

FOREWORD BY JERRY JENKINS

GRACE BEHIND BARS

AN UNEXPECTED PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

Bo & Gari Mitchell
with John Duckworth



We should not only read *Grace Behind Bars*; we should incorporate into our lives the principles it teaches of love, hope, wisdom, and seeking daily to find the mercy of our eternal Creator.

GREG ANDERSON
President, Smiles for Life Foundation

This intimate look at Bo and Gari's difficult journey is applicable to all of us who have dealt with shame, a sense of injustice, or family pain, and have ever wondered where God is in the process.

JAMES ANDERSON
President/Chief Operating Officer, New Canaan Society

As you face life's challenges, have you ever wondered about the true depth of God's love for you? Bo Mitchell's journey of faith will put to rest any doubt you may have. You will love this book for its honest portrayal of a man learning to accept God's grace, a grace that overcomes anything—even a prison sentence.

PAUL ANDREWS
President and CEO, National Western Stock Show

Grace Behind Bars is a well-done book. It is a must-read for any of us who are progressing to fulfill our own faith commitment. Gari and Bo have dealt successfully with adversity in their lives, and this book tells the story well.

PHIL ANSCHUTZ
Chairman and CEO of The Anschutz Corporation

In the midst of seemingly unjust, unwarranted trials, we often forget (or don't realize) that all that comes into our lives is filtered through God's sovereign fingers of love. And so our Father says, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord. . . . For the Lord disciplines the one he loves (Hebrews 12:5-6, ESV). Bo and Gari not only tell their story of God's loving discipline that gloriously accomplished His purpose in their lives; they also share valuable "Keys to Freedom" that can keep us from being imprisoned by the need to prove our worth. *Grace Behind Bars* is a fascinating, life-transforming story for all of us.

KAY ARTHUR

Cofounder of Precept Ministries International, author, and speaker

Bo and Gari have given us a great gift by sharing this story. The story itself is compelling, but the inner story of how God worked in their lives, and how they obediently submitted to Him, is priceless. I believe God will use this book to minister to multitudes of men and women.

DR. BOB BELTZ

Senior Pastor, Highline Community Church

Associate Producer, The Bible Series, *A.D.: The Bible Continues* and *Son of God*

Grace Behind Bars tells the heartfelt and inspirational step-by-step journey of one of the strongest families I have ever known. They went through a deep valley and came out the other side with an ever-deepening faith in Jesus Christ.

BOBB BIEHL

Executive mentor

This is the most inspirational book I've read in years.

EARL BOYKINS
Former NBA player

Bo and Gari's story is an incredible journey that will inspire you to keep your faith and trust in God and His Word.

MICHAEL CARDONE
Cofounder, Chief Strategy Officer, and Director of CARDONE Industries, Inc.

You'll be glad you took the time to read this inspiring story of faith, family, and true freedom!

GAIL AND JOE COORS
Retired Chairman and CEO of CoorsTek, Inc.

Bo Mitchell was respected as a “self-made” man who could—and did—do everything successfully: athletics, business, ministry, family. But a well-meaning error in judgment, followed by an almost unbelievable chain of worst-case scenarios, led him to the darkest place imaginable—behind bars in a federal prison. It's a pleasure to help share Bo and Gari's story of grace and restoration, which is such a powerful testimony of God's faithfulness.

JIM DALY
President, Focus on the Family

Any of us could face our own “prison.” Bo and Gari show us that God's grace is the key to true freedom.

DAVID GREEN
Founder of Hobby Lobby

The way Bo and Gari Mitchell tell their story of personal trials with truth and vulnerability is astonishingly refreshing. Filled with biblical truth, this book shows what true followers of Christ look like.

NICK HUNDLEY

Major League Baseball player

Through this emotionally charged circumstance and soul-saving experience, Gari and Bo show all of us what true belief in God can do.

HALE IRWIN

Three-time US Open Champion and PGA Hall of Famer

This story is living proof that God will never take us where His grace cannot sustain us! This is also a love story for us all—a story of Bo and Gari’s love for God, for family, for those around them, and for each other.

DAN ISSEL

Hall of Fame NBA All-Star and former coach

Bo Mitchell—the personification of generosity, grace, and placing others first—got caught in a maze of legal wrangling that resulted in what many believe was a profoundly unfair prison sentence. Recounting Bo and Gari’s story with excruciating honesty, this book is eminently readable, encouraging, and enlightening.

PEB JACKSON

Principal, Jackson Consulting Group

Bo and Gari are genuine, transparent, humble, and talented. All of those traits and more are found in their compelling story of Christ's redemptive power.

BILL McCARTNEY

Former head football coach of the University of Colorado and founder of Promise Keepers

If you've ever doubted God's power, *Grace Behind Bars* will dispel that doubt and renew and invigorate your faith. Everyone deals with some type of tragedy. Dealing with these tragedies and coming out better because of them is what this book is all about. If you find yourself feeling down, follow Bo and Gari's path. There is always a way—God's way!

