely denied everything and she was too afraid to tell the truth. The following day after his release, I received the beating of my life. He told me that if I were still home when he got back from work he would blow my brains out with the gun, which he was pointing at my head. I tried leaving that day but my mom didn't want me to go, so she proceeded to hide me. Unfortunately her plan was discovered when he got home that night. He picked me up by my hair and threw me out the door unto the streets. He told me that if I ever returned he would kill me. With that warning in mind I fled, never to return.

Little did I know just how drastically my life would change from that point. I begged in the streets, slept under newspapers and ate scraps from trashcans. Occasionally, someone would take pity on me and take me into their home. However, I would always run away before morning because I did not want anyone trying to be my parent. I was determined to need no one. Nevertheless, one particular family seemed to genuinely care about me so I decided to stay. Although I felt like I was becoming comfortable with this family, I was deathly afraid of their black cat. After being at their home for about three months I had a nightmare that that cat ate me, so the next morning I sought to kill it. To my surprise the dumb cat ended up winning the fight. Even though I hadn't killed him, I was horribly afraid of getting whipped so I hid under the house until the family went to church. Despite never getting in trouble for the actual catfight, the family told me that they were taking me to a place where little children are taught manners and how to live with families. I was afraid yet consented to their wishes. They brought me to a huge building and left me there.

As so many times before, God continued to work out the circumstance in my life to bring about change. Because I was one of the last children to be registered, I was placed on the top floor of the building. I can't quite say just how tall the building was but I know it was tall. They told me that I was not allowed to enter a certain room because I could hurt myself. Of course the first thought that entered my mind was, "this is wonderful; just what I had been waiting for." I opened the door and found a broken rocking chair (a big portion of its back was missing, leaving a big enough gap for a child to get through) balanced between two pieces of wood. I stood there

pondering my life, asking myself why I should live. I could not find any good reason. I had no family, no friends, or even a home to call my own. Nobody would miss me. With this in mind I sat and leaned back. When the doctor's found me I was stuck to firewood with nails sticking through it. The nails were so deeply embedded into my head and back that they had to take the wood with me to the hospital. I was brought back to the family I had been living with. There the doctor's took care of me for about 3 months as I lay in a coma. The doctor's finally lost hope and claimed me dead. At that time the lady I was living with prayed that God would spare my life. Just as she said amen I turned my head and threw up blood. I had been internally bleeding, yet the doctor's had no clue. *This was the first time in my young life that I realized the existence of God.* He had once again protected my life. Contemplating the existence of a God did not thrill me because I knew He was the one standing between death and me. I had so desperately wanted to die and yet He had stopped me. I became very bitter at God because I felt He was being cruel to keep me alive only to be rejected by everyone who laid eyes upon me. I know now that God loves me and He had a plan for me and was preserving me for that purpose. At this time, I believe He used my strong will and tenacious spirit to drive me forward in the healing process. Though I had not broken one single bone in the fall, I had to learn to walk and simply live again. After I had recovered, my mother came to visit me. She told me that my stepfather had changed and that she wanted me to live with them. She placed me on her shoulders and began to walk outside into the yard. Once we reached the yard fence I grabbed on for dear life and would not let go. I was horrified at the thought of going back to live with my stepfather. Fear overtook me. I took my anger and wrath out on my mother. I told her that I hated her and never wanted to see her again. In fact I went so far as to tell her that I didn't care if she died and went to hell. Regretfully, those were the last words I ever spoke to my dear mother for I never saw her again. Of course those words were the furthest from the truth. They were just hiding the pain and fear of a soul that Jesus was trying to heal. Years later after I had found peace in the finishing work of Christ, I began searching for my mom. To this day, I continue looking and it is my desire that the Lord will allow us to someday be united. I pray that He will allow me to share with her the joy that I have found in Him.

