



# Witness to Your Family

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closest to you?

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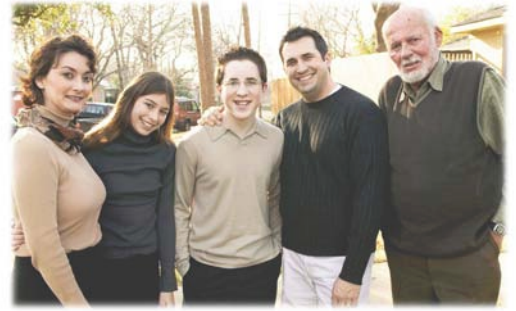
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# INTRODUCTION



## Would You Rather?

**Why is it so hard to witness to our own family members?**

“Would you rather?” has always been one of my favorite games. I like it so much because it helps me know myself and others better. I’m going to give you a chance to play this game right now. Here goes ...

Would you rather take a two-day vacation in Paris, France, or a two-month vacation in Paris, Missouri?

Would you rather lick a water fountain or wipe a stranger’s nose?

Would you rather have your underwear run up the courthouse flagpole or have your bedroom smell like a mouse for a month?

Would you rather witness to a complete stranger or witness to someone in your family?

Ah-ha! I got you on that last one, didn’t I? That’s a hard one to answer for most people. Talking to strangers is not my forte, so “cold-call” evangelism scares the daylights out of me. However, witnessing to family members can also be difficult because you (and they) have so much to lose if it goes bad.

While sharing the gospel with family members isn’t the easiest thing any of us have ever done, it’s extremely important. And it can be done. After all, God has placed you as a light in this world in exactly the place that He wants you. And that includes your family. You also may have more ground to stand on with them than most, since you have common experiences and common views to start from.



## **Witness to Your Family**

Would You Rather?

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In this collection of articles, you'll read about women who have shared God's love with their loved ones. You'll get tips and advice on how to witness to family members without alienating them, how to love them, and how to wait gracefully. My prayer is that this study will give you the confidence, courage, and wisdom you need as you witness to your lost family members.

Blessings,

*Dana Wilkerson*

*Contributing Editor, Women's and Family Issues*

*Christianity Today International*



# LEADER'S GUIDE



## How to use “Witness to Your Family” for a group study.

“Witness to Your Family” can be used for individual or group study, but if you intend to lead a group study on this, some simple suggestions follow:

- 1 Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.
- 2 Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.
- 3 Alternatively, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.
- 4 Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.
- 5 When working through the “Thought Provokers” be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for women to know that others share their experience. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 6 End the session in prayer.





## My Sister Rejected God

Loving a family member who doesn't share your faith in Christ.

by Jane Merrill

I sat at the children's table in the library, my knees shoved under my chin, pretending to listen to the librarian read a story while my stomach tied itself in knots. It wasn't the story being read to my son and the other preschoolers that upset me. It was my elder sister, Diana\*, 32, who sat across from me. She'd just dropped a bombshell into my lap. "I quit the church," she'd blurted out. "Sam and I have joined a meditation group."

"What's a 'meditation group'?" I knew I didn't want to hear her answer.

"We meet together and meditate," she hedged. "It's similar to praying."

"But what about Jesus?" My stomach ached clear through to my back.

She said, "It doesn't matter. I don't believe Christianity's right anymore. Jesus was just an influential teacher and good man."

Diana's reply hit me like a physical blow. The tension between us crackled through the air like static electricity.

On the 90-minute drive home that afternoon, I berated myself for not seeing this coming. Despite the fact we'd been raised in a Bible-believing family, I'd sensed Diana didn't share the type of personal relationship I had with the Lord. As a Christian, I'd often felt the Holy Spirit nudge me to talk to my sister about Jesus. *I've tried*, I reasoned, wondering all the time if maybe I could have tried harder. At least three times in the last few months I'd attempted to get together with my sister to talk without interference from our kids. Twice, I even made the long drive to town only to find something had come up for Diana, and she couldn't meet with me. Could I have done more?



## Witness to Your Family

### My Sister Rejected God

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Over the next few years, Diana and I had many confrontations as I tried to “set her straight.” One day, at a fast-food restaurant where we were having lunch, our conversation strayed to a controversial subject.

“But homosexuality is wrong,” I said.

Diana leaned forward. “Wrong according to whom?”

“The Bible says ...” I began.

My normally mild-mannered sister exploded. “Why does everyone always talk about the Bible?” she ranted. “I get so tired of hearing that!” I felt as though her attack was personal, yet deep down I knew God’s Word can be convicting and painful.

Once, when we visited her house at lunchtime, my four-year-old daughter, Amy, said our mealtime prayer. When she finished, Diana taunted her, asking if Jesus really came when she prayed. With childlike innocence Amy explained that Jesus is always with her. Although angered at my sister’s ridicule of a child’s prayer, I kept quiet, hoping my daughter’s budding faith would shine through with a testimony of its own.

One day while we talked on the phone, Diana asked, “Do you know what Dad says? He says Jesus is the only way to heaven. Can you believe that?” It didn’t matter to her that I agreed with Dad; she only thought we were narrow-minded. “Where were you when we were growing up?” I wanted to ask. Hadn’t we been taught that truth? Once again I antagonized her by disagreeing with her. At least this time we weren’t face to face; she couldn’t see the tears in my eyes.

I came to loathe visits to her house. The more she and her husband, Sam, delved into Eastern mysticism, the more idolatrous paraphernalia surrounded them. Pagan altars appeared in all the bedrooms. Even their two young teenaged daughters had altars in their rooms. A beautiful amethyst rock outlined with candles soon adorned the front of their living room fireplace and became an altar of worship when their meditation group met in their home.

I dreaded the summertime when Diana and Sam attended weeklong pilgrimages to New York. There they stayed at a huge center for people who believed as they did. Their meditation leader met with them and reinforced the teaching that they should worship themselves. They were indoctrinated in New Age/Eastern mysticism beliefs, such as God is in everything; therefore they are God.

As I watched Diana’s devotion to her meditation group deepen, I became angry. Diana went to their meeting place every morning for an hour of meditation. Two to three evenings a week, she and her husband met with their group. Almost



monthly, they had a special weekend retreat. I thought of the times she'd complained about how empty Christianity had been for her since it was "only a Sunday-morning religion."

As time went by, I struggled to understand the changes in her. For several years she had attended church and even taught Sunday school. However, as I thought about it, I remembered her main reason for choosing a particular church was the beautiful organ and the music. Diana never wanted to talk about Jesus, saying her beliefs were too private. Now I knew why. She'd never surrendered her life to God, but only went to church when it pleased her.

I recalled that a couple months before our meeting in the library, Diana's best friend died of cancer. Losing this friend, a very strong Christian, had been the final straw for my sister, I felt. She no longer could accept the God of Christianity when he let such a godly woman die a horrible death. Although she wouldn't discuss her feelings, I believed my sister blamed God for her friend's death. Changing religion was her way of striking back at this seemingly uncaring God.

Every time I met with Diana, I prayed for an opportunity to tell her the truth about Jesus. I would get so worked up I'd have knots in my stomach. I wanted so much for her to understand the gospel and believe it that I became, at times, an obnoxious Christian. For the next 12 years our relationship suffered because of our belief differences. I often felt as though I were a failure. After all, wasn't I supposed to tell others about Jesus and lead them to him? Shouldn't I come up with the perfect words to cause Diana to embrace Jesus?

As I listened to Christian friends talk about their wonderful relationships with their sisters, jealousy gripped me. How I longed for that close godly bond between Diana and me. Gradually, I learned to appreciate the "sisters" I had at church. They became like family to me as we shared burdens I couldn't share with my biological sister.

On those rare occasions when Diana felt obligated to attend church to hear a family member sing or for other special occasions, I found myself spending the whole time praying for her. Rather than using the time for worship and trusting God to work on Diana, I prayed as if her salvation depended on me. Sometimes I wanted to shake her and say, "Did you hear that?" Each time she showed no response to the message, I left discouraged over her refusal to believe.

Finally, through hours of prayer and Bible study, I realized I'm called to witness given the *opportunity*. What God does with that witness is up to him. I need to be the seed planter, and he will do the growing when the time is right. With that understanding, my attitude changed. I no longer felt tied in knots with the need to hit Diana over the head with my Bible. I knew God promises not to let his Word return void, and I could trust him to work in her life.