DICK MONFORT

Owner/Chairman and CEO of Colorado Rockies Baseball Club

Bo and Gari's authenticity about their journey through brokenness is refreshing and empowering. You'll find their story compelling and life-changing. In fact, I wrote a song ["I Need You"] concerning Bo's journey—and all of our journeys—when we come to the point of brokenness and cry out to God in desperation.

RANDY PHILLIPS

Phillips, Craig & Dean

Can God work for our good even in the times we call the worst? Bo and Gari Mitchell testify that God will pierce the darkness of our most terrible experiences with His light and

understanding if only we open ourselves to His leading. You will be encouraged with the reality that God is for real, He is good to His people, and He is able to get you and me to the other side!

LUIS VILLARREAL

Executive Director, Save Our Youth

Bo Mitchell, a dynamic speaker and leader, used his unfortunate and unfair circumstances to strengthen his faith and glorify God. Bo and Gari's story is one of hope and resolve.

WALT WEISS

Major League Baseball All-Star player and former manager

Told with humility, grace, truth, and trust in our sovereign God, this story will minister to so many whose lives appear to have been turned upside down or who have been through their own life-altering experiences in Christ.

BETTY WELLS

Widow of Michael Wells, author of *Sidetracked in the Wilderness*

GRACE BEHIND BARS

AN UNEXPECTED PATH TO TRUE FREEDOM

Bo & Gari Mitchell
with John Duckworth



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FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

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In some cases, people’s names and certain details of their stories have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. However, the facts of what happened and the underlying principles have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

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Foreword

It's easy to come away from *Grace Behind Bars* thinking Bo Mitchell was guilty of a lot of things—workaholic, coming on too strong, a brash business style, not being the kind of husband and father he knew he should be—in short, guilty of everything but the charge that landed him in federal prison.

Yet you won't hear that from Bo. He accepted responsibility, took the heat, and served his time. It took what many saw as an unjust sentence to break him and show him God's reason for allowing his plunge from respected civic, business, and Christian leader to felon.

Bo and his wife, Gari, had taught classes on marriage. Behind bars, with little to do but face his true self, Bo learned how much work he had yet to do as a husband.

Proud of his son and daughter, Bo had thought his Father-Knows-Best style should only spur them to great things. Behind bars he learned he had serious strides to make as a dad, too.

A fund-raiser, a churchman, an enthusiastic witness for

Christ, Bo loved solving people's problems, making things happen, getting things done. Behind bars he had to face that even many of his most productive ministry accomplishments were driven in part by a need to please and be seen as the hero.

Grace Behind Bars is an emotional, gut-wrenching tale—told with brutal honesty by Bo and Gari—of a man who seemed almost overnight to go from the height of accomplishment and achievement to the depths of despair. Gari, suffering through her own serious physical challenges, proved heroic in both her support for Bo and in lovingly but frankly helping him face himself.

Much of what Bo saw he didn't like.

Yet he came to realize that it took such a blow to get his attention. And somewhere in the darkness of his hellish existence, Bo mustered just enough wherewithal to allow God to work. He and Gari allowed themselves to be spiritually sifted—which, according to their poignant accounts, had to feel more like being bulldozed.

The process wasn't pretty, and neither was it quick. But in the end Bo emerged a changed man, he and Gari living testimonies to the power of Christ to heal, forgive, reconcile, and restore.

Bo was not lost, needing to be found. He was not hell-bound, in need of a Savior. He was a born-again Christian, so busy for God that he lost his way without even realizing it.

The crucible of incarceration laid him low, and his and Gari's accounts serve as sobering mirrors to readers. I found myself angry on their behalf for the injustices they endured,

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as well as weeping for their son and daughter, who stood with their parents throughout the ordeal.

Not long into Bo and Gari's bare-knuckled account of a test so fierce it could only transform or destroy a couple, the hard truths they learned began applying to me.

At times I wanted to turn away or tell myself this was just their story—and good for them for gleaning so much from the agony. But at last I had to face the truth: *Grace Behind Bars* isn't just the Mitchells' story, their test, their sifting.

It's mine, too. It's all of ours.

Ferry B. Jenkins
Novelist and biographer
FerryJenkins.com

Prologue

The Trap

I HADN'T SLEPT THE NIGHT BEFORE. How could I?

Now, after waving good-bye, I turned to face the entrance to the Englewood Federal Detention Center, south of Denver. Like most of the rest of this prison complex, the pinkish-brown concrete box looked like a cross between a Mayan temple and a Nazi fortress. Heavy and angular and stern, it belonged somewhere long ago and far away.

But that's how everything looked and felt this morning.
I've just been dropped off on Mars.

