



TRIBUTE TO MAMA

Joyce Williams

Many who are first will be last, and the last first.
—Mark 10:31

She was a very quiet, humble person. My mama avoided the spotlight like the plague, and you would never find her up front. As a matter of fact, she always sat near the back of the sanctuary.

Mama was unstintingly unselfish. She always made me and my sisters, Bobbi and Jane, her priority. I remember her taking us shopping. On rare occasions when Daddy had earned some extra money, she took us to one of the nicest stores in town. At great personal sacrifice she bought Jane and me, who were born 15 months apart, matching outfits. I don't remember her ever buying something for herself. That was Mama.

Mama and Daddy worked hard. It wasn't unusual for Daddy to work three jobs. Both of them had minimal educations, so survival was always a struggle. In the summer Daddy went to the farmers' market late in the day to buy bushels of produce. Mama spent many days canning fruits and vegetables to get us through the winter. For years she provided daycare for

children in our home. We came to consider some of them as little “adopted” sisters and brothers.

In my early years Mama did our laundry each Monday—“wash day”—in a wringer washing machine. I remember being fascinated by the different galvanized tubs she positioned around that aging relic. One was for cold water; another for hot water; and another for bleach water. It was quite a process.

Jane and I took advantage of her preoccupation with that all-day assignment to stir up any kind of mischief we could. Mama believed in corporal punishment, so we frequently felt the sting of switches from nearby trees. From all I hear and remember, we must have been little terrors. One day she locked us in a room and told us not to “tear up jack,” whatever that means. I was so ornery that I found a picture of Cousin Jack, and we tore it up! I wonder how child psychologists would analyze such behavior.

Mama was firm and really knew how to use a switch on two misbehaving little girls. But she was always kind and loving. She had a great sense of humor. I loved to hear her laugh, although she usually covered her mouth. She had lost several teeth, and due to her sacrificial nature, she delayed getting false teeth for years.

Although both of her parents were gone before I was born, Mama remained very close to her siblings. We loved visiting our aunts, uncles, and cousins. More than anything we enjoyed eating around a table groaning with delectable goodies! That was before we thought about sugar and fat, and we didn’t count grams of anything. So everything was delicious and guilt-free.

One of my favorite memories of Mama was of her reading her big black Bible. Many times it would be opened to Revelation 21, because she loved to read about heaven. And she loved studying eschatology. Although she had to drop out of school after the sixth grade, she was highly intelligent and an avid learner.

I reflected about how the Lord comforted me the day Mama died. The call had come on a Sunday morning—Mama was gone. I was more than a thousand miles away, and my heart was broken. Gene and I could not get a plane out until Monday morning. I spent the afternoon and evening going through things of Mama's I had with me.

As I sorted through a box, I found an envelope I had never seen before. Her spidery handwriting brought fresh tears to my eyes. The words that I read through that misty veil lifted my heart.

Mama had always told us her favorite song was "Beulah Land," as sung by my daughter Bethany. So I was surprised to read, "My favorite songs are 'It Is Well with My Soul' and 'I'd Rather Have Jesus.'" My heart lifted as I thought, *What a great epitaph!* And I was comforted.

I was overwhelmed with sadness the week before our first Mother's Day without Mama. She was gone, and I was a thousand miles from both my daughters, Tami and Bethany. Word had just come that Uncle Lewis, the last of Mama's siblings and our patriarch, was dying of cancer. There was no way I could go to be with any of them. My heart was torn into ribbons of grief.

As I recalled the way the Lord had brought such wonderful words of comfort when Mama died, I was assured that somehow He would find a special way to console us once again as we walked back through the valley.

On Friday I called my cousin, Patsy. Tearfully, she said that Uncle Lewis' death was imminent. He almost died on Wednesday night but had somehow rallied. "As a matter of fact," she said, "he had been so much better the doctor sent us home to rest."

Early Thursday morning his nurse Debbie, a family friend, heard Uncle Lewis mumbling. She leaned toward him, listening. Joyfully, he whispered, "It's much more beautiful over there than I ever dreamed. Look at the angels! There's a big river. I can see lots of people on the other side." He paused, then said, "I see Mary!" Then he drifted back into unconsciousness.

After Patsy told me that story, I couldn't speak for the tears flowing down my cheeks. He had seen his sister Mary—Mama! Uncle Lewis had been given a glimpse of heaven and that very special resident. Joy infused me, pushing back the sorrow! What a Mother's Day gift—straight from heaven!

Patsy called early Saturday morning to tell me that Uncle Lewis had joined Mama. Rather than the sorrow I had anticipated, I was suffused with comfort as I pictured Mama welcoming him. I visualized brother and sister exploring heaven together. I could picture them walking with their new bodies on golden streets hand-in-hand, shouting joyfully. I'm sure Daddy was holding Mama's other hand as they helped to reacquaint Uncle Lewis with so many who had gone ahead.

Imagine! My humble, meek, back-of-the-crowd mother was right up front, by the portals of heaven! That Mother's Day was a joyous celebration rather than a sad farewell.

Prayer: *Thank you, Father, for allowing my meek mother to be a heavenly greeter.*

Thought for the Day: When our lives are over and we want to leave a final testimony as a legacy of our faith, the songs "I'd Rather Have Jesus" and "It Is Well with My Soul" say it all.