Now, when I see my sister, I pray beforehand that God will provide an opening for us to talk about him. Sometimes that chance comes and sometimes it doesn't, but I trust him for the opportunities. I don't force my Christian beliefs on her anymore, knowing they only cause strife and unwillingness, on her part, to hear what I'm saying. Most of all, I know no matter how much I want Diana to become a Christian, God desires it even more.

I try to listen to what Diana says without condemnation and self-righteousness. When she talks about grace, I understand she isn't referring to *God's* grace, but to a good feeling when things go right. Because of the change in my attitude, we still have a relationship, although there's a gulf between us. We get together for lunch sometimes and communicate through e-mail or the phone. I always try to show her I care about her. I ask about her friends and what her family's current interests are. When I go to her house for graduations or other functions, I meet her acquaintances with an open mind, seeing them as an opportunity to reach out.

Despite the fact 16 years have passed since Diana dropped that bombshell in my lap, I still have hope. I've seen her searching—trying different New Age churches and groups—and know she still has an emptiness inside for the true God. Even though I despair at times, I cling to the hope that someday I'll hear her say, "I quit my meditation group. I don't believe it's right anymore." Then, maybe she'll be ready to hear the truth.

### **Tips on Handling a Non-believing Family Member**

#### **Pray**

I always keep the link between God and me open. I tell him my fears and heartaches. He already knows, but he wants to hear it from me: "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4).

#### **Respect**

I found that when I began to show respect for my sister despite her beliefs, she wasn't always on the defensive. She began to relax and there were more God-given moments to point out Jesus' love to her. I may not agree with her religious beliefs; however, there are many areas where I'm able to respect her.





### **Listen**

After lots of trial-and-error, I learned the importance of listening. Many times I'd put on my self-righteous Christian mask and make some unconscionable remark about "her need to turn to God," only to see hurt on her face. I couldn't take back the destructive words, but I did pray for forgiveness. Each time I learned that if I'd simply listened, remembering how much God loves her, I wouldn't have been so mean-spirited.

### **Continue Communication**

Although tempted to cut off communication with Diana, I knew that if I did, I would have no opportunity to show her God's love. I try to meet her for lunch once a month or go by her office just to see her. Now, when she has difficulty at her job or other problems, she often turns to me as someone to talk to.

### **Show Love**

I try to show my Christianity by works as well as words. "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17). Knowing my sister's love for breads, I made her a bread cloth with a beautiful wheat pattern cross-stitched in the corners. I try to do little things for her and her family that please or help her. These gestures not only demonstrate God's love, but show her how much I care.

### **Seek Support**

I surround myself with Christians who willingly pray with me. They give me godly advice or listen when I need to express my hurts to someone. They are my God-given support team who helps me through the discouraging times and rejoices with me over small victories. My sisters in Christ remind me that God's in control, and I can trust him.

*Jane Merrill is a pseudonym for a writer living in the Southwest. This article first appeared in the **November/December 2002** issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.*

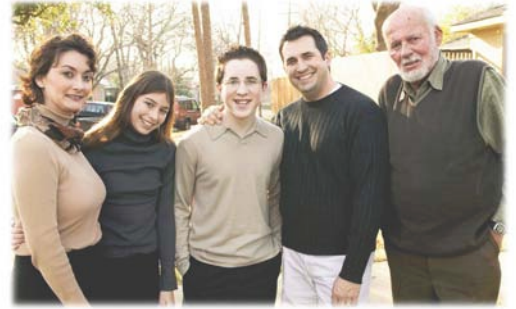


**Thought Provokers**

- *How would you respond to a lost family member who taunted your young child for praying before a meal?*
- *In what ways can you show respect for a family member who doesn't share your beliefs?*
- *How do you keep lines of communication open between yourself and your lost family members?*



# FEATURES



## Good News!

You don't need a soapbox or a tract to share your faith.

by Suzy Ryan

I hate to admit it, but sometimes I'm afraid to open my mouth to tell others about Jesus. Oh, I love the Lord and want all my friends and family to know him—but when I try to witness, sometimes I feel as though there's a sock stuffed down my throat.

Perhaps you've felt the same way. You're just not comfortable with witnessing tools like tracts, but you feel guilty about not sharing Jesus' love with others. If you can't relate to traditional methods, there's another option I've found successful in leading several of my neighbors to Christ—*lifestyle evangelism*. I let my natural personality show neighbors the love of Christ as I walk with Jesus moment by moment.

Scripture tells us, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). This basic backdrop of truth to witnessing relieves me of the burden of perfectionism. It's God doing all the work—I'm just the vessel. As I align my life with him according to his Word, I can more easily share how the Lord has intimately changed the flawed woman I am into a usable woman! Here are some steps I've found helpful in sharing the Good News with those around me.

**Pray for opportunities.** The Bible tells us that “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16, NKJV). So I ask the Lord whom he is drawing to himself, and within that parameter, how he can use me. You can do the same—then make a list of those he brings to mind and pray that God will soften their hearts and give them faith to believe in him. Pray for their salvation and petition Jesus to help you meet their needs and reveal himself through your actions. When God nudges you to share your faith, say a silent prayer for him to give you his words. If all goes well, the Lord receives the glory. If disaster occurs, he takes responsibility. No pressure!



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**Obey God's promptings.** Several years ago, I invited an unchurched friend, Marion, to our church. Unfortunately, the Sunday she and her husband attended, our church was going through an intense fundraising drive. Marion wasn't interested in going back. But the Lord prompted me to invite her to go with me to a Bible study. I adamantly replied, "No way!"

I still remember the battle in my mind. I arrived home from the Bible study and heard the Holy Spirit prompt, *Invite Marion*. I argued, *She already gave church a try. I can't!* and *Who am I to ask her?* But no matter how I tried, I couldn't shake the words, *Invite Marion!*

Finally I picked up the phone. When Marion answered, I literally held my breath and said, "I feel God telling me to ask you to my Bible study. If you can't go or don't want to, I understand, but I can't get you out of my thoughts." Surprisingly, she agreed, and has been attending ever since (this is her fourth year). She accepted the Lord, and now has more Bible knowledge than most lifelong Christians!

Watching Marion love the Lord so intensely has touched my very being. This precious soul mate has filled empty holes in my own life with her love and encouragement. To have the privilege to introduce her to Jesus is an unbelievable honor because she's an absolute treasure for a confidante.

Being obedient to the Holy Spirit—even when you feel awkward—can reap unexpected blessings.

**Walk the walk.** One of my neighbors, Melissa, used to push every one of my buttons possible. She constantly judged my actions and belittled my faith. Her son spent a lot of time at my house playing with my son and would tell his mom, "We prayed today at lunch for good behavior. I also learned God can change bad men into good men, like he did with Paul in the Bible." In a rush of anger, she once stormed into my house lecturing, "My child is not to pray. If you want to teach your children to depend on a God who lets innocent babies die and earthquakes kill people, fine. But I will teach my child all he has to depend on is himself. Your religion is for the weak."

Many nights, I cried out to the Lord, "Bring someone else to minister to her!" But the Lord continually reminded me, *With my power, I can give you genuine affection for Melissa and her family.*

God's might was tested the eight years they were our neighbors. But before they moved, God laid it on my heart to speak to Melissa one last time. Obediently I offered, "I know you don't understand and share my faith, but I want you to know that if you ever get to the place where you want to know God personally or have any questions, please know my door is always open to you."



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Her reply brought tears to my eyes. “Suzy, I’ve watched you, and you really live your Christian faith. It isn’t something you just talk about. I’m beginning to think more about religion, since my son is curious on this subject.”

Her words encouraged my soul—and made me realize anew that people on my street are watching me.

Your neighbors will notice if you still go to church in bad weather. They’ll notice if you forgive a friend who treats you poorly or exercise self-control with an out-of-control child. They’ll note if you choose not to complain about your absent, working husband or opt out of gossip sessions concerning a mutual acquaintance. When you choose to represent the Lord, you must hold yourself to a higher standard.