This had to be a bad dream, finding myself surrounded by walls that bristled with coils of razor wire, forcing myself to walk toward that door. I was numb.

None of this could really be happening, could it?

I shifted the weight of the black plastic trash bag they had told me to bring. In a way, it contained what was left of my life.

Somehow I made it through the door. I approached a lady at the front desk and went through the motions of entering a different world.

GRACE BEHIND BARS

“I’m self-committing at 10:00,” I said. “Dudley Mitchell.”

She rose from her chair. “Follow me,” she said, and then sat me in another room where someone else handled the booking process, checking my photo and thumbprints. My trash bag was emptied, its contents inspected. A government form recorded the results:

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE		
FEDERAL BUREAU OF PRISONS		
Inmate Personal Property Record Institution: FDC ENG Name: Mitchell, Dudley W. Register Number: 23386-013 Unit: Camp Date and Time of Inventory: 1/6/92 Purpose of Inventory: Admission Disposition D—Donated M—Mail S—Storage K—Keep in Possession C—Contraband (Attach BP-Record-102)		
Personally Owned Items		
Number	Article	Disposition
7	Books, reading (soft)	K
3	Books, religious (soft)	K
1	Eyeglass case	K
1	Eyeglasses	K
3	Photos	[none noted]
1	Radio (Realistic, w/earplug)	K
2	Shoes, tennis (Nikes)	K
5	Socks	K
1	Sweat pants (gray)	K

THE TRAP

Personally Owned Items		
Number	Article	Disposition
1	Sweat jacket (gray)	K
5	T-shirts	K
5	Underwear (white)	K
1	Address book	K
1	Driver's license	M
1	Pkg. stationery	K
1	Calendar book	K
1	Contact solution	K
1	Contact case	K

They took one item I'd brought—a baseball cap. They didn't say why.

It didn't bother me and it didn't surprise me. At that point I didn't know if I'd be allowed to keep anything. After all, a prison employee had already made my status clear over the phone several weeks before: "You're just a number now, an inmate."

As the form noted, that number was 23386-013.

The Cold Room was next.

I'd been warned about the Cold Room by someone who'd been through this. "They'll just sit you in a room and leave you alone," he'd said. It was all part of the brain-washing process, getting you used to the submissive life of an inmate.

The Cold Room was a normal office, probably 10 feet by 12 feet. It contained one metal chair, and nothing decorated the walls.

I sat there glad I'd been warned about this. *Weird. Just like I've been told—they've forgotten about me.*

I pulled out the Bible from my trash bag and tried to read it, but it was hard to concentrate.

Next I tried to build up my defenses. *I'm tall. I'm loud. Maybe that'll help me get through this.*

I thought about situations I might encounter in prison. *Okay, how do I handle it if I get in a fight?*

Had I not been warned about the Cold Room, it would have made me crazy. I was there for hours.

Finally, another woman showed up. Julie looked like a schoolteacher. About 35, I guessed. Nice appearance, friendly, pleasant—and very pregnant.

I liked her immediately. She wasn't mean as she filled out forms and we talked a little. It was all part of Admission, with a bit of Orientation.

This might not be Mars after all. "Do you have any questions?" she asked.

Only two. I'd been worrying about them for weeks, and now they just tumbled out.

"When do I get raped, and when do I get beat up?"

It may have sounded like a joke, but it wasn't. When she seemed to doubt my sincerity, I assured her it was the most serious question I'd ever asked anyone.

She took off her glasses and, in my mind, she went from being a prison administrator to a person. *So these are just people. They have a job. These are my new associates.*

"You won't get raped or beat up if you keep your mouth

shut and mind your own business,” she said. “If you see it—you didn’t see it. If you hear something said by another inmate—pay no attention to it as if you hadn’t heard it.

“You’ll feel like yourself for only about five minutes a day. And the rest of the time you’ll just keep your eyes on the lookout. Mind your own business and avoid trouble.”

She put her glasses back on. The “they’re just people” moment was over.

A prison guard opened the door behind me. Time to enter the cellblock. My heart beat faster.

He escorted me to another room, where I faced the kind of prison door I’d seen in movies—a wall of cold, gray steel bars that slid slowly to the side, then halted.

Clutching my trash bag, I stepped in. There I faced another set of bars. Behind me the first door rolled again and banged shut.

A voice came from a speaker in the ceiling. “One in the trap!” it said.

My heartbeat ratcheted up another notch. I was trapped, all right. I felt surrounded by evil, uncertain what would come next.

Through the bars appeared the two-tiered cellblock, much like the one I’d seen as a tourist at Alcatraz in San Francisco a few years before. Today I was no tourist. This looked stark, threatening—even worse than I’d expected.

Of all the half-formed, panicky thoughts that stumbled through my brain, one seemed louder than the rest: *I don’t belong here.*

Anybody who knew me knew that. I was a respected member of the community. I was successful. I'd done my best to help people.

