

ZONDERVAN

What Southern Women Know about Faith

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rich, Ronda.

What Southern women know about faith : kitchen table stories and back porch comfort / Ronda Rich ; foreword by Stevie Waltrip.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-310-29179-4 (hardcover)

1. Christian women—Southern States—Religious life. I. Title.

BV4527.R54 2009

248.8'43—dc22

2008054081

Scripture quotations are the author's paraphrase based on the King James Version of the Bible.

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Interior design by Beth Shagene

Printed in the United States of America

09 10 11 12 13 14 15 • 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION



On most mornings of my younger life, I would awake to the delicious aroma of sizzling bacon drifting in from the red-and-white tile-floor kitchen where Mama was up, bright and early, making a big breakfast. The smells, sights, and sounds of those big Southern breakfasts are still vivid in my mind: hot bacon or sausage grease popping loudly and escaping from the black cast-iron skillet, the coffee pot whistling, sawmill gravy boiling to a creamy thickness, steam rising up from fluffy handmade buttermilk biscuits, grits simmering in the well-worn, battered boiler, and broken egg shells scattered across the countertop next to the stove. She poured Daddy's coffee, added sugar and cream, and then called, "It's ready."

Mama had a penchant for mashing butter into her scrambled eggs with a fork and then adding extra pepper. As she did so, and as Daddy sipped his coffee before starting his own breakfast, they would inevitably begin a morning conversation about the trials and tribulations faced by either our family or those we knew. For both, their first awakening action had been to pray silently to our good Lord Almighty.

Daddy would then throw his long legs off the bed, lean forward to put his elbows on his knees, and talk it all over with the Lord until Mama called him to breakfast.

Most of those morning conversations around the kitchen table would include phrases such as “The good Lord will answer in his own time,” “We’ll just have to leave it in God’s hands. He knows better than us,” “We can’t question God, we just have to trust,” “The Lord won’t let us down,” “We’ll just take these troubles to the Lord in prayer and leave them there,” “God has it all in the palm of his mighty hand,” and “We just have to have faith. It’ll all work out. Don’t worry.”

As bacon was munched, coffee sipped, and biscuits pushed around the plates to sop up the last dredges of gravy, worries seemed to melt away with a vivid, vibrant faith reaffirmed through both word and action. There around that old oval-shaped oak table, I first learned of the faith of my people, the kind of faith that I have repeatedly witnessed over the years across the South of my upbringing. It is a faith that is plain, simple, and sturdy, that is utilitarian in practice and fits as comfortably in the hands of Southern women as a baby, an iron skillet, a hairbrush, a telephone, a book, or a broom.

It’s best described as a kitchen-table faith because it sits comfortably in our midst like a lifelong trusted neighbor who is always there at our beck and call, who enters through the kitchen door and stays a spell. It is a faith that does not require us to dress in our Sunday best, assemble in the church house, or make an appointment at the altar in order to find it. Nor is it a faith to which we only subscribe to and feed on Sundays. It is faith that undergirds us every morning, afternoon, and evening of our lives.

Our faith, as practiced by the Southern women I know, walks beside us minute by minute, with its arms slung casually and sweetly

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around our shoulders, ready to embrace us tightly when the trials and heartaches of this life make rocky the road that we walk. When we stumble, as we all do from time to time, that ever-present faith grabs an elbow and steadies us on the uneven path.

“Wherever you are, God is there,” Mama always said. “He’ll meet you wherever you are.”

On Sundays, my sister, Louise, will cook a huge dinner for our family and serve it piping hot after church ends. Twelve or so adults and children will pile into the big open kitchen that spills into a sun-kissed dining area and family room. After the blessing is said, the mashed potatoes, green beans, and fried chicken are passed, and the sweet tea is poured. Forks will clink against the pottery, and talk will inevitably turn to that morning’s Sunday school lesson or sermon, and a theological discussion will ensue or a recent experience of God’s grace will be shared. Most of the table time will be spent discussing faith, both the pragmatic and the practiced. Just as in the early days of my life, the faith of my family still rises up bountifully from the kitchen table.

One day I stood in the dairy aisle of a small grocery store in a tiny town in rural Tennessee. As I selected a carton of milk, my ears tuned into the conversation of two women standing behind me, their grocery carts parked beside each other. One’s voice was filled with sadness as she explained her medical concerns for her son. The other’s voice was filled with sincere compassion as she gently said, “I’ll be praying for you. With God, all things are possible.”

I smiled to myself, warmed by a faith that is ever present among our women whether they reside in Tennessee, the Carolinas, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Kentucky, Virginia, Texas, or have transplanted and sowed their seeds of faith and belief in other places. In a grocery store in the middle of nowhere in

Tennessee, I had witnessed the same kind of faith that I encounter every day in my homeland: a biblically based trust that is buried deep in our hearts and discussed comfortably among each other at a moment's notice.