**Meet others’ needs.** Analyze pertinent ideas to help friends. Do they need an encouraging note? Why not have your children make a picture with a treat attached? Can you offer to baby-sit for a weary mother or make dinner for a working couple? Or maybe you can think of a book or tape that’s appropriate to encourage a harried mom, a woman irritated with her husband, or a friend grieving a loss. Why not furnish welcome baskets for new neighbors, with Bible verses attached? Meet your neighbors’ needs as you impart God’s Word, making it come alive by your consistent conduct of unconditional giving.

Unconditional love without expectation is a powerful testimony. And God has blessed me with the opportunity to implement all these suggestions. However, one word of warning: Know your limits. Since I have three children five years and under, my garage door shuts at 2 p.m. for naptime, and I hang a “Do not disturb” sign on my door. Start by praying where God would like you to begin, and obediently listen to his voice. He will not stretch you past your limits.

**Be willing to be inconvenienced.** “To live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). God can’t work through you if you’re filled with self. To be an effective witness, you may have to drive out of your way to pick up a friend for church, but will losing a little sleep really kill you?

If you’re discussing a controversial topic, how about giving up the last word for the Lord? Remain steadfast in your commitment to basic biblical truths, but don’t cram them down another person’s throat. If a friend wants to discuss abortion, compassionately listen to her point of view. Agree to disagree. These healthy dialogues actually solidify the position in your own heart. Don’t apologize for your opinion, but respect hers. Admit more Christians should support unwed mothers. If the neighbor wants to discuss hypocrisy in church, confess that it is rampant, but that God remains true and trustworthy. My secular companions know where I stand on social issues, but I never allow myself a defensive or holier-than-thou attitude.



**Practice patience.** Cultivating the right to share your faith means building respect. Sometimes this seed is sown for years, but many times it's overnight. Pray where God would like you to embark, and then ask questions. "How can I pray for you?" might help console a depressed friend.

Several months ago, a friend and I started praying God would bring Christians into our neighborhood. The day we prayed was the day Troy and Susan's family bought a house on our street. Although they weren't yet Christians, Susan expressed her desire to find a church to attend with her two young daughters, so I immediately invited them to our place of worship. Basically, all I did was extend the request—and the Lord graciously used me as the vehicle for this precious family to get to know him. Today they're attending church, their children are in a youth program, and she attends a Bible study.

There's another neighbor, Lisa, who moved in six months before Susan. At first she seemed interested in the Lord, even asking me for an explanation of salvation. But she's backed away after we went to church together. I'm waiting patiently, praying for her. I don't request her presence at Christian functions anymore, because she's made it clear she needs space. Discernment is key in every situation, and God liberally provides this gift. When he is ready for me to start the invitations again, he'll let me know.

In the end, lifestyle evangelism's really about allowing the Lord to change and use you when you make your life available to him. There's no greater pleasure in life than to introduce someone else to God's grace.

*Suzy Ryan is a freelance writer who lives with her family in California. This article first appeared in the **September/October 1997** issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.*

### Thought Provokers

- *How does John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," affect your mindset about evangelism?*
- *In what ways can you meet the practical needs of a lost family member in order to be an example of unconditional love?*
- *How might you need to change your schedule or attitudes to be more willing to be inconvenienced by lost family members?*



# FEATURES



## Stand By Your Man

**These strong women willingly and humbly served their families.**

*by Edward Rowell*

They have a saying in Arizona: *Cowboy Up*. It means never give up, do whatever it takes to get the job done.

For a cowboy like Don Pock, manager of the N Bar Ranch in western New Mexico, this was more than just a saying; it was a way of life. A typical morning for Don involved such activities as roping a cow from the back of a horse loping at full speed, all the while dodging 26 species of cactus and innumerable boulder piles. Such work fostered extreme self-reliance. Don also had a hair-trigger temper and was prone to humiliate his cowhands, especially after he'd taken an extended beer break. At 17, I was one of those cowhands. But I was a lazy, smart-mouthed kid, so I didn't last long there. I thought I'd seen the last of Don.

Fourteen years later I became the pastor of Lifegate Baptist Church in Phoenix, Arizona. There among my new flock sat Don Pock and his wife, Rosemary. In fact, Lifegate was home to four generations of this family: Don and Rosemary's oldest daughter, Donna, and her husband, Gary Mallory; *their* daughter, Rosie, and her husband, Jim Sander; and *their* daughter, Ramie. My first thought was, *What could've changed the heart of that old coot?* Little did I know the answer was sitting right beside him.

Throughout years of weddings and funerals, births and baptisms, I observed firsthand how the faithful witness and persistent prayers of Rosemary, as well as her daughter, Donna, and granddaughter, Rosie, greatly impacted each of their husbands. Although my family and I left Lifegate six years ago, my wife, Susan, and I flew back to Arizona recently to visit our friends. We spent a few days reminiscing about how these three generations of godly women stood by their men in good times and bad—and loved these tough cowboys into an active faith in God.



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We began our conversation around the kitchen table in Rosie and Jim's new home in northern Phoenix. They now have three children: Ramie (eight), Alyssa (four), and Newton (two), who were racing in and out of the back door with their cousins. Donna had driven in from the ranch, about 90 minutes away on a rough dirt road. Just five feet tall, she can barely see over the steering wheel of her massive four-wheel-drive truck. Rosemary and Don had come from Wilcox, Arizona, where they moved to retire two years ago. After we caught up on all the recent news, I asked when their family's journey of faith began. Donna sat quietly until she realized both her mother and daughter were waiting for her to respond. All three laughed in unison.

"I guess it began with me," she said, and began to share her story.

In the early 70s Donna was a young mother with three small children. She and Gary lived on a remote Arizona ranch where he herded cattle and she "herded" the kids from daylight till dark, seven days a week.

But come Saturday night, the Mallorys were part of the hard-living, hard-drinking crowd. She recalls, "I was always right in the middle of the fun, but in my heart I knew our lifestyle was displeasing to God." Though Donna had responded to an altar call as a child, she had no peace that she belonged to Christ.

Beyond that inner turmoil, Donna wrestled with the issues of her generation. "We were told that a woman had to demand her rights in order to be happy," she said. She bit her lip. "I treated Gary so bad. I was so determined to be independent that I'd refuse to get him a glass of iced tea when he came in from a rough day of riding. I thought, *He's got two good legs; he can get it himself.*"

She paused, fishing for words. "On one hand, I was full of guilt over our lifestyle; on the other, I was dissatisfied and selfish. But the more I pushed for my rights, the more Gary stayed away from home. I was miserable."

When the guilt finally won, Donna began reading her Bible. A few weeks later, she confessed her sin and surrendered her life and stubborn spirit to God. She immediately received a new heart, and gradually, a new perspective on marriage.

At the time, Donna's parents were running a ranch clear across Arizona. When her mom, Rosemary, read a letter from Donna describing her new-found peace, she wondered how she could have that same assurance. *Do I belong to the Lord?* Rosemary wondered, so she looked up some verses Donna had recommended and rededicated her life to Christ. She began reading her Bible and praying regularly, seeking to share what she was learning with Don. "I was so zealous," Rosemary recalled. "Don resented me preaching to him. So I decided to quit talking about it and just try to live what I was learning."

Her granddaughter, Rosie, decided to follow Christ when she was seven years old. Her mother had taught her numerous Bible stories and had prayed and sung with





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her and her siblings. “I remember sitting in the desert and asking Jesus into my heart,” she said. Rosie grew up and married in 1988. Her husband, Jim Sander, worked long hours as a maintenance supervisor on a golf course. Though Jim had received Christ as a boy, he didn’t share Rosie’s interest in spiritual matters.

Three generations of women now shared a common faith, a commitment to prayer, and a heartfelt desire to see their husbands know and grow in the Lord. So Rosemary, Donna, and Rosie prayed, fasted, and hoped.

When Donna and Rosemary tried to talk to their cowboy husbands about submitting to the Lord, Gary and Don didn’t get the concept. After all, they’d never surrendered to anything in their lives.

So, like Christ washing the feet of his disciples, these strong women willingly and humbly began to serve their families. For Donna, this meant simple acts like having that cold drink ready when Gary came in from the desert.

“I’d seen the way Mom always treated Dad,” recalled Donna, “even when he wasn’t that easy to live with. Instead of arguing with him, she would just smile and go along with him. And she went out of her way to compliment him in front of others.”

“It wasn’t that hard,” Rosemary explained. “I always knew Don loved me. I was just doing what it says in the Bible: ‘Wives, be submissive to your husbands.’”