More importantly, I was a Christian. I knew Jesus as my personal Savior. I had the privilege of knowing some of the foremost Christian leaders in the country. Many would say *I* was a Christian leader too.

I knew nothing about crime or criminals, much less prison. Until a few months ago, I'd never been charged with anything worse than a minor traffic violation.

What was I doing here?

The gray bars in front of me began to slide sideways, and my breathing grew shallow. The cellblock came sharply into focus. Numbly I stepped forward.

All I could do was try to follow Julie's advice: Stay alert to whatever might come next.

And to keep believing that I would, with God's help, somehow get through this.

Deep down, I feared I would never go home again.

CHAPTER 1

THE BOY WHO LEARNED TO WIN

IT WAS THE PERFECT DAY FOR THE PERFECT GAME.

That afternoon, October 8, 1956, found New York City under clear skies with a temperature of 69 degrees. My mother and I sat in the stands at Yankee Stadium, down the first base line, under the overhang. The place was packed with 64,519 fans. After all, it wasn't just any game. It was game five of the World Series. Even at age seven, I knew that was a very big deal.

Mom and I had been here the day before, too. We'd had great seats then as well—about 10 rows off the field.

In fact, we'd been treated like celebrities since coming to New York for this event. We had an escort with us from

Oklahoma, where we lived. He was there to take care of us, to make sure we got safely around town from the hotel to the ballpark and back.

It was all courtesy of the Brooklyn Dodgers, the Yankees' opponent.

Why? Because my dad—Dale Mitchell—had recently joined the Dodgers.

That had its privileges. So far I'd met some pretty famous people. The day before, Yankee star Mickey Mantle had taken the field, and we were sitting so close that I thought he could hear me. I stood and screamed, "Hey, Mantle! You're not as good as you think you are!"

I kept up the heckling, thinking I was doing Dad's team a favor. But the guy sitting behind me didn't agree. He turned out to be Joe E. Brown, a comedian known for an unusually large mouth—and who would be best known three years later for using it in the movie *Some Like It Hot*.

"Son," he said, "I think *you* have a bigger mouth than *I* do."

And today, before the game, I'd been in the Dodgers' clubhouse sitting in the lap of legendary center fielder Duke Snider. I just stared at his face like I was looking at God himself. After all, he was The Duke of Flatbush!

Now, in the stands, I thought, *This is amazing that I get to see this incredible game.*

Mom pulled me closer as I looked at the sea of people. They were cheering, eating hot dogs, enjoying the game and each other's company. Mom and I were hoping for a Dodgers win, of course, but it felt nice, comfortable, fun.

Then things changed.

It wasn't obvious at first. Nobody thought much of it when Yankees pitcher Don Larsen struck out the first few Dodgers. But when he began to mow them down inning by inning, I felt the excitement build. With every pitch the Yankees fans went wild. Whenever anybody stood up in front of me, I had to stand up even higher or climb on my chair seat.

By the time there were two outs in the ninth inning, the place was about to explode. The crowd was in a frenzy.

It was also growing. Hundreds of thousands of fans nationwide had tuned in as word spread about the perfect game being pitched in New York. If Larsen kept it up, it would be the only such game in World Series history.

A perfect game is one of the rarest feats in all of sports. By definition, it's way more unlikely than a no-hitter. There have been nearly 300 no-hitters in the half million or so big league games in history, but only 23 perfect games. (In a no-hitter, while obviously no opposing player gets a hit, runners can reach base by walking, being hit by a pitch, or because of an error. In a perfect game, no opposing player reaches base at all.)

An astounding 26 Dodgers had been up to bat, only to be retired by Don Larsen. This being 60 years ago, there had been only three perfect games pitched since 1900, and none in the previous 34 years.

Then, over the public address system, came the words we'd waited for: "Now batting for Brooklyn, number 8, Dale Mitchell."

My dad had been a great major-league player for 10 years,

achieving a .312 lifetime batting average with the Cleveland Indians and making two all-star teams. He'd hit .336 in 1948 when the Indians won the World Series. Because he'd been such a great hitter, Larsen had to know that getting this last out and securing his place in history wouldn't be easy.

Dad settled into the batter's box. The score was two to nothing. By now millions of people were listening and watching. If he failed, it would be remembered forever.

I felt more tension in that stadium than I'd ever felt in my long seven years of life! My mother put her arms around me and pulled me closer, but what she murmured in my ear was not comforting.

"Son," she said, "keep your mouth shut. Because if your dad gets a hit right now, these Yankees fans might kill us."

I believed her! Suddenly I was no longer just watching a baseball game with my mother. I actually thought I could be killed if my dad got a hit.

My view of the world shifted and became more serious. I decided to be quiet no matter what happened.

I learned later that the Dodgers announcer, a young Vