

*Celebrating
Your
Scars*

LIVING BOLDLY FOR CHRIST!

Theresa Whitfield

with Victoria Sandbrook

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Giving honor to God, who is the head of my life, the author and finisher of my faith. For without Him I am nothing. My life will forever give God glory.

This book is dedicated to my husband, friend and pastor, Jonathan Whitfield, who is truly my inspiration, my joy, my everything.

I want to thank him for believing in me, not just that I could make it through the attack, but for always believing in me, that I could make it through all of the obstacles seen and unseen. You encouraged me to write, to sing, to soar and to be everything God has created me to be.

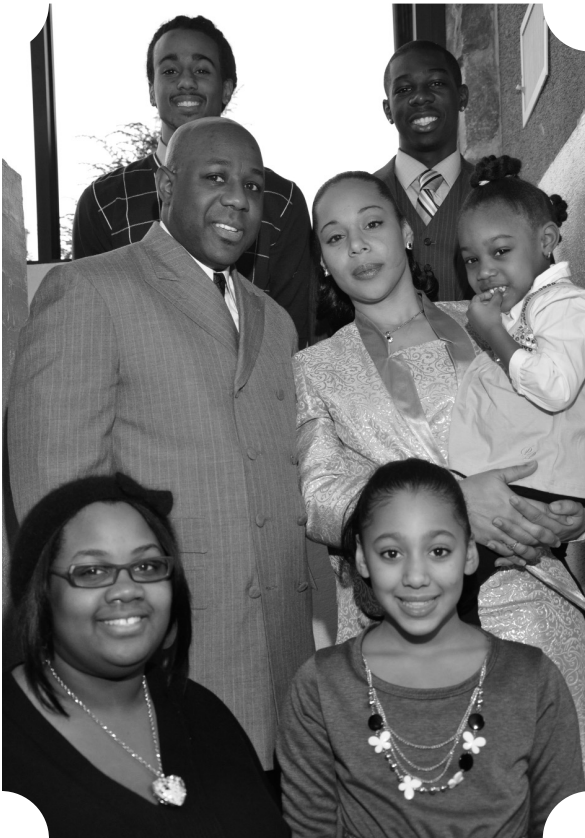
I want to thank my children, for always being there, always listening and being my sounding board, when at times I felt I was going half-crazy. For staying grounded and being strong examples of Christ. For not showing a spirit of fear, even though sometimes things were scary. For never giving up. I want to encourage each of you to continue the press, to press toward the mark of the high calling for each of your lives.

I want to thank my mother and my sisters and brothers. For there were times we did not see eye to eye, nor could we understand why we would say or do the things we did. But one thing we do know is that we truly love and care for each other. And that comes from a mother who instilled in us a true sense of family, that we are all we have and we stick together no matter what comes. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. Thank you for being a real family and keeping me real.

I want to thank Welstar Publications for wading through the weeds and finding a beautiful story in me to share with the world. Kate, thank you for letting me share, vent, cry, and for praying with me that we can do it. Dr. Bat-

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A special thanks to Dr. Bikoff, who I call the number-one plastic surgeon who ever lived. Thank you for believing and acknowledging the God in me. I truly believe God ordained us to meet on that day, July 22, 2007. Thank you for letting Him use you in your gift of healing. Continue to acknowledge Him in all your ways, and He will direct your path.



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GENESIS 4:9

Then the LORD said to Cain,

“Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

INTRODUCTION: WHO CARES?

I have not come to preach, but hopefully to encourage and inspire those who are trying to find their way through this thing called human life. The importance of this message is not what it achieves as being a good message, but what it sets in motion, “a message with a purpose.”

My title chosen for this time must be judged not only by the manner in which it is expressed, but to whom it is addressed and not just addressed to a particular person but to your experiences. I am not sure who I have been preparing this word for. But tap your neighbor and tell them I need this word to shift me to my destiny. (from the sermon “A Need for a Shift”)

When I first told a special young woman about my intentions to write this book, I received the shock of my life—her response was simply, “Who cares?” She said to me that in this life we see so many horrible things, nothing is new anymore, so who would really care about my story?