“But that word made me *crazy*,” Donna interrupted, eyes flashing. “I couldn’t even hear the S-word without getting mad. After everything I’d been hearing about women’s rights ... Well, as I began understanding the nature of the Christian life, I realized that even if I could somehow get around Ephesians 5:22 and 1 Peter 3:1, I still had to deal with dozens of passages like Philippians 2, where we’re told, ‘In humility, consider others better than yourselves.’ If Jesus had to take upon himself the nature of a servant, who was I to say, ‘I won’t serve my husband’s needs?’”

Rosie joined in. “I grew up with both my mother’s and grandmother’s example, so I never thought of submission as a degrading thing. It was so obvious that Christ made a difference in my dad and my granddad through the unconditional love of their wives.” “At first, I wanted Gary to get saved so *my* life would get easier, not for *his* well-being or eternal security,” Donna admits. “I was determined to make him change. But you can’t make a cowboy do anything. So I started praying that God would change *me*.”

God honored that request after Donna quit going to the bars with Gary and their friends. One evening, left alone with her small kids, Donna read, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your hands.”



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That verse from 1 Thessalonians 4:11 motivated her to pick up a block of wood and a knife. “I began wood carving as a way to keep my hands and mind occupied, instead of fretting about where Gary was. As I worked, I prayed for him. When he did come home, instead of chewing on him, I was actually in a good mood. So he wanted to stay home more!”

Rosie grew to share her mother’s aptitude for art, and several years ago began painting her mother’s eclectic carvings of cowboys, angels, and desert animals. Today they use their thriving craft business, Two Branches (taken from John 15), as a platform for sharing Christ at Arizona galleries and shows.

Faithful prayer and examples of authentic Christ-living warmed the hearts of their husbands. But before God could break their wills, they each had to be confronted with circumstances beyond their control. Don’s crisis came first, when he finally admitted he couldn’t win a decades-long struggle with alcohol.

In late summer of 1980, Don asked his whole family to join him at the top of Rhinoceros Peak, in the remote Bradshaw mountains of central Arizona.

“I’m tired of being a bad example for this family,” Don told them. “With your help, and especially the Lord’s help, I’m going to change.” Donna, her sister Roseanne, and Rosie prayed for him and quoted Scriptures about the Lord’s grace and mercy. They discussed salvation, how it couldn’t be earned, only accepted as a gift. Don accepted Christ on top of that wilderness mountain and admitted he was totally dependent on God to beat the bottle. He’s been sober ever since.

Gary’s confrontation with his need for God came years later. After a family reunion in northern Arizona in 1988, Donna drove home with her mom and youngest daughter, Rachel. Gary stayed behind to party with friends.

A passing car cut too close, sideswiping Donna’s truck, causing her to lose control and roll several times. Rosemary and Rachel were bruised but okay. Donna’s jaw was crushed, and she sustained serious neck and shoulder injuries. When Gary arrived, he felt humbled and powerless to help. Clutching Donna’s Bible, he prayed over her with a broken spirit. During the weeks Donna was hospitalized, her sister, Roseanne, prayed with him.

As God spared Donna’s life, Gary responded with a genuine commitment borne out of gratitude. After Donna’s convalescence, the family began attending church together for the first time, not long before I arrived as their pastor in 1990.

Though Rosie had seen God’s grace in the lives of her father and grandfather, she was eager to see him work in her own husband’s life as well. She, too, went through a period of trying to force her husband to change.



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“I wanted Jim to pray out loud at meals—even though he didn’t like to,” Rosie recalls. “I thought he watched too much TV, so I griped. I nagged him about going to church with me, mostly because I was tired of sitting in church alone. But I had a selfish motive, and Jim sensed that.

“I finally learned to pray for his heart—and mine—to change. I also prayed for other men to come into Jim’s life and encourage him to grow in his faith.”

God answered that prayer when I became their pastor and struck up a friendship with Jim. Attending a Promise Keepers rally with other men from church had a significant impact on him, and Jim began to grow spiritually.

But his emerging faith was also tested by a crisis. Jim and Rosie’s son, Newton, was born in 1995. When he was seven months old, doctors discovered a rare heart deformity. Risky surgery was the baby’s only chance for survival.

“I was really shaken,” Rosie recalled. “And Jim was a boost to *my* faith while we waited. He prayed with confidence, and Newt came out of surgery in great shape. That crisis showed me just how much Jim had changed.”

Rosie paused, wiping away a tear. In almost a whisper she continued, “It’s what I wanted most—a husband who loves the Lord first. But I found out I couldn’t force or control Jim. Only God has the ability to really change people or situations.”

In our three days together with these women and their families, Susan and I continually marveled at their appreciation for God and his grace. At one point, as they listed the numerous family and friends who had come to know Christ in the past 20 or so years, I joked aloud, “Who’s left to pray for?”

Without hesitation, all three said in unison, “The kids.” Rosemary looked at her great-grandchildren running around the yard and added, “We old-timers have had a lot of catching up to do. But these little ones have their whole lives ahead of them. With the head start they’re getting, there’s no telling what God will do through this family in the future.”

Donna said, “God is faithful to his Word. He tells us in 1 Corinthians 13 exactly what real love looks like in practice: *It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* And that’s all we’re doing. Just serving, hoping, and persevering.”

*Ed Rowell previously served as assistant editor of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL, America’s leading publication for pastors. This article first appeared in the September/October 1997 issue of TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.*



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### Thought Provokers

- *One of the women says of her husband, "I wanted Gary to get saved so my life would get easier, not for his well-being or eternal security." Why do you want your loved ones to get saved?*
- *In what ways can you relate to the women in this article?*
- *Compare and contrast the faith journeys of the three couples. What do your findings tell you about the way God works?*



# FEATURES



## What Are They Really Asking?

Looking at the person behind the question.

by Judson Poling

One of my colleagues told me the story of a professor, a brilliant man, whose father couldn't support the family. As a boy, this professor listened as the extended family argued over who was going to get stuck with raising him. In the middle of their arguing, feeling abandoned and unwanted, he slipped away to his room. There he found solace and escape in books.

His initial reaction to Christianity was to ask skeptical questions. He's not the only one for whom intellectualism becomes a way to mask pain. More than he needed his thinking corrected, he needed his heart mended. That brilliant boy did find healing in Christ, and today teaches seminary courses.

My ministry has brought me into contact with thousands of curious, questioning people. I've discovered that people ask spiritual questions because something in their lives isn't working. Uncertainty, fear, and pain provoke their questions. What they really want isn't information, but relief.

Most seekers' questions, whether intellectual or emotional, indicate underlying issues. Choosing to believe in Christ carries major internal ramifications. Snappy, pat answers don't satisfy these inner struggles. Nobody wants a two-cent answer to a million-dollar question.

Behind every question is a person asking that question, and we need to minister to that person—if we can find him.

### **What Do You Think?**

A great irony in Scripture prompted me to rethink how I answer seekers' questions. When the Son of God walked the earth, people came to him with dilemmas, doubts, and questions. He had all answers available to him. And yet he met their questions with questions of his own.



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In Luke 10:25-26, “an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”

Jesus didn’t give the answer. Instead, he asked a question in return. “‘What is written in the Law?’ he replied. ‘How do you read it?’”

In Matthew 18:12, Jesus asked, “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go look for the one that wandered off?” The heart of the parable is nothing but two questions!

In Matthew 22:41-46, Jesus conducted a little Bible study on Psalm 110 with the Pharisees. “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” Through this conversation Jesus affirmed that the Christ would be more than an earthly son of David, but also the Son of God. Jesus’ answer was to recite one verse and ask four questions.

He responded not to the question, but to the person behind the question.

I remember overhearing a college professor talking to a student about spiritual matters. The student claimed she didn’t believe in God. Rather than argue, the professor asked a probing question. “What is this god like, the god you don’t believe in?”

The student described a vengeful god, a god who looked to punish her as soon as she steps a little out of line.

By asking a probing question, the professor uncovered the underlying fears that caused the student’s doubt. She wasn’t looking for proof of God’s existence. She was looking for relief from condemnation. Up to this point, only her claim that God didn’t exist provided that relief.

“Well, I don’t believe in that god either,” said the professor. “Let me tell you about the God I do believe in, the God of Jesus Christ.”