I have always been amazed to see how God shapes every event in our lives even before we are His children. I was not aware then that God's mighty hand was at work in my life drawing me to Himself. Once my body had recovered, I ran away from this home because they told me one day that they were going to send me to a home for orphans. No sooner had I done this than a man claiming to be my uncle took me on a bus and brought me to a huge building. He left me there and told me that he would be back after he went to the store. I waited and waited there for hours, but he never showed up. Finally, a lady came out and told me that I was going to be staying there with them. The place I had tried running away from is the very same place God in His mercy brought me to. I only lasted a couple hours at the first foster home in which they placed me. The parent's daughter had a doll that she would not let me play with so I grabbed her by her hair and threw her backwards. Needless to say the parents were less than pleased! I returned to the head quarters and was reassigned to a new home. This one I was only at for a day. Again I beat up their children. I was very angry and did not want to be placed with some strange family who would try to be my parents. They finally found one home to place me in. Even though I hated all the children, especially the girls, I liked the parents so I tried to behave myself. After a few months however, trouble started. They left all of us kids at home. One of the boys told the youngest child to stick a piece of corn in one ear and it would come out the other ear. The kernel got stuck in his ear canal. When the parents got home everybody blamed me. Consequently, I was forced to leave the family. This was a very upsetting thing for me, for I had grown rather fond of this family. After this, I ended up with a family who actually cared about

me. I stayed with them for a few months before it was time to move into a new orphanage. I found out later that this family was in the process of adopting me, however just hours prior God interceded and allowed a Christian woman in the United States to adopt me.

As God continued to work out my permanent home situation, He allowed me to live in about 13 different foster homes and orphanages. As I was learning to become an expert foster child, my big day finally came. I was going to meet my new adopted family! I will never forget the first time I looked upon my new mother. I was so scared. She looked like a ghost to me! Yet worse than anything else, my new sister had funny looking eyes and she also was fading away (she's Korean). I was sure that this new family would never love me. They would certainly get sick of me in no time and ship me back. With much fear, I left the orphanage that day not knowing what my future would hold. My mother, my sister Kristi and I spent about 4 weeks getting everything ready to fly to America. While we were in Colombia I attempted to kill myself by trying to jump off a three-story building. Kristi caught me just before I jumped. I received my first spanking from my new mother for this. She told me that she loved me and did not want to loose me. I was shocked! What did it mean to love someone? I had never before been told that I was loved. I didn't even know what the word meant. On the flight to America I was determined that I was going to change. I would leave my old life behind; nobody would have to know that I was that unwanted child who everybody hated. Nobody in this new land knew me so I would build a new me. I did not know then just how much my life would actually change and Who would do the changing in me.

When we arrived in my new home I was so excited that I ran through every room looking to see which room was mine. The foster parents had told me that I would be getting a real live talking doll from my new family. I was sorely disappointed when that did not happen. Still I was thrilled to have my very own family, what more did I need? The months and years that followed were very difficult ones both for my new family and me. I tested them in every way imaginable. I was not about to let them love me. I did not want someone else trying to be my mother. My heart was so full of hateful thoughts, that I simply could not accept their love. On several occasions I tried running away, but they always caught up with me. In my mind my new mother was the strangest person I had ever known, because she never beat me up. Instead, she would spank me! She would tell me that because she loved me she had to spank me. I would simply laugh at her and stand there very defiantly refusing to cry. Besides, what was a spanking compared to the vicious beatings I was familiar with? My heart was so full of hatred and bitterness at the world and God that I was not about to allow anyone to get close to me. Every day it was a battle of the will between the two of us. That first summer she sent me to Word of Life Camp where I began hearing the Word of God. In the summer of 88 a speaker at camp spoke on hell. He explained that this is a place reserved for Satan and his angels and all those who refuse to accept God's free gift of salvation. As he went on to describe the torments of hell my heart became overwhelmed at the thought of spending eternity there. I had already lived a life of misery while on earth. Why would I ever want to spend eternity there? The next day he spoke on Christ's sacrificial gift on the cross. He explained that it was my sin that had nailed Him to the cross and that He did it simply because He loves me (Rom 5:8). That night I battled in my mind and heart until midnight at which time I woke my counselor up and asked her to explain it all to me again. I could not understand why Someone so perfect and lovely could die for such a wretched child like me. My counselor shared with me the most profound truth. She explained to me that it had nothing to do with me but everything to do with Christ. Ephesians 2:8-9 states that I was saved by God's grace and it had nothing to do with how evil I was or how good I was, it had everything to do with God's perfect love for me. Once she explained this simple yet awesome truth to me I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior with my whole heart. I

say Lord because we are to give Christ full control of our lives. Eph. 2 goes on to say in verse 10 that we belong to God to do good works for Him. This was and is God's perfect plan for every believer's life. I was now a new creature. Old things had passed away, behold all things had become new! A year later a missionary came to my church where he challenged us with his mission field. My heart felt compelled to answer God's call upon my life. I was so burdened for the lost condition of the people of that Land. I vowed that night to the Lord that I would give Him my whole life to use in whichever way He saw best. That same night He laid missions upon my heart.