It was like I’d been hit by a ton of bricks.

Who cares?

Those two words communicated a world of hurt and need—that need is why I wanted this message in the world. Who cares? I do. But then I suppose many folks would ask, “Well, who are you?” It’s a fair question, when the truth is that so many of us really don’t know who we are. To tell the truth, neither did I, until a blessing literally cut me open and revealed my true purpose and destiny to me. So for all of those reading now and wondering, *Well, just who does she think she is?* I can tell you—I am a beautiful child of God, a fearfully and wondrously made woman of purpose, a testimony ready and willing to bear witness to the goodness of

God and to His powerful presence in my life and in the world. But that's not the answer that's important, that's not even the question that needs to be answered.

I want to go back and speak to that two-word question: Who cares?

To God be the glory for He so truly cares about us! *He cares.* Not because of anything we've done, but because we are His children, no matter how we walk away, ignore Him or curse His name. God cares.

But, I think, that special young woman should know that already. As a devoted member of our church, I know her faith in the Lord, and so I know she knows God cares. So still there is something missing. And the missing are all around us.

Today we don't have time to think about how f.i.n.e. we are. And no, those periods aren't typos. The truth of the matter is that most of us are not fine, as in all right, feeling good, peachy keen. No. We aren't. We're all running around f.i.n.e.—freaked out, insecure, neurotic, and emotional. We put up the front like we can handle it (whatever "it" is) when the truth is we are failing and faltering and fading into a pale excuse of an existence. Life is that thing that skitters across us as we are just lying down taking whatever comes. In the 21st century with tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, mudslides, tornadoes and disease raging across the world, we can't seem to catch our breaths. We are living in a constant state of hyperventilation such that we can't even see that we aren't getting any oxygen. We are freaked out by all of the craziness happening around us. We are insecure about our places in the world. We are operating in a constant state of neurosis, stifled by anxiety, obsessed with scandal and gore, compulsive in our excesses and mysteriously tormented in body. We are so emotional that we can no longer process all of the chaos of our minds.

To care, to be concerned, or to look out for our fellow

brothers and sisters seems a luxury that we just can't afford, when it's so hard for us to simply care for ourselves.

I learned this firsthand, as both a victim and a victimizer. Now you might wrinkle your brow at that statement, scratch your chin or tap your forehead thinking, *What does she mean by that? Sister Whitfield a victimizer?* No, I don't mean that I've gone out and assaulted anyone; but I am guilty just as many of us are of neglecting the Golden Rule, the highest of all the Commandments—Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. When we ignore this greatest assignment from God, we become both victimizers and our own victims. And it is so easy to do. To love your neighbor as yourself requires that you love yourself. To love your God with your whole heart requires that you are in touch with your heart and that it is open to not only give but to receive love.

Who cares?

If you don't care about yourself, you can't care about anyone else. And if you can't care about anyone else then you can't love God, because God is love and demands love and requires that we love one another.

Who cares?

My brothers and sisters, I come to you to say that you must care. If you don't care, really and truly, who will? We are all thirsty for each other, and we do not know how to quench that thirst, because we have lost sight of the most important part of our humanity—caring for each other. Humans are social creatures that cannot survive without each other. And when we hurt each other, we harm only ourselves. We are caught in a cycle of destruction that we ourselves cannot escape from without some divine intervention.

God cares. But unless we do, unless we can stare f.i.n.e. in the face and say *I want my life back and I want it more abundantly in the name of Jesus Christ!*, unless we can see each other and care for each other, God cannot help us.