### What to Ask

I’ve found several specific questions effective at reaching the underlying issues. Now, when someone asks me a spiritual question, I almost always reply, “That’s an interesting question. What do you think?”

This is the approach Jesus used when he asked, “What’s written in the Law? How do you read it?” It gives me an opportunity to understand the person. It also affirms that I care for him or her, even more than I do about having the “right” answer.

Often, exhibiting care for the questioner is a greater ministry than answering the question.

Another good question: “What situation in your life makes you wonder about that?”



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Kathy had tried Christianity before. It didn't work out. Her husband, Jim, was raised in a secular Jewish home. When I met them, they had lots of pointed questions about God, Christianity, and faith.

Jim, a logical man, said he wanted proof of Christianity's claims. *How should I answer his skeptical and sometimes antagonistic questions? I thought. Is he really after more information? Why is he asking in the first place?*

We could have spent our entire evening lost in theology. Instead, I asked what situation prompted their questions. That's when we discovered they were uncertain about their children's upbringing. Should they be brought up Christian, Jewish, nothing, or a little bit of each? Knowing the key issue directed our conversation toward cooperation rather than theological debate.

Sometimes, however, a seeker's questions and thoughts do require challenge. For instance, many seekers today are struggling with Jesus' claim to be the way, the truth, and the life. "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

They ask, "Does Jesus really mean he's the only way? Isn't that kind of narrow-minded?"

"If I were to say that he really meant it," I reply, "would you rule out the possibility that it's true? Why won't you even consider that a possibility?" Such questions help them examine their skepticism.

When I was in college, students often boasted phantom objections and rationalizations to discount Jesus. Cutting through these smokescreens, I sometimes asked: "If you found out you were wrong, what would be at risk?"

Many times what keeps people from faith is fear of the consequences. Many of my college friends were living with their girlfriends. They knew if they accepted Christianity, they'd have to stop. So they put up diversions. As long as they could keep God looking silly and Jesus looking less than divine they could continue their unexamined lives. Their doubts had little to do with theology and everything to do with morality.

Once the objection is uncovered, it can be addressed with compassion and truth. "In Hebrews 11," I might say to one who fears what God will demand, "it says they who seek God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder. He rewards, not tramples, those that serve him. His character is not to make you miserable, but to give."

*Judson Poling writes small group studies for Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. This article first appeared in the Fall 2002 issue of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.*



### **Thought Provokers**

- *The author says, “Most seekers’ questions, whether intellectual or emotional, indicate underlying issues.” How could this change the way you witness to your family members?*
- *What questions have your loved ones asked you about your faith? What could you ask them to get to the heart of their questions?*
- *What is the most helpful thing you learned about witnessing from this article?*







## When Your Loved One Doesn't Love God

It's possible to be 'unequally yoked' yet still stay close—while you wait.

by Nancy Kennedy

With every new year, Lisa hopes, “Maybe this is the year my husband will become a Christian.” Meanwhile, she sits with her kids in church trying not to feel resentful as she watches other families—husband, wife, and 2.3 children—filling the pews around her.

“I have to fight the lump in my throat,” she says. “My mind races: I’m angry and worried and scared all at the same time. I try not to think about it, but what if he dies tonight? I get so tired of praying and waiting. And I’m tired of the tension at home, especially on Sunday mornings. I know it’s wrong, but as I sit and count the couples, I can’t help thinking, ‘Why doesn’t God do something?!’”

In the past 20 years, I’ve often asked that question. The answer, of course, is that God is doing something—and he’s keeping and sustaining me within my “unequal yoke.”

That term comes from 2 Corinthians 6:14, where Paul admonishes Christians not to pair themselves with a “different kind.” Unless a yoked team of oxen moves at the same pace and travels in the same direction, the yoke chokes one and pinches the other. The marriage of a believer to an unbeliever often hinders the believer’s life with God and can cause both partners pain and discomfort.

Barry and I were unbelievers when we married, and back then a relationship with God was the last thing on our minds. Three years went by filled with partying, softball, and the birth of our first daughter. Then I prayed a simple prayer that changed my life forever.

Unfortunately for Barry, I was an obnoxious “Jesus freak” right from the start. I didn’t “share” my faith; I pushed and shoved. I wrote the handbook on how *not* to win your



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spouse to Christ. I trumpeted my every minute change: "See how loving and humble I am?" I prayed loudly in Barry's presence and made sure he knew he was a sinner destined for hell. I gave him every gospel tract I could find and added a Bible verse at the end of my notes to him.

Not surprisingly, we were soon at odds. I blamed our problems on his unholiness and his ungodly friends; he said I was a lunatic. One minute I'd be blasting Christian music and scattering opened Bibles around the house, the next I'd be crying and pleading with him to go to church with me.

When he wouldn't go, I'd sulk and make him sorry. He was sorry all right—sorry he married me. I wanted a Christian husband (preferably him); he wanted his old wife back, Jesus-free.

Then I read a book on prayer that challenged my whole approach. I decided, "That's it! I'll pray for Barry for the next 80 years, if that's what it takes. And I'm going to love him. Period." That was 19 years ago, and I'm still praying, but I'm no longer pining away in self-absorbed isolation waiting for his salvation to bring us fulfillment. I've decided that if it takes 80 years, then I want those years to be enjoyable for both of us—despite our spiritual differences.

#### God Doesn't Make Mistakes

When I came to faith in Christ and Barry didn't, I thought God had made a huge mistake. Two serving the Lord made much more sense. But I knew God never makes mistakes.

I came to realize that God "purposely positioned" me in my unequal yoke, to borrow from Jo Berry, author of *Beloved Unbeliever* (Zondervan). As an unbeliever, I hadn't married in disobedience. As I realized that God was the designer of my marriage, I relaxed my spiritual choke-hold on Barry.

Author and speaker Jeanne Hendricks pointed out to me that unbelieving spouses are actually in a privileged position, set apart in God's eyes because of their union with believers (1 Cor. 7:14). They share our blessings because God sees a couple as one flesh. She believes Christian spouses should see their role as a ministry given by God. Her thinking changes the whole tone of the relationship from burden to blessing.

Knowing it's an honor to be married to Barry doesn't take away the ache of not being able to share the most important part of my life with him. But it helps to remember that loneliness also happens between Christian spouses—whenever individuals seek ultimate fulfillment in each other, instead of in God.

For me, knowing that the Lord is my Husband (Isa. 54:5) takes away the sting of being alone. He can fill the needs that Barry can't. It's when I stop relying on God and start isolating myself at home, doing "spiritual" things while Barry does



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something “worldly” like watch a ball game, that I feed my loneliness and create division. It helps to reason that even if my husband were the most committed Christian, he still wouldn't meet all of my deepest needs.

### A House Undivided

“Sometimes the sight of him just makes me want to scream!” confided a friend recently. “When I see empty beer cans on the sink and he's watching trashy TV shows, I can't help thinking of him as the enemy.”

Another friend said, “I worry about my kids. If Daddy doesn't go to church, will they grow up thinking they don't have to? Every once in a while, my husband will plan something fun on a Sunday, like a trip to the arcade, and say, ‘Okay, who wants to go to church with Mom and who wants to race go-karts with Dad?’”

“Expect your spouse to be unreasonable about spiritual things,” writes Jo Berry. “[Your] godliness is threatening, convicting, and confusing.” But that doesn't make an unbeliever the enemy. In the chronicle of her own marriage, Bebe Nicholson warns that such an attitude will sabotage your relationship and ruin even the best efforts to be effective examples of Christ's love (*When a Believer Marries a Nonbeliever* [Priority Publishing]). Self-pity, Nicholson writes, projects the attitude, “I could've done better in the marriage department” and is a refusal to accept God's sovereignty in all matters. Self-righteousness not only hinders compassion but, if left unchecked, easily turns to contempt and hatred.

Jo Berry points out, “You and your spouse are both sinners. The only difference is one of you is saved and the other one is not. But that doesn't make the unsaved any less of a person or less deserving of dignity and respect.” On the contrary. Believers are called to have the same attitude Christ had when he humbled himself and lived among sinners, considering others better than ourselves (Phil. 2:3-4).