As God continued to mold me into His image, the next several years demonstrated many challenges. I battled with the assurance of my salvation almost on a daily bases. During these times the Lord assured me from scripture of His love and that I belong to Him with verses like, *"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom 8:35-39). I knew His promises were true yet I still felt empty. As I continued to search for answers, I learned that this emptiness was a prompting from God to further sanctify me.

My God desired to have a relationship with me. Up until this point, our relationship had been very one sided. I needed to start participating. I knew that God loved me, but now I needed to build on that by adding to my faith "diligence, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love" (II Peter 1:5-9). I had become content to just be a Christian who went to church and warmed a pew and this needed to stop. Quickly, I learned the importance of accountability and discipleship.

God continued to use defining moments in my life for His glory. The first day of college, the first class of the day, I met my wonderful soon-to-be husband. Paul spent several hours simply listening to me unburden my years of baggage and hurts. He had such wisdom and compassion as he would direct my heart to the Lord in every area that I mentioned. In 1997, Paul and I began attending Northland Baptist Bible College. I came to college still weighted down by bitterness and an unforgiveness, yet God had wonderful plans for my life. This is where the Lord began to do a transforming work in my life. I went to one counseling session with a staff lady at the Northland where she taught me the most powerful truth I have ever heard. Through this, I was taught the principles of putting off the works of the flesh and putting on the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:21-26). As I grabbed a hold of these truths I began to confess and repent of my bitterness and anger and move forward for Christ. I gave God all of my past failures, fears, hurts and scars! I will never forget the sense of victory I felt - finally my heart was set free.

The Bible says in Jeremiah 29: 11-14 that the Lord's thoughts toward us are always those of peace and an expected end. In other words, He only has the best in mind for me. The Lord was simply waiting for me to call upon Him, and turn from my own ways. He promises that He will be found, if we seek for Him with all of our hearts. On October 17, 1998 I married Paul - my best friend. In 2000, we took a missions trip where the Lord confirmed His will for the both of us to serve Him on the mission field. When we first got married, we were not sure if I would be able to bear children due to the abuse my body had endured, yet on January 24, 2001, the Lord blessed us with our first daughter, Bryanna Mariela. Since then, God has blessed us with three other precious children: Isaiah Paul, Eilianna Mekenna, and Emilianna Grace. God is so wonderful to give us children! Through God 's grace we both graduated in 2002 with majors in

Missions/Bible. In December 2003 we began praying that God would show us His clear direction for our lives. A few weeks later we received an email from a missionary in Brazil inviting us to come join their team. We began praying to see if this is where the Lord would have us go. The more we prayed the stronger the calling became. There was no doubt in our minds or hearts this was the direction God wanted us to pursue.

Who would have ever guessed that a homeless child who nobody wanted would someday be doing the most important thing in life....serving the Creator and Savior of the world! God's mercy is so great towards them that fear Him! I stand before you today to testify that we truly do have an awesome God, who shows his love and mercy to thousands who diligently seek Him and love Him.

To my Friend who has never placed their trust in Christ alone, what has kept you from giving your life to Jesus Christ? I grew up learning that I could trust nobody, than Jesus came and taught me the true meaning of love. I thought I was unlovable, but Jesus demonstrated His love to me. I could not fathom how He could love me, but all I had to do was accept His love, forgiveness, and healing. You CAN trust Him and He Does love you!

Fellow Christian, what is keeping YOU from serving God? If God could take me, an undesirable, unlovable, street child from Columbia, bring me to the States, save me and put me into the ministry, He CAN use YOU if you surrender yourself to Him. If God could take my life and turn it into a usable vessel for service, He can use anyone! Will you let yourself be used?