Then there is f.e.a.r. Again, those periods are not typos. Fear is nothing more than false evidence appearing real, and I know this because in 2 Timothy 1:7-10, the Bible declares:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

God has given us life such that we may live it more abundantly with a sober boldness to declare His good works and proclaim His name forever, always and everywhere. When I say sober here, I don't mean before we've hit the bottle—no. I'm talking about a clear, sane mind. We are not meant to be tormented by fear, debilitated by doubt, or accosted by our own shortcomings. Life is a gift and it gives us the opportunity, and responsibility, to give something back by becoming more. More than just existing to say you lived. How about saying you lived with purpose, in purpose, and full of purpose?

You know, beliefs have the power to create and they have the power to destroy. For too long, I was restricted. I had allowed others to categorize me, placing me into the tiny boxes of their descriptions. I felt the Lord stirring in my soul, filling my spirit with a song for the world to hear, but every time I opened my mouth, other people's expectations came bursting forth. Fear of judgment, discomfited by other's perceptions of me—I used to hide. My scars were internally hidden from the world, and yet I wore them so close to my heart that I couldn't heal myself and I couldn't accept healing from

God. I would ask myself, *Theresa, who cares that you have a message? All people see is that pretty face; no one knows why you sing.* Until...

July 22, 2007.

My whole world flipped upside down and inside out. Those scars that I had kept so close were put on display for all the world to see. My cells were literally ripped apart and my life stolen from me. When I realized the light was the hospital fluorescents and not the gleam of the pearly gates, I was presented with the question: Who cares? And my answer is, "I am my brother's keeper!"

Who are you?

JOB 10:8-14

*“Your hands shaped me and made me.
Will you now turn and destroy me?*

*Remember that you molded me like clay.
Will you now turn me to dust again?*

*Did you not pour me out like milk
and curdle me like cheese,*

*clothe me with skin and flesh
and knit me together with bones and sinews?*

*You gave me life and showed me kindness,
and in your providence watched over my spirit.*

*But this is what you concealed in your heart,
and I know that this was in your mind:*

*If I sinned, you would be watching me
and would not let my offense go unpunished.”*

PART I
MAKING ME IN HIS WAY
JOURNEY TO SELF

1 | JULY 22, 2007

She grabbed me by my hair from behind...

She turned me around to face the full-length mirror.

She cut my throat.

She was behind me; I tried to turn all the way around to ask her, Are you serious? Are we really doing this? A young lady in the bathroom with us ran out, closed the door.

She's coming back... coming down on me again with the... what? I didn't know what she had in her hand, I saw her cut me, but I didn't know with what. She's coming down on me. I raised my left hand to stop her. She's not going to stop. She's coming down now on my face. She's swinging. Everywhere. But my hands are moving, defending. But she doesn't stop. My hands are cut open... my face... I don't feel it, but I see her. She was moving, but she wasn't there. No humanity in her eyes. Vacant. Only the movement of her hands as she cuts, cuts and cuts... across my nose, down my cheek, across my chest, my arm... God, she isn't going to stop. I turned away from her and slipped, in my own blood. I saw her coming down on me again, and I turned away, exposing my head—her hand, a blade, sliced through scalp. I turned on my knees—she slashed the back of my neck... I turned to my left, I've got to get up, I've got to get out of here, she's not going to stop! My baby was there crying, watching. I have to get this woman off of me, I have to get myself up, get my daughter and then get out of this bathroom, open this door that is now closed! I was on the door, but she was on me, cutting, slashing, thigh and calf. No one knew that we were down there.

A sudden push on the door pushed me back, pushed me into this woman, vacant, violent. I call her "my Disobedient Child," the girl who ran out of the bathroom... She's back... my God.

The girl came back with her mother. Her mother didn't know what was going on. All she knew was that someone was hurting me; the girl had not seen the blade. She said, "Someone is hitting on Sister Whitfield downstairs." The girl's mother didn't see the blade either—she saw a hairbrush (praise Jesus for taking away the source of fear!). The mother demanded the attacking woman to "Stop!"