## Ethics and the Unequal Yoke

**Say your unbelieving spouse asks you to cheat on your income tax, uses foul language, tells off-color jokes, or belittles your faith in front of the children. What do you do? Gary Oliver, executive director of the Center for Marriage and Family Studies at John Brown University, gives this advice:**

**Avoid knee-jerk reactions.** Think and pray things through. Consider past confrontations: what worked then? Don't confront at the moment, especially in public, and never attack.



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**Communicate as an individual.** Say, "This is the conviction I have." That allows you to state your beliefs without forcing your faith or "being weird for Jesus."

**Don't make a big deal of it.** Especially with off-color jokes or conversation topics, just say, "I'd prefer not to hear it."

**Offer a joke of your own.** For men, especially, humor is a way of showing affection.

**Be flexible.** Tolerate things that may be distasteful, as long as it doesn't cause you to sin.

**Appeal to your spouse's sense of fair play.** When it comes to issues involving the children, approach your mate on the basis of what's fair. Most unbelieving spouses are eventually fair when it comes to their kids.

**Pray, pray, pray.**

### Created to Love

"I felt helpless," said my friend Ron, talking about the time before his wife, Kerri, became a Christian. "I couldn't transform her heart." No matter how hard we try, we can't coerce, sweet-talk, or plead our spouse into a relationship with God. No one comes to Christ unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). To me, that's good news. I can focus on my responsibility: to love Barry.

"God created us to be lovers," writes Nicholson. "The more we love God, the more open our hearts are to loving each other. ... The strength of our love for our partner can draw [him] toward Christ and bring glory to God." Until that happens, there are some practical things believers can do to help bridge the spiritual gap and help themselves stay spiritually strong.

*Live in the now.* Accept your relationship for what it is and concentrate on cultivating peace and happiness. Instead of striving to alter your circumstances, set your mind on enjoying your life. Find what's good now and build on it.

*Live your faith with integrity.* Let your spouse see that genuine Christianity isn't blind allegiance to a set of rigid standards, but a process of growth and change. Ron said Kerri had seen him fail to make good on promised changes before he became a Christian. But when she saw he wasn't going back to his old ways, she became interested.

*Let your actions speak.* The loudest form of evangelism is a life that's changed. Gary Oliver, executive director of the Center for Marriage and Family Studies at John Brown University, counsels believers to show Christ in the little things, like taking



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out the trash and vacuuming. Ed, a man at the local gym who's now a believer, told me his wife was always kind when he was harsh with her, and that drove him crazy. "Joanne wouldn't say a word, but I knew it was Jesus that kept her from blowing up at me."

*Honor your marriage.* "I let my husband know I'm glad I'm married to him," said Margaret, "and I never talk about him without him knowing about it first." At Bible study, Julie told me she honors her unequal-yoke marriage by not filling her calendar with church events. She and the kids go to Sunday morning services, and she attends Bible study and events like MOPS during the week. But when her husband is home, he's her priority.

Jeanne Hendricks adds, "It might not be easy, but it speaks volumes when you let your spouse know, 'I like you as a person.' When wives honor their husbands by making them feel appreciated and good about themselves just as they are, it often softens their hearts to the things of God."

*Find common ground and have fun together.* My friend Jodi makes a list of things she and her husband enjoy: swimming, watching Star Trek movies, vintage cars, and sex.

*Stay affectionate.* Gary Oliver says both sexual and nonsexual touch are important and cautions (women especially) against shutting down physically. "Although it's difficult for women to remain open physically when they feel they can't share the most important part of who they are, men especially need touch. Sexual touch reaches him at his core. When a wife enjoys her husband, he feels loved, valued, and appreciated."

## Resources:

**Beloved Unbeliever**, by Jo Berry (Zondervan). The classic Christian book on this subject—designed for personal use or use in a support group.

**Lord, I Wish My Husband Would Pray with Me**, by Larry Keefauver (Creation House). A book for couples who are spiritually mismatched—even if both are actually believers.

**When a Believer Marries a Nonbeliever**, by Bebe Nicholson (Priority). An encouraging personal story—with a happy ending.

*Pray hard.* Prayer is our link to God's presence, power, wisdom, and comfort. You might pray for conviction of sin and godly sorrow that leads to repentance (2 Cor.



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7:10); that God will take a spouse's heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26); for wisdom, courage, discernment, and opportunities to speak.

*Cultivate your relationship with Christ.* It's crucial to maintain Christian fellowship, Bible reading, and prayer. If you can, join a small group and have them pray with you for your unsaved mate.

*Don't give up hope.* God knows what he's doing, and he knows those who are his (2 Tim. 2:19). Trust that he will do what's best for you and your spouse. We have this hope: "God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). That means there's hope for your spouse—and hope for mine.

*Nancy Kennedy is the author of several books, including Honey, They're Playing Our Song (Multnomah). She and Barry live in Inverness, Florida. This article first appeared in the Spring 1999 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine.*

### Thought Provokers

- *What is your response to the idea that "unbelieving spouses are actually in a privileged position"?*
- *In what ways do you honor your marriage with your spouse—whether he's a believer or an unbeliever?*
- *What is your reaction to the reality that you may live 20 or 40 years or even a lifetime without seeing your loved one accept Christ?*





## Premature Harvest

Waiting until the right time.

by Rick Weinert

My grandpa had a large garden. One spring he showed me how to cut seed potatoes so that each piece had at least one eye, and we planted them in the soil behind the house. The waiting was agony. At first there was no progress at all, but Grandpa encouraged me to be patient. When the first green plants started growing, I was ready to start digging. If there is a plant, then there must be potatoes, I thought.

Grandpa had to gently dig up one potato just to show me it was too early. As the potatoes began to form, he would gently brush back the dirt and show me that the potatoes were there, but they weren't ready yet. A few new potatoes were good to eat, but if we were to have enough for the coming year, we needed to let them grow to maturity.

The process was so long that I gave up checking my potatoes. It wasn't exciting anymore. It took too long.

But on the day Grandpa announced the harvest, we unearthed sacks of potatoes. The harvest was exciting! Every mound was a new discovery. And I found more than potatoes that day. The lesson I learned has served me well in ministry. The harvest was worth the wait, but without the wait there would have been no harvest.

### **Everything Has a Season**

As a young pastor in northern California, I had made a habit of visiting the local café for lunch. The owner grew to know me, and we began to talk. One day she asked me, "Do you do any counseling?"

I was inexperienced, but I had Bible College training, a couple of counseling classes, and a couple years in the ministry. "I haven't done a lot, but I do some."

We set an appointment, and she and her husband came to my study. Their daughter had gotten in with the wrong crowd, and they were worried about her. What could they do to help her?



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I listened carefully, trying to think what I was supposed to do next. For some reason I kept thinking, *always present the gospel, always present the gospel*. So I began, “The only way you can help your daughter is by making sure that your relationship to God is right. If you were to die tonight ...”

It was the strangest sensation. The more I talked the bigger that little room became and the farther from me the couple seemed to be sitting. It began to feel as though an immeasurable gulf divided us. No one got saved that day, and I was of no help to them whatsoever. I pulled up every one of the seeds I had planted in my lunch counter conversations. And I preempted the possibility of any future harvest. I continued to eat lunch in their café, but they avoided me. The next pastor in that community had no better response. They were closed to the gospel. I had mistaken planting season for harvesting and ended up with nothing.

#### **An Almanac of Excuses**

If a premature harvest is so dangerous, why do we insist on plucking up sprouts before the fruit is ripe? One reason is zeal.

While attending Bible College, a friend and I decided to make an evangelistic foray onto the local university campus. We wandered around until we saw a student who seemed like a good prospect. We gave little prayer to this effort, and there was no plan for follow up, let alone building relationships beforehand. We were going to turn that campus upside down for Christ!

The evening ended a dismal failure. Our student preferred to discuss fascism rather than Christianity. If we presented the gospel at all, we did so poorly with no positive response. We had zeal, but no experience, no wisdom, no preparation, and worst of all, no harvest.

A second reason that we sometimes harvest too soon is lack of faith. As a child I had to trust my grandfather to know the proper time to dig the potatoes. As a believer zealous to see souls won for Christ, it is sometimes difficult to trust that God will bring it about in his time, not mine.

A young woman began to attend our church with her children. Occasionally she and her husband would invite me for supper, and we began to develop a friendship. As I shared the gospel with her she told me, “We prayed something like that once. We were trying to rent a house and they told us to pray this prayer. We just thought it was something we had to do to be able to rent.”

