

Heritage

To Timothy, my dearly beloved son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, and from Jesus Christ our Lord. I may be filled with joy, when I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice, and I am persuaded in thee also. Wherefore, I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God which is in thee...2 Timothy 1:2, 5-6, KJV

My friends in elementary school talked about going to Sunday school and church. I first learned about God from Mom and Dad, but they were not attending church in the 1960s, when my brother, Tony, and I were very young. They did share Bible stories with us and encouraged us to pray, because they wanted us to believe.

I attended Vacation Bible School with my friend who lived across the street. I thought it was fun. I liked learning about God. I enjoyed the crafts, and I looked forward to the breaks, when we enjoyed cookies and Kool-Aid. I was a little sad when Vacation Bible School was over. I wanted to attend Sunday school, so I could learn about God all year.

I asked Mom, "Why ain't we going to church?"

"We don't have the clothes we need to go to church," she said.

"What's wrong with our clothes?" I asked.

"When people go to church, they dress up. Women wear nice dresses and even gloves and hats and men wear suits and ties. We don't have dress-up clothes," Mom explained.

"Why don't we get dress-up clothes?"

"We can't afford them."

I did not realize that we were not as well off as many other families in our neighborhood. I thought we were rich. We lived in a house with a backyard, and we had plenty to eat. Tony and I had toys and games. I did not mind that my clothes were often hand-me-downs and thrift store finds.

But now I felt envious of my friends who knew what church and Sunday school were like. I felt left out, and all I could do was wait until we had dress-up clothes. Until then, Tony and I learned about God from our parents and grandparents.

In the country where Tony's and my grandfather lived, people were not expected to wear dress-up clothes to church. Our grandfather, who we lovingly called "Papaw," dressed simply in a white shirt and dark pants. On his head, he wore a fedora hat. He did not wear expensive suits, but was always dressed up in the spiritual armor that the Apostle Paul wrote about: "Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. Wherefore, take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, and your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness, and your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace. Above all, take the shield of faith, wherewith ye may quench all the fiery darts of the wicked, and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Ephesians 6:11, 13-17, KJV)

Being a spiritual person, Papaw placed far more emphasis on the soul, than the body. He did not need riches to be content. He embraced the words of Jesus: "Lay not up treasures for yourselves upon earth, where the moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21, KJV). It was clear to Tony and me where Papaw's heart was, so we watched him. We listened to his words. At a young age, we were strongly influenced by his witness. We began to understand that true wealth was unseen and worth seeking. True wealth was eternal. The Word of God inspired Papaw to teach us, "This is just a gettin' ready place." He encouraged us to look beyond our temporal existence and into eternity. Years later, I would remember what Papaw taught Tony and me when I studied the words of the Apostle Paul: "Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth. When Christ who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory." (Colossians 3:2, 4, KJV)

As Tony and I grew older, we realized the truth of the proverb, "You don't know who you are until you know where you came from." When we witnessed the faith of our people, and how God blessed them for it, and when we heard the stories of their strength and courage, we were encouraged to continue their traditions and beliefs.

1970 brought a new decade. It also brought quite a change in the lives of Tony and me. A friend of our family invited us to attend the Baptist church that she was attending in our neighborhood. I had already expressed my desire to go to church, so Mom was ready to say "yes" to the invitation. Dad was also making more money, and she felt that our clothes were acceptable. Dad was not ready to go with us, but Mom took Tony and me to the church and attended Sunday school and worship with us.

Prior to attending church, I had watched televised crusades led by Rev. Billy Graham. At the end of one of these crusades, I had asked the Lord to come into my heart. Since I was very young, I was not sure that my commitment was sincere. I had to make sure, so not long after we started attending church, I came forward at the end of the service to give my life to Christ.

Not long after that, I found myself navigating the few cement steps into the baptismal pool. The pastor who baptized me said, "Buried in the likeness of His death...", and holding a handkerchief over my nose, he dunked me into the water. As he lifted me from the water, he said, "Raised in the likeness of His resurrection!" I could hear "amens" from members of the congregation. I was filled with wonder, realizing that I was following in the steps of Jesus.

Researching my and Tony's ancestry and hearing family stories, I realized more than ever that our faith had been passed down to us from generations of believers. We had every reason to be thankful for our ancestors who had given their hearts to God.

I knew that was not always the case. We also had skeptics and outlaws in our family tree. I sincerely hoped that before the end of their lives, they came to believe that earth was "just a gettin' ready place," and they had prepared for eternity. How unfortunate to not experience the happiness of being clothed in the spiritual garments that are fashioned by the Master Designer!

The Word of God enlightens us with these words: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, and my soul shall be joyful in my God, for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, and covered me with the robe of righteousness. He hath decked me like a bridegroom, and as a bride attireth herself with her jewels." (Isaiah 61:10)