The woman froze. There was no sight, only the whites of her eyes—her pupils were rolled up in the back of her head. "Stop!"

Her irises returned; her face changing, sense seemed to reemerge. The woman ran, out of the bathroom, out the church.

I ran out of the bathroom, forgot my daughter... no, the door was open and I ran out, screaming for someone to get my daughter.

"Something happened to my face, get ice, something has happened to my face, get ice!"

I'm running, thinking I'm alone, but there is a doctor there running with me to the kitchen. I said, "All I need is water and ice, water and ice..." When I asked for ice, ice made me feel better; when I asked for water, water made me feel better; and they were doing all that, and holding me, holding my face together.

I put my hand under the flow of water in the sink; that water splashed over it—my hand opened up like a flower.

Oh no, that's not good, that's not going to work.

I closed my hand immediately. There were others around me—I don't know who—holding me up, holding me together. I said, "Just do the face, y'all just work on the face and I'll keep this hand."

I wasn't scared until I opened my eyes—isn't that something?—all that I'd been through, I wasn't scared, but when I opened my eyes I got scared. When I opened my eyes and looked up at the woman who was holding me, she looked scared and it scared me. Her hair was standing on top of her head, blood was all

over her, "Oh my God," there was blood all over the walls, there was blood all over the counter, there was blood everywhere.

Then... the darkness descended on me, the darkness was coming over me... "Whoever is holding me... I'm going."



I felt this... something... I'm feeling something, something is happening... I'm going.

A dark place. I was at a very, very dark place, and I felt the essence of my body leaving me, and I said, "I'm going."

Whoever was holding me, she said, "Okay, you go, I'm going to hold you, I've got you."

With her words something quickened in my spirit, I heard a voice say, "No, you're not. You're not going."

I repeated it out loud. "No, I'm not. I'm not going."

The one holding me whispered to me, "Sister Whitfield, you're getting heavy, I'm going to have to let you go, for a moment."

"It's okay, you let me go. We're just going to hold on, I'm just going to hold on." I held on to the sink, I knelt on it, supporting myself with one toe and an angel's shoulders.

"No, I'm not. I'm not going."



On July 22, 2007, I was attacked in the basement of Trinity Baptist Church during Sunday morning worship service while I had gone to change my then two-year-old daughter's diaper. I was attacked by a young woman named Yolanda Cooper, a member of Trinity Baptist Church, a congregant under my husband's pastorate, a Christian woman, disturbed by a spirit of the devil, possessed in mind, body and soul.

I was saved by God.

God sent his angels to guard me and protect me. The first angel on earth I call my little Disobedient Child—a youth member of Trinity who had abandoned church service in preference to reading a book in the relative quiet of the ladies' bathroom. She was the only witness to Ms. Cooper's initial attack. The girl ran from the bathroom in search of help when Yolanda initially struck me. My second angel on earth was that little girl's mother, "My Little David," who stepped into that bathroom and commanded Ms. Cooper to "Stop!" It was as if she brought Yolanda Cooper back to her senses. Ms. Cooper fled out of the church only to be followed by our deacons until the police were able to catch up with her.

I would not know about the other angels around me until much later.

I was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. I had asked those congregants gathered around me, holding me together, holding me up, to pray with me before the ambulance came. I feared—I had no prayer for myself but I knew I needed the protection of prayer. I didn't know exactly what had happened, but I had felt my life start to slip away from me. I felt the absence of myself inside my own skin. I heard the prayers of those around me, and I heard a voice inside of me tell me I wasn't going anywhere. My spirit was restored, but my body steadily lost blood out of the over one dozen slashes all over my body.