As a result of their previous confusion and her husband’s disinterest in spiritual things, I didn’t push the gospel with them, but I discussed spiritual things as the opportunities arose. Eventually the husband was saved, and the entire family became active in the church—but only after I had moved on. The next pastor was able to reap where I had sown.





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Another reason for a premature harvest is attempting to be someone we're not. A friend used to tell the story of his first preaching experience: When my friend was a teenager, his father told the boys in their small church that he would like some of them to try their hand at preaching. My friend claims that he memorized one of Billy Graham's sermons word for word and preached it like his own. Everything went great until he came to the part where he said, "Thousands are coming down to the front ..."

True or not, my friend's story always draws laughs and it makes a point: Trying to fit someone else's mold will never work. It is better to discover your own style of ministry.

#### **Knowing When to Dig**

My wife and I planted a garden just after we married. I was so eager to harvest that I dug up the first thing that sent out green shoots. I asked my wife to cook it. I learned from my mistake. You only eat a rotten seed potato once.

I learned to watch closely as the mound grew. I learned to probe gently. I came to understand the subtle changes that occurred as the plant developed and the potatoes grew.

In one community I developed a friendship with a young man who did not attend church. I helped him remodel a storefront for his business, and I worked with him on the fire department. I occasionally went 'coon hunting with him late at night.

One evening, as we were listening to his hounds bay in the distance, I decided it was time to probe. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" He agreed, so I probed a little deeper, "How do you view your relationship with God?" He gave an honest and open response, so I was encouraged to probe deeper still, "If you were to die tonight, do you know for sure that you would go to heaven?" Before morning, I had a new brother in Christ.

Sometimes we need to push back the dirt gently and see if the crop is ready yet. If so, it's time to dig. If not, we back off and trust God for the right time. We also need a bigger view of God. When we believe the harvest is largely dependent on us, we find ourselves fearful and anxious, and we usually fail.

At one point in my ministry I made it my goal to knock on every door in our little town to share the gospel. It was a knee-knocking, heart-pounding experience for me as I raised my knuckles to each door in that community. I never did finish, although I came close. Unfortunately, the harvest basket was empty.

I struggled for years after that feeling that there must be something wrong with me. Then one day I discovered that I was sharing the gospel with people without even trying. I went to a chiropractor for several months. We developed a relationship, and I found myself spending twenty minutes being treated and an hour talking with



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the chiropractor and his staff at every visit. Out of that grew a Bible study. The gospel was shared, marriages were strengthened, commitments were renewed, and seeds were sown.

The difference was God. In the first situation, sharing the gospel was something I determined to do. In the second, it was something God did.

In my first full-time pastorate, I developed a friendship with the local sheriff's deputy. The first time we met, we went horseback riding. He had a question on his mind. "Why don't you drink?"

It wasn't the gospel, but I had an opportunity to give a non-condemning answer to a loaded question. From that time on, a pattern and a friendship developed. He would pick me up in his patrol car or in his pickup truck and we would drive—sometimes into the mountains, and sometimes to another town. And there would always be a question.

I never pushed. I just prayed and answered his questions the best I knew how. One day he picked me up in his truck so we could head for the mountains "to look for bear."

We drove for a couple of hours, then headed back into town. I thought it strange that there had been no questions. In front of my house he turned to me and said, "I've decided to give my life to the Lord."

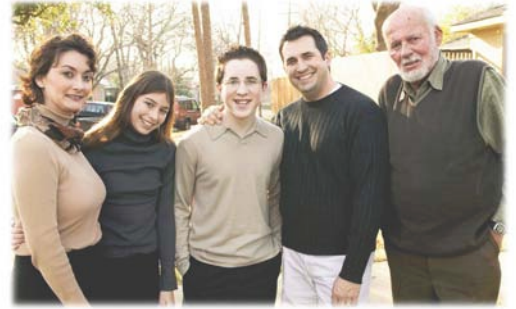
God brings people to faith in his time, but we must trust him enough to wait.

*Rick Weinert is pastor of Spring Bible Church in Spring, Texas. This article first appeared in the **Summer 2001** issue of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.*

### Thought Provokers

- *How has this harvest analogy changed your thinking about witnessing?*
- *In what ways have you seen a witnessing experience "go bad" because of too much zeal at the wrong time?*
- *How good are you at knowing "when to dig"? What might you need to do to improve in this area?*





## When He Doesn't Believe

Secrets to loving your unsaved spouse.

by Virelle Kidder

Coming home was no picnic.

“What’s for lunch?” my husband, Steve, mumbled, barely looking up from the couch. He sat unshaven, still in his bath-robe, watching a ball game on TV. He looked just as disheveled as he had two hours earlier when four-year-old Lauren and I had left for church, only now he was hungry. Out to the kitchen I went, and with a loud banging of pots and pans, slapped together a colorless meal.

Without a doubt, we were miserable! Steve had no interest in my new faith in Christ; in fact, he reacted as though I’d taken a lover. As he retreated into a hostile, quiet shell, I grew increasingly hurt and resentful, casting disapproving glances at everything he did.

We sat down, and I said a stiff prayer over dinner. When Steve looked up, he asked, “How was church?”

“It was wonderful,” I returned flatly. “You might have liked it if you’d been there.” Another disapproving glance.

“I don’t think so. I don’t fit in there,” he answered thoughtfully, and after a long pause he added, “You know, if I were you, I’d feel pretty guilty.”

“Guilty? Guilty?!” I exploded, bringing my fist down hard on the table. Lauren darted out of the room. “Why should I feel guilty? You’re the one who’s rejected Christ! You’re the one who refuses to believe! How can you have the nerve to say that?”

With the softest words I ever heard, Steve delivered a blow from which I’d never recover: “Because, Virelle, I’m a pagan, and I’m behaving exactly as a pagan should. But you’re a Christian, and you’re not loving.” Silence. For once, I had no words.



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Later, on my knees in our bedroom, I cried out to God, *Steve can't possibly be right, can he? You know how hard I've tried to grow as a Christian. You don't think I'm unloving, too, do you?* Silence again. In my heart, I knew God agreed with Steve.

I'd been a pain to live with. I'd watch my Christian friends' husbands sit with an arm around them in church, or hear them pray aloud in a group, and brim with jealousy and self-pity. I justified my growing coldness toward Steve by viewing him as incapable of being the husband I now wanted. The fact that I no longer was the wife he needed had never occurred to me. How could I possibly please God when I claimed to be spiritual, yet showed neither love, gentleness, nor grace to my husband?

The turning point came while still on my knees that miserable Sunday. I knew I had to change, and radically at that. God challenged me to love Steve as if he were already the man I prayed he would become, whether it happened now, in 30 years, or sometime after my death. If faith really was "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1), I had to believe God would answer my deepest prayers for Steve in his own way, in his own time. Tough terms—but I wasn't exactly in a bargaining position. I agreed.

It's funny how God works. To this day, I've never heard of him changing your mate first. He always begins with you, or in this case, with me. I realized that although I couldn't change Steve's hostility toward my faith, I could learn better ways of handling it. When he'd occasionally grumble about Lauren and me attending church, I'd offer to stay home. A few times he even tested my sincerity by taking me up on it. On those days, I needed a serious attitude adjustment in a hurry, but God didn't let me down.

"Attitude verses," such as Philippians 2:1-3, 5, seemed to jump off my Bible's pages: "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love ... then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ... Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus."

That's a tall order. So I enlisted a few friends to pray daily for my attitude to become more Christ-like at home.

Having focused on my own feelings so long, I also had to relearn what made Steve feel loved. I was ashamed to admit I'd forgotten. Showing little kindnesses had become so rare, Steve didn't trust me at first when I'd bring him a cold drink or prepare a special meal. He thought it was a ploy to get my own way, but in time, we both began to relax and enjoy being together again.



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But frankly, words were my biggest problem. I had far too many of them. It was a rude awakening for me when I realized God didn't need to use my mouth to teach Steve anything. In fact, he did much better without me. Many times when tempted to retaliate with a sharp or critical word, I'd remember Proverbs 12:18: "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." I began loving Steve without preaching at him or registering my disapproval at every little "mistake" he made.