Does the faith of Southern women impress God more than others? Certainly not. Does the faith of Southern women offer redemption or salvation more than others? Absolutely not. But what is different about it—and why this book now exists—is the steady, consistent way that it is practiced among our women. Our society is so deeply entrenched in an active, engaged faith that rarely will a conversation of any length between two Southern women not allude to or outright mention spirituality. Our culture is saturated with religious conviction, soaked completely to the bone with it.

These days, I spend much of my time with the good Lord out on my sprawling back porch as I read my Bible, study the writings of scholars, pray, and reflectively seek his guidance and wisdom. I find solace in my favorite rocker or in that sweet white porch swing, where I am surrounded by the wonder of God's creation in the form of towering hardwood trees, squirrels that jump playfully from limb to limb, and a nearby tiny river that ebbs slowly by on its way to meet the ocean somewhere. That rippling water is a subtle reminder that little things often lead to bigger things in the divine plan of our heavenly Father. In the rural North Georgia countryside, it isn't a large amount of water, but one day it will join an almost endless ocean and be part of something much bigger. So is, I believe, the Lord's plan for my life. It is small in presence, but it is meant to be part of a bigger, grander plan.

On the quiet back porch, I often crawl figuratively into the lap of my heavenly Father, just as I once did with my earthly father, to seek comfort, love, and guidance. Just as the Lord was always wait-

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ing for us each morning at the kitchen table of my childhood, I find him waiting on the back porch whenever I need a reprieve from the harshness and uncertainty of life or when I want to praise and thank him for the mighty blessings that so often fall on my life and the lives of those I love.

My only wish as you embark on this reading journey is that you will snatch pieces of joy and comfort hither and yon, and that when all is said and done, this little book will find its humble place in God's bigger, grander plan.

THERE'S POWER IN THE BLOOD



Out of the poverty-stricken foothills of the Southern Appalachian mountains come my people. Many of them Scotch-Irish, some of them English. For over two hundred years, they traipsed through those beautiful laurel-covered mountains in the form of farmers, mule traders, moonshiners, mothers, Sunday school teachers, in-laws, out-laws, fiddle players, storytellers, and preachers.

They make up an interesting culture, these Southern Appalachians, for they are a goodly mix of the righteous and the renegades who often warred against each other. In generations past, and perhaps even some today, there were those who loved the Lord with all their hearts and those who ran from him with all their might. It always seemed that sooner or later, the good Lord would catch up with the renegades, bringing the righteous to say, "There comes a day of reckonin'. There always does."

I descend from many generations of God-fearing, Jesus-loving, fervent-praying people. People of strong and immeasurable faith. When my first Scotch-Irish ancestors came to America in the

mid-1700s, they were Presbyterian, but as they moved further down the Appalachians to western North Carolina and northern Georgia, they were forced to turn Baptist.

You see, the Presbyterians ordain only scholarly, well-educated men for their pulpits. That was a problem for two reasons. First, they couldn't turn them out of divinity school fast enough to supply the exploding population of the Southern mountains, and secondly, these refined men didn't always cotton to the primitive backwoods life; so finding the willing in spirit as well as in body to go forth among the less civilized proved a bit hard for the Presbyterian church.

The Baptists, though, are surprisingly more liberal. At least in this aspect. To be ordained for a Baptist pulpit simply meant, and still means, that a man must have the calling of the Holy Spirit on his life, and, therefore, laymen—farmers and the like—could and did pastor churches.

“The Lord called him,” folks would say one to another about a man who had publicly announced his calling by the Spirit to preach. “How 'bout that? He made a preacher.” “Making a preacher,” in the vernacular of our people, was what they viewed as the highest calling and most prestigious honor in humble mountain life. Much grander than that even of making a doctor.

Beginning in the early 1800s, the Presbyterians became Baptists and the Baptists became rulers of those mountains. It would grow to be the largest Protestant denomination in America, while the South and its ever-faithful flock would become the unyielding heart of America's Bible Belt.

The faith of my people has always been simple. We have always believed in a benevolent God who hears and answers prayers. When my ancestors fell on their knees to pray, they prayed with a fervency that could rock those mighty mountains. No, the good Lord does not

always answer as we see fit. He does not always answer as we have prayed he will. But he always answers according to his will, and sometimes his will and ours are sweetly the same.

My people have clung faithfully to the King James Version of the Bible, spouting its lyrical words from memory and knowing Scripture to fit every heartache, joy, or need. We have worshiped the Almighty from the simple structures of white clapboard country churches with gravel paths leading to them, sung praises with old-fashioned hymns accompanied by ancient upright pianos with yellowed keys, baptized the redeemed in clear, rushing rivers, and buried our dead in cemeteries behind those simple churches.