When the ambulance arrived I must have been somewhat hysterical. I don't like attention, I never have. I could feel the bodies around me, but I didn't know to whom they belonged. My daughter was somewhere but I didn't know where. My other children were not with me that day, and neither was my husband, who had gone to Maryland to a forum about violence in the church. I was in the midst of, the center of, a storm of attention; it made me nervous and I

was going into shock. All I can remember is the invasion of an oxygen mask, and thinking, *Are these people crazy? Theresa doesn't do oxygen masks. Don't put anything on my face—my face is already messed up, how are you going to put an oxygen mask on my face?* I was not pleased.

The EMTs comforted me by saying if they put the oxygen mask on, it would calm me; something in me trusted them, so I let them put the oxygen mask on. I liked the way I started to feel, I could identify things in my surroundings, I felt like myself again. The EMTs spoke gently to me, explaining what they were going to do next. They put me on the stretcher, and I told them, “Okay, you’re going to do this, but let me tell you about me first” —all of this while I’m bleeding to death. I gave instruction as the paramedics were putting me in the ambulance, “I’ve got to tell you something, I do not like to ride backwards in an ambulance, I’ve done it before and I don’t like it. I don’t like that oxygen mask on my face, and I get motion sickness and I’m claustrophobic.” They listened patiently. The last thing I heard was, “My name is Chris and you’re going to be okay.” I don’t remember the ride, I don’t remember the sirens, I don’t remember the surgery. All I remember is waking up in the recovery room...

Two thousand stitches later.

I remember waking up in the recovery room and hearing voices—nurses coming to me that were not very nice, checking my IV, taking my pulse; they hurt me more than my stitches, they hurt me more than the initial attack.

I was coming in and out of consciousness. They moved me from the recovery room to a room in intensive care, but I don’t remember that. I remember waking up in a room with people standing all around me, their hands over their mouths, crying. It was like a movie. You know how in movies one scene goes dark and then you’re into another scene—I would close my eyes with one scene around me and open my eyes to find things completely different. I guess it was the

medication; I didn't panic, I just floated... in and out of consciousness. Until I opened my eyes and I saw my mother.

2 | WADE IN THE WATER

That day was not the first time I'd been attacked. It's merely the attack that has left the most visible scars. My childhood was not idyllic. Many people would not believe having looked at me before July 22, 2007, that I, the pretty light-skinned child with "good" hair and a sweet singing voice, had ever been through anything in my life. But my upbringing was not the stuff of dreams. And being light of hue and soft of hair does not spare you from the darker sides of life's realities.

Life didn't even start out easily. I was born Theresa Stephens on November 24, 1968, in Jamaica, Queens, New York, at Queens General Hospital, premature, my mother having gone into labor after being knocked down a flight of stairs by my father.

There were nine of us: James Henry, Judy, Timmy, Jerry, William, Betty, David, and I was next to the youngest, before my baby sister Vivian. From Timmy down to me, there is only one year's separation between each of us; two years after my birth, Vivian was born.

The youngest siblings, myself included, were called the second generation of the Stephens family. The older children would lament to us young ones, "You have no idea what we went through before you guys came." But what we all went through together was terrible enough. I remember my mother and father were always fighting. Too many times we came home from church and the police were already there. The ups and downs, the fighting associated with alcohol resulted in unspeakable cruelty in our household.

We always hid when my father came home. We knew not to be around because we never knew what we were going to get. He would throw the pipes out of our

house, sell the washing machine—just crazy, crazy stuff sometimes. And other times it went far beyond absurd decisions brought on by a drunken stupor. If he'd been on that corner drinking with the boys, then he was definitely coming back raising hell.

I can remember one incident like it was yesterday. My father came home drunk and looking for us. My oldest brothers hid me behind the couch. I don't know where they hid my sisters, but I know Timmy (God rest his soul) hid under the bed. We could hear my father coming through the house like a giant, pipe in his hand. He was looking for all of us and ringing the pipe all through the house, hitting it everywhere. I guess he thought if he made enough noise we'd get scared and come out. But none of us budged; no one came out. I could hear him raging through every room until he got to the bed where Timmy was hiding and he just rang that pipe under that bed. Then he left. Drunk or not, I believe that he knew what he was doing.