I desperately needed to spend time daily drinking up God's Word, allowing God to fill my hungry spirit with his thoughts. My friend Connie calls it "hugging the Word." Then, through some miracle, when I most need it, he releases words that build and mend and heal out of the same mouth that once caused hurt and offense. What an amazement!

But words alone can't rebuild a marriage; they need actions to prove them true. My Christian friends urged me to do more than just give up being Steve's chief critic; they urged me to get on his team, learn to put his plans and interests ahead of my own, to look for every opportunity to help him shine. I watched how they did it. They listened more to their husband's challenges and joys at work. They looked for things to laugh about and created beauty in the little things that make up life. And they prayed hard for every detail that touched his life.

As I imitated their example, I found that praying for Steve daily did more to change him than a thousand words from me. I asked God to guide Steve all day long, to give him wisdom and protection, to open the right doors in his life and close the rest. Then, I had to believe that God was doing it, even if Steve wasn't yet the spiritual leader for whom I longed. John 9:31 holds a powerful promise for praying wives: "He listens to the godly woman (my paraphrase) who does his will." I found he not only listens, he knocks her socks off with answers!

When our car, for example, suddenly gave up the ghost, Steve's stress meter went off the scale. I prayed like mad for a miracle. Within a few days a car dealer from my church offered us a free loaner car while we shopped for another. He soon found us one of the most beautiful cars we've ever owned and sold it to us at a price even we could afford on a squeaky budget. Steve was amazed—and I secretly leapt for joy.

But in order to pray effectively, I had to rid myself of every ugly attitude in the way. Resentments choke the healthy growth of relational change; I needed to remove them deliberately, one by one, through daily prayer.

I also realized a great teammate doesn't have to call every play. During the eighth month of my third pregnancy, Steve announced a sudden job change to the Boston area from my cozy Christian setting in Baltimore. I had a choice: either cooperate with God's apparent leading, or dig in my heels and make us both miserable again. I chose to cooperate and the path to Boston was strewn with miracles: a brand-new



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home purchased without a penny saved for a down payment, an “instant band” of new playmates for our lonely five-year-old, and two older women to mentor me as a struggling Christian mom.

Within a few months of that painful lunch when Steve wondered about my Christian attitudes, big changes began to occur in our home. Hilarity and romance returned, attendant to a marriage better than the one before. No longer did I experience the “you make me happy and I’ll make you happy” kind of love, but a stronger, richer love that reached for new words to say, “You’re the best gift God ever gave me. My deepest joy is loving and serving you.”

Yet it all took time, and the process carried with it times of intense loneliness. When silent tears rolled onto my pillow at night, God comforted me with a tender promise from Psalm 126:5: “Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.” He not only understood my pain, but also sent someone who showed me how to carry it.

When I met Elizabeth, I thought she was one of the most beautiful women I’d ever met. Silver-haired and 60ish, Elizabeth radiated an unflappable acceptance of others. Her husband, Fred, was a quiet man, not much for socializing. Whenever he came to church, they often held hands. I’d think, *That’s the kind of marriage I wish Steve and I could have.*

It wasn’t long before Elizabeth included me as a helper in her weekly ministry to neighborhood children. Her lovely voice made Bible stories come alive each week for a room full of squirmy kids, including my own preschooler. One day I confided in her the terrible longing I felt for Steve to share my faith.

When she confided that Fred also was an unbeliever, I blurted out in amazement: “What? How have you lasted this long?” My heart secretly sank at the prospect of a 40-year wait looming ahead of me.

“I learned one day that God called me to love Fred, to make his life as content as I possibly can,” Elizabeth said. “He never asked me to change him. Only someone as big and powerful as God can change a husband! In spite of Fred not sharing my faith, we’ve found a happy life together, and God has done wonderful things in my children’s lives. They’re all strong believers and pray every day for their dad. I have no doubt God will honor those prayers.” And he did. I learned many years later that Fred received Christ as Savior shortly before his death.

Women such as Elizabeth helped me see my mate was given for me to love, honor, and enjoy, but not necessarily to meet all my emotional needs. God reserves that place for himself. He wants to meet the deepest hunger of my soul, to be filled with himself—the only true source of unlimited love. Elizabeth’s beauty, I learned, came from spending time regularly with the Source.



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Like any great father, God loves to surprise his children. Six months after that milestone Sunday, Steve returned home one evening from an overnight trip. My pastor dropped by to talk to me about church membership, but instead spent the entire evening talking with Steve.

While I fixed snacks in the kitchen, Steve began to unearth his last remaining doubts about the Christian faith. *I can't believe this is happening!* I thought. *If I go in there I might spoil everything!* As Steve bowed his head and quietly accepted Christ, I sniffled a big thank-you to God in a little corner of the kitchen. Strangely, it was the same corner I'd often ducked into for my "panic prayers" for help. My song of joy had finally come.

It's been more than 28 years since then. I've learned that in God's household, love is the power that transforms. Now I marvel at the awesome Christian man Steve's become. Our shared joy is found in building up other marriages and families through small groups, teaching, speaking, and writing together.

This year marks our 35th anniversary. Has it all been smooth sailing? Certainly not, but it's been an exciting journey learning to love each other and move forward as a team. Will we ever "arrive" at a perfect marriage? It's doubtful, since I'm one of the partners! But we're having fun working on it. I'm thankful God gave me a second chance at loving.

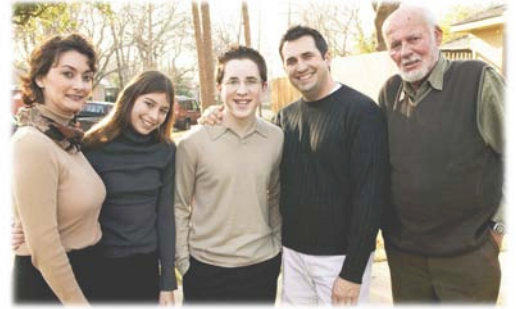
*Virelle Kidder, a TCW regular contributor, lives with her husband in New York. This article first appeared in the March/April 2001 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.*

### Thought Provokers

- *The author's husband said, "I'm a pagan, and I'm behaving exactly as a pagan should. But you're a Christian, and you're not loving." In what ways did this statement affect you?*
- *What kind of attitude do you think you would have if you had lived 40 years with an unbelieving spouse?*
- *What did you learn about witnessing to a mate or close family member from this article that you will put into practice?*



# RESOURCES



## Additional Resources

*Books to help you further*

🌀 **Active Evangelism** by Derek Prime (Christian Focus Public, 2003; 195 pages).

Prime guides us through the book of Acts giving very practical examples of how to do evangelism in the workplace, with our neighbors, to our families, as a church and individually. In each chapter Prime looks at the context the disciples were ministering in, the challenges they would have faced, the methods they used, and then applies it to our situation today.

🌀 **Beloved Unbeliever: Loving Your Husband into the Faith** by Jo Berry (Zondervan, 1983; 176 pages). Using the scriptural framework of love, this book shows how to love your husband into the faith. You'll learn how to be a suitable helper, how to deal with hurts, heartaches and hindrances, and how to shoulder spiritual responsibility.

🌀 **Sharing Your Faith with Friends and Family** by Michael Green (Baker, 2005; 160 pages). Here is the help that ordinary, everyday Christians are looking for. This book is an easy-to-read, practical guide for any Christian who wants to know more about spreading the Word. Green shares useful advice on how to talk about Christ to those closest to us and offers answers and fulfillment to our current culture's questions and needs.

🌀 **Splash the Living Water: Sharing Jesus in Everyday Moments** by Esther Burroughs (New Hope, 2006; 224 pages). Jesus told the woman at the well that He was the living water. If she drank, she would never be thirsty again. Using refreshing stories, Scriptures, and encouraging words, the reader will learn to share her own personal everyday moments with those around her, turning evangelism into a simple, basic, natural occurrence.






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Additional Resources

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 **When He Doesn't Believe: Help and Encouragement for Women Who Feel Alone in Their Faith** by Nancy Kennedy (Random House, 2001; 224 pages). Kennedy does not promise women a transformed marriage nor a changed husband—rather, the ability to rest in God's peace, whatever the outcome. Speaking from experience she explores crucial issues and emotions, and offer biblical truth, practical help, and comforting insights for those in “unequally yoked” relationships.

