

Completely His: Loving Jesus Without Limits

On the morning of August 29, 1984, Shannon Ethridge kissed her mom goodbye and tossed her books and pompoms into the backseat of her little brown Plymouth Champ. It was the third day of her junior year at Greenville High School, but she never made it to school that morning.

After driving a couple of miles down the country highway that would lead her to the interstate, Shannon reached for her lipstick and adjusted the rearview mirror for a quick application. Suddenly, she caught a glimpse of something moving, then felt her car jolt suddenly. "I thought it was perhaps a farm animal out of its pasture, but I had a sinking feeling it was something much worse," Shannon says.

Her sinking feeling was confirmed when she ran back to see what she'd hit. She stood trembling in shock over the body of a curly headed woman laying face down in the grass next to a mangled bicycle. "I wanted to turn her over to see if I could help her, but I knew I couldn't waste precious time in calling for an ambulance," she explains. At a nearby house, Shannon made two calls, one to 9-1-1, and one to her mother, asking her to drive down the road until she saw her car. She didn't have the heart to tell her anything else at this point.

Her mother arrived within a few minutes, and together they waited for what seemed like an eternity. All the while, Shannon's kept thinking, "This woman was probably someone's mother... someone's daughter... someone's wife... and how will I ever face her family after what I've done?"

Forty-five minutes later, the ambulance finally arrived, and the paramedic coldly explained that they'd have to call a funeral home ambulance because there was nothing he could do. He speculated she'd been killed on impact.

They left the scene not knowing who the woman was, but received a phone call within a few hours from a man named Jerry Speight. He said he lived next door to Marjorie Jarstfer, the woman who'd been killed, and that he and his pastor had driven to McKinney, Texas to tell her husband, Gary, that his wife had been killed. Shannon's heart sank. The family now knew what she'd done, and she figured they probably wanted her dead, too. In fact, she'd already considered suicide as a way of escaping this painful tragedy.

But the caller explained to Shannon that Gary's first response was, "How is the girl? Was she hurt? Does she know it's not her fault?"

Shannon couldn't believe what she was hearing. "How could this man's first response to such devastating news be concern for me, the one responsible for his tragic loss?" she wondered. The caller also explained that Gary wanted Shannon to come to their home the next evening so that their families could meet one another -- an invitation she wanted to decline, but knew that she couldn't.

Feeling as if she was about to face a firing squad, Shannon entered the front door of the Jarstfer home. There she saw a big, burly middle-aged man coming toward her, not with animosity in his eyes, but with his arms open wide. Gary held Shannon tightly as her tears flowed freely onto his flannel shirt. She kept repeating, "I am so sorry! I am so sorry!"

Gary ushered Shannon into the living room where he sat her down in a bay window and explained, "Shannon, I want to tell you about Marjorie's life. We've served many years with Wycliffe Bible Translators, and there was no limit to how much Marjorie loved the Lord. She had such a close, intimate walk with God, and she's actually been telling me for a while that she sensed the Lord would be calling her home soon."

Shannon found it difficult to fathom that a human being could be close enough to God that they would know when their time on earth was about to expire. In fact, Marjorie had even taken out additional life insurance, and given her testimony at church about how she was ready to leave this earth and be with the Lord any day.

Gary continued, saying, "Shannon, this accident may have taken us all by surprise, but it was no surprise to God. He was ready for Marjorie to join Him in heaven, and He *chose* you to carry out her fate because He knew you would be strong enough to handle this, and that is your responsibility. As a matter of fact, *I am passing Marjorie's legacy of being a godly woman onto you.* I want you to love Jesus without limits, just like Marjorie did. I want you to let Him use you for His glory, Shannon."

In her sixteen-year-old mind, Shannon couldn't imagine what those words really meant, but she has spent the past 23 years contemplating them and trying to live up to them. As the author of the *Every Woman's Battle* series and the new *Loving Jesus Without Limits* series, she's trying to carry the mantle of being a godly woman who loves Jesus beyond measure, just as Marjorie Jarstfer did.

“Even though I grew up attending church and singing, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know...’ I don’t think I ever really understood the depth of God’s mercy, compassion, and unconditional love until I met Gary Jarstfer,” Ethridge explains. “His response toward me, the one who caused him indescribable pain and loss, has served as a vivid reminder of how Jesus Christ endured all of that pain on the cross, yet His first concern is always for us, those who nailed Him there.”

Gary Jarstfer remembers the day of the accident as clearly as Shannon does. He says, “Although August 29, 1984 marks the day of Marjorie’s death, God also birthed something special in our hearts that day -- a peace that passes all understanding, a deeper trust in His sovereignty, and an unexpected friendship that would glorify God in a magnificent way for many years.”

Gary reflects back to the forty-five minute drive home after learning of Marjorie’s death. He contemplated how Marjorie would respond if the tables were turned and he had been the one killed. He says, “I wanted whatever words I spoke to Shannon to be in accordance with God’s will for her life. I knew I bore a weight of enormous responsibility, for if I said the wrong thing, it could be absolutely devastating. I saw this opportunity to speak to Shannon as a chance to bless her, not blame her.”

Jarstfer goes on to say that he had no idea what God would wind up doing in and through Shannon’s life. “I’m absolutely overwhelmed, and so grateful for what the Lord has done. I never dreamed that she’d become a youth pastor, or abstinence educator, or an author that would touch so many lives in so many countries with her writing. It’s all so beyond anything I could have ever imagined at the time of the accident.” He goes on to say that Marjorie was a teacher and an aspiring writer as well, he believes she would have been so pleased to see the kind of topics Shannon tackles, encouraging women to live with integrity and to love Jesus without limits. “Those are certainly messages that would have resonated with Marjorie’s heart.” Gary says.

In the years since the accident, God has knit the hearts of these two families even closer together. “When I moved to North Carolina and married my second wife, Betty Ann (a long-time family friend whose husband was also killed in a car accident just six weeks after Marjorie’s death), Shannon was on our list of the people to share the good news with as soon as possible. Through letters and emails, we’ve been delighted to support one another in our ministry and missionary endeavors,” Jarstfer explains. In fact, Gary and Betty Ann say

they consider Shannon one of their own daughters, and some of their granddaughters affectionately tell their friends about how “Aunt Shannon” was adopted into their family as a result of the car accident.

While neither Shannon nor Gary would have chosen for the accident to take place, they both wholeheartedly agree with Romans 8:28, “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *His* purpose” (KJV). Shannon reflects, “God didn’t say only the good things work together for our good. He said *all* things – the good, the bad, and the ugly – work together for our good. And He has proven this passage of scripture to me over and over again.”

Gary insists, “I can be at peace with Marjorie’s absence on earth and presence in heaven because I know that God is working through her memory to bring glory to Himself - - simply because we have chosen to live as Christ lived. We have chosen to bless rather than blame. We have turned tragedy into triumph. We have embraced God’s sovereignty, and declared that regardless of the pain that this life brings, we will forever remain *Completely His*.”