When he was long gone, we all came out. Timmy's mouth and face were so busted up, I almost couldn't recognize him. He looked like something from a movie: his lip was open and all his teeth in the front were knocked out. I remember him running around making fun of the way his face was all busted up, until our mother got home. She'd been at the hospital all day, working her shifts as a nurse. She must have been exhausted, but she took one look at her son's face and immediately rushed him to the hospital. The doctors helped, I'm sure, but his face was never the same again.



In remembering my upbringing, the discipline from my mother wouldn't have been called abuse; it was just called raising a child. She truly believed in the Scripture "spare the rod and spoil the child." My mother's temper was quick and all-encompassing, and though she was harsh to all of us, I recall little mercy in my discipline.

She also distrusted me, even when I was a child. I could be sick with a fever and she would insist that I was pretending. Maybe that distrust also played into her rules about friends. Because there was no such thing as friends in the Stephens family. They weren't allowed in the house. You went to church, you went to school and you came home, that was it. You did your chores, you did your homework, you went to bed, that was it. As youth we were extremely isolated from the outside world, and as we all grew into adulthood, each of us took a different path, always straying from the straight and narrow because we didn't know any different.

The perversion of our inheritance from our parents bled into our genes, and what started as a life troubled by alcoholism and anger became a confusing and dark life of shadows for many of us. We all struggled to overcome our individual trials, but too many times we found ourselves struggling against each other. My mother denied the truth of it for years. And I didn't realize, until I was an adult, that there was any other way to grow up.

Before I had children of my own, I just assumed life was lonely and hard and trying, like I deserved the worst for no reason and that was just how it would be. None of my siblings seemed to question it either. Some of them are still too caught up in the lives we lived as children to see that there's more than abuse and violence and pervasion in the world; they can't see past the scars and shadows.

With everything we went through, it only makes sense that we struggled. Physically and mentally we suffered and, in some cases, still suffer. But as a family we still don't talk about that.



We just didn't understand my mother. Especially when it came to her daughters—my mother adored her sons, but we daughters would get together and wonder, “What is

wrong with her?" When we were little, we thought she was crazy, just off the chain. It wasn't until I became a woman that I started to really see my mother as a woman, and not just as my mother. Only then could I understand what she had survived.

My mother, born and raised in North Carolina, decided to move to New York for a new start, but she only stumbled into one bad marriage after another. Forty or fifty years ago, times were different. Life was hard and sometimes unbearable—how else could it be when you were trying to raise nine kids on a nurse's salary? She spent our childhoods fearing her own hidden scars and the shadows on her heart—the ones that made her accept abuse in marriage as a necessary evil. A woman had to do what a woman had to do. If it meant sacrificing her own happiness for her children's survival, my mother knew she'd just have to find happiness after we'd been fed.

My mother focused so much on shielding us from a past that tormented her that she couldn't protect us from the abuse and darkness on our own doorstep. She feared we would inherit her scars, and in some ways she was terribly right. None of us came out of the home unscathed. Her scars and her battles are not mine to share, not mine to explain or justify. But knowing her story like I do, knowing her as a grown and married woman myself, knowing her scars through my own, I have found forgiveness in my heart. Now, I can respect that and I can understand.



I may remember many of my early hardships as bad dreams, but I had a lot of nightmares, true nightmares when I was a child. That I can tell you. I always dreamt about the devil, always dreamt about being pulled away. I think I've heard specialists describe dreams like these as growing pains in some psychological study or other. And maybe they had more than a little to do with the reality of my waking hours.

Do you recall, when you were younger, dreaming of something being on top of you always holding you down? Did you lie there, so sure you were really wide-awake? And you couldn't move because something was on top of you? That was my dream. It was ever recurring through my childhood. I'd be in my room, dreaming of the devil and that weight holding me down, and I could see myself just being dragged across the house, and I could do nothing to stop it.