I descend directly from some of those Spirit-called foot soldiers in the battlefield for the Lord. Paw-paw, my mother's father, was a humble man of no financial means, but he preached salvation throughout the Nimblewill Valley, outside of Dahlonega, Georgia. He and my grandmother were instrumental in bringing my daddy, a scion of the renegades, into the righteous fold. Though he would spend a couple of years running from the call of the Lord, he did finally succumb and would become one of the most revered preachers in the North Georgia mountains.



Until I was seven years old, Daddy pastored two churches at one time, not an unusual practice in those days. One church—Town Creek—met for worship on the first and third Sundays, while the other—Tesnatee—held meetings on the second and fourth Sundays in a little white clapboard church perched on a picturesque hill. The occasional fifth Sunday was spent visiting or preaching at other churches. When Tesnatee decided it had a large enough congregation, Daddy became pastor of one church. I was eight years old. He

always preached only for love offerings, which were never very much. Once a full week's revival had yielded only seven dollars in the collection plate to share between two preachers. Daddy gave the full bounty to the other preacher.

"I preach for the Lord, not for money," he would often say. Our family was supported by the money he made in his garage from repairing cars — another layman turned preacher.

In Deuteronomy the Scripture commands believers to tithe from their fields and crops. In those days so many years ago, both Paw-paw and Daddy found that while their humble congregations could not line their pockets with coins, they could certainly laden their tables with food. So they were paid in tithes of turnips, cornmeal ground in the nearby mills powered by the mighty rivers, corn, tomatoes, green beans, a bounty of other fruits and vegetables, fresh eggs, and live chickens.

Once an old man in Daddy's congregation, who dressed regularly in overalls and an old work shirt for church, stopped to shake Daddy's hand on his way out the door after service.

"Preacher, if'n you would, stop by my place on yer way home." The man with hands hardened by work in the field, pulled an old handkerchief from his pocket and wiped a bit of snuff from the corner of his mouth. "Got somethin' I wanna give ya."

When Daddy arrived, the old man motioned for him to follow, hobbled out to the barn, then stopped at the hog pen. Several small piglets played in the mud close to their mama.

"Pick ya a pig," the man said proudly, smiling at what was the greatest gift he could give. "Pick any one of 'em you want. That'un over there's a good 'un. Gonna make a huge hog and give ya plenty of meat to feed that family of your'un."

“Now, Brother Jarrard, you don't have to do that,” Daddy protested, knowing the man barely could make ends meet.

The man's eyes watered. “Preacher, I ain't got no money to give ya, so I wanna give ya what I got to give. I aim to pay my way in this church, same as everybody else.”

In the corner of the pen was a tiny runt, half the size of its siblings. Daddy pointed to him. “Then I'll take that one.”

The old man's eyes widened, and he shook his head vigorously. “No, no, no. That'un's the runt. Ain't much good for nothin'. You take the best 'un in there you kin find.”

Daddy tilted his head, put his hands on his hips and reminded him, “You said I could have whichever one I want, and that's the one I want. You ain't goin' back on your word now, are you?”

The man, prouder of his word than anything else, as were all of his kind, sighed heavily, caught the tiny creature, put it in an old feed sack, and sent it home with the preacher. Daddy, knowing that the old farmer could make more money and produce more food from the healthier pigs, had chosen the least. But the least would become great, growing into an enormous hog that Daddy later slaughtered and then filled Mama's old freezer with dozens of packages of sausage, roast, bacon, and pork loin. He would use every ounce of that hog, turning its fat into lard for cooking and producing cracklins to spiff up an ordinary cake of cornbread.

The greatest prayer warrior I have ever known was my daddy. From him I learned to pray. He prayed earnestly with his words crackling in voice-choking humility. And though he has been gone for years now, I can still hear clearly the words with which he ended every prayer, “Dear Lord, we bow our unworthy heads and give you the honor, the praise, and the glory for it all. Amen.”

Those people who came before me never prayed for more than

what they needed. No one ever prayed for fame, riches, or earthly glory. That, they all believed, was waiting on the other side of the River Jordan. They prayed simply for what it would take to survive this life until they could make it to the other side. When death came, illness plagued, the skies didn't rain and the crops died, or taxes were to be paid, my people had found one Scripture buried in the Old Testament that would become their mantra. From one to another, they would pass it when encouragement was needed and despair had to be shed.

“Remember what David said,” one would remind the other. “I once was young and now I'm old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or his seed begging bread.”

Prayer and faith lie at the center of my family. On the early November night that the Lord called Daddy home, my mama, siblings, and other loved ones had gathered around that which had been my parents' marriage bed for over fifty years and prayed. We prayed first that Daddy wouldn't linger in the coma that the massive stroke had wrought early that morning. When that prayer was answered many hours later, as the enormous Hunter's full moon hung boldly in the dark sky outside the bedroom window, we prayed again, thanking God for his mercy and for the life of a faithful servant that had touched so many. Like his hero, the apostle Paul, he too had fought a good fight and finished the course. Then we sang “Amazing Grace” and one verse of “I'll Fly Away.” Though we have always known the comfort and peace that prayer through our faith can bring, we knew it in abundance on that fateful day.



The Bible says to pray without ceasing, and sometimes I believe I do just that. I wander through my house doing mundane things, such

as sweeping the floor or loading the dishwasher, while I have chats with God. I find myself looking for a misplaced file in my office and mumble, "Now, Lord, where is *that*? Please help me find it." And moments later, I will put my hands on it in some odd place and immediately whisper with a bit of a laugh, "Thank you, Lord. I knew you knew where it was."

I pray for simple things. Yes, I have prayed for a parking place in an overcrowded lot at the mall. And found one of the best. I have prayed that a lost package would be found by the post office. And it was. I have prayed that my car would make it to a gas station in the dark of night in the middle of nowhere. And it has.

I have prayed for profound things. Or so they seemed at the time. I have prayed that a guy who I adored would love me. But he never did. I have prayed for a job that I thought was perfect and would utterly complete my life. But I didn't get it. Yet through those unanswered prayers, I discovered that God's plan for my life was grander and much smarter than I would have ever thought of asking. I have finally learned that when he answers no to my prayers, I will profit more than if he had answered yes.

I have prayed for things that seem insignificant but I believed could yield either significant results or dire consequences. Before every speaking engagement, I pray that my mind will conjure up the right words and touch the hearts of those who hear me with either laughter or inspiration. Before I write, I pray for guidance, knowing that I am an empty vessel until a divine Spirit deems me worthy to be filled with creative inspiration. Before difficult conversations I pray that my words will be effective and not harmful or hurtful.

I have prayed fervently to calm the tidal wave of sorrow roaring toward me, begging God to still the waters of sadness over the impending homegoing of loved ones, who were being beckoned by

heaven but I couldn't bear for them to leave this earth. Sometimes he has answered and given me my heart's desire. Sometimes he hasn't.

There was that boy, my childhood nemesis, who slammed me in the eye with a baseball bat at eight, tried to drown me at eleven, but who grew handsome and strong and won my heart completely when I was fifteen. In one way or the other, it seemed I had loved him all my life. I was in New Orleans on book tour when the heart-shredding news came by phone from Mama. Pancreatic cancer, she said. Not much time.

Months before Katrina flooded the streets of that city, I had walked its sidewalks and flooded them with my own tears, prayerfully beseeching God for a miracle. I wouldn't accept death as the answer. I believed that I could pray him well. I seized upon the Scripture that says, "Wherever two are in agreement of anything touching on earth, it shall be done for them in heaven."

I called my closest friend, Karen, a Grammy-nominated gospel singer. "Every day, we shall pray together on the phone, and we'll pray him well." Six weeks came, the time when the doctor said he would be dead. But he wasn't. He was alive and, amazingly, the cancer had retreated. Within a few months, it looked as if he had defied the odds. I prayed and thanked God for that reprieve. But that's what it was—only a reprieve. Death had been delayed but refused to be deterred.

On the day before the Lord called him home, Karen and I visited him together. His body was ravaged with uninterrupted pain, and those who loved him mightily could not bear to see him suffer. The time had come to pray that God would ease his pain—even if it brought to the rest of us unbearable sorrow.

In her pitch-perfect voice, Karen sang "Amazing Grace" a cappella. Then, I did the only thing I knew would bring comfort to his

wearied soul as death plucked persistently in his ear. I prayed. I knelt, taking his bony, frail hand in mine—the previously strong one I had held so many times over the years—and in a voice tinged in sorrow, I called on Almighty God to help us all. I do not recall one word I said, for the words rose up naturally from my broken heart and somehow managed to get around the knot in my throat to escape my lips. Though I don't remember one word, I shall never forget how our tears fell like icy droplets on our joined hands. Or how the moment I whispered, "Amen," he turned his world weary eyes to mine and mumbled softly, "Thank you."

For even as death eased closer and we had to accept that our previous prayers for healing would not be answered, we still found comfort in the presence of the Lord through prayer and faith.

Though he hasn't always answered my prayers in the way I wanted, or even sometimes demanded, he is still a great and mighty God to me just as he was to my ancestors. From those quaint and odd Scotch-Irish I have inherited much—red hair, stubbornness, a gift for storytelling, an independence of spirit that isn't always pretty, a strong work ethic, and an unyielding belief in the power of prayer and the faith in a higher power that sustains me. I have also inherited a legacy that man cannot put asunder and that is the finest heirloom that can pass from one generation to another.

For this I know: prayer and faith always work. One way or the other.