Opening Words

The Faith … in the Family. If we can live it there we can live it anywhere. We must live it there that we might be a testimony to the world of the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.

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I mentioned to you previously that examples are powerful motivators. We looked at Christ as the supreme example for husbands loving their wives. I want to give you another example as a finishing touch for these messages on Ephesians 5:22-33 for husbands and wives. It is my example. I wish I could say that I have been a perfect husband. I haven't been, and I know so many men who are sterling examples of godly love for their wives. I have a friend who just buried his wife, and he was an example of loving her to the end. In her final years, she declined greatly in health and was helpless in her last weeks, but he was with her every day and when she breathed her last. There are so many men who have inspired me to be a better husband.

God has done many things in my life, and if I denied his work in me I would be dishonoring him. And so, I want to tell you a couple of stories today from my life.

In 1991, I awoke very early one morning. At that time in my life, I normally awakened about 6:30. I always wished I could get up earlier but I never could. However, that morning, I awakened at 4:30 and my heart was racing. I was immediately alert, and I knew God was wanting me to read his Word. I sensed a need to read the last part of Hebrews 12. Let me read verses 26-29.

> And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN." [27] This *expression*, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. [28] Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; [29] for our God is a consuming fire.

I read and thought about this passage. I knew that it was talking about God appearing on Mt. Sinai with glory and shaking that mountain with a great earthquake. The writer of Hebrews then used that event in the history of his people to tell them that just as God appeared then and shook the earth, so he would come again and shake the earth and heaven, and if his people thought Mt. Sinai was something, that was nothing compared to what was coming!

But what was the purpose of the shaking? The purpose of God shaking things up was so that those things which were not eternal would fall away and those things that would last forever would remain. God shakes things up so that we will see what really matters. We so often acquire things or get involved in things that are of such little consequence and God in his great loves shakes things up so that we will let go of those things and hold onto the unshakeable things.

As I thought on those truths, I asked, "Lord, what are the unshakeable things in life that you want me to hold onto?" It didn't take long until three thoughts came to mind. The first was my character. I realized that what I was as a man was far greater than what I was doing, even in ministry. My ministry at that time did not seem to be prospering. Christian magazines were not seeking to interview me so that I could tell others the great things that were happening with my church or the lessons I had learned so that others could follow me. But I humbled myself before God and I said, "Lord, even if my ministry always remains small and never amounts to much in the eyes of man, that's OK, if it glorifies you and if I am a man of character, a man who is above reproach. I want my character to be an honor to you. I want to be like Jesus more than anything."

Here is the second thought, "make your wife radiant." I thought on Ephesians 5:25-27, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,[26] so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,[27] that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless."

I thought about my wife. She was lovely, and I loved her, but she had issues and I had issues and we had issues in our marriage and sometimes we experienced conflict and marriage was hard at times. But I knew that Christ laid down his life for the Church to make her glorious and so I prayed, "Lord, I want to love my wife as you loved the Church. When my wife gets to the end of her life, I want her to be glorious and radiant for you. I want her to be beautiful inside and out for you."

The third area was my children. I prayed, "Lord, I don't care what they do as long as they are in the center of your will and honor you with their lives."

When I finished thinking and praying about these three areas, I knew I had latched on to some unshakeable things. Money could come and go, houses could come and go, ministry could come and go, but character, and making my wife radiant, and leading my children to obey the Lord were three things that must come and stay, that must never fall away, that must be unshakeable.

As I mentioned this was 1991. I prayed these things for years. And shortly after that I went through a trial by fire in ministry and came through it. But that was nothing compared to the trial, to the time of shaking that would come in 1999. In December of that year, we learned that my wife had breast cancer and that the cancer was aggressive. This was a shock to us. Those kinds of things happened to other people, not to us. But, no, it was happening to us.

And so, after getting over the initial shock, we set out on a course of therapy for her and for the next three years my wife lived a regimented life like she never had before, physically and spiritually she was more disciplined than ever. One of our highlights in those three years was our 25th wedding anniversary but when you looked at her you never would have guessed that she was old enough to have been married for 25 years! She, who was pretty to begin with, became beautiful. To look at her, you would have thought she was the healthiest person on the planet.

But the cancer was doing its thing inside her and in October of 2002 we learned that it had spread into her lungs. The doctors were alarmed and that alarmed us. But still she was active and without pain. In December of that year, my second son David married. It was on December 13th, our 27th

wedding anniversary. We were living in San Antonio by that time and my son David was in Kansas City so we went up for the final preparations of the wedding. I officiated, and my wife, did a thousand other things to make it special for David and Sarah. We saw friends in Kansas City and had a great time. Dee was beautiful and people marveled at her energy and radiant face.

Then after the wedding and after we returned home, on Christmas Eve, she started coughing up blood. It was small at first but it persisted, and then it increased. We had plans to attend a conference with our entire family and I left early on the morning of December 26 to drive with some young adults to the conference. She was going to follow on the next day by flying to the conference site. I stayed in close touch with her by phone and she told me how weak she was feeling. Finally, she became so weak that I told her to call some friends and have them take her to the emergency room. I continued driving to our destination, but the next day flew home and went to the hospital where she had been admitted.

When I met with the doctor, he was alarmed by her condition, and when I walked outside the hospital room to talk with him in private he said, "You better call the family in. Your wife is dying." I was shocked. How could this be? And so, I called my children. They were all at the conference. I told them they had to leave the conference and come home to see their mother. For them to see their mother alive one more time, she had to be put on life support. I called Dee's family, and they came, and for the next week we sat with her in the hospital as she weakened day by day.

But something unusual happened. Even though she was not taking in any solid food because of the life support and was receiving nourishment only through the IV, her face continued to be as beautiful as ever. Yes, she had lots of tubes going into her, but you could see the radiance on her brow and even on her last day, as she breathed her last you would not have known that she was a sick person.

I've often thought on that last horrible week of her earthly life – the nightmare of it all – and yet the glory of it. Twelve years previous God awakened me early one morning to talk to me through his Word about devoting myself to those things that could not be shaken and one of those unshakeable things was to love my wife and to present her to God in all her glory, radiant for him. God answered my prayer for she who was lovely and loved became lovelier with each passing year and her friends marveled at her love and care for them. I had prayed that I would love her as Christ loved the church and that I would be able to present her to Christ as a godly woman, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and blameless. And I believe he answered my prayer for she was that way on the outside and on the inside, because of his grace.

I buried her with great thankfulness in my heart for 27 years of marriage, three children, and one grandchild on the way that she knew about. I know I wasn't a perfect husband as she wasn't a perfect wife. But we experienced the perfect grace of God and we lived it in the family. And I am so glad that we stuck it out together and lived that grace. The Faith … in the Family. If we can do it there we can do it anywhere. We must do it there that we might be a testimony to the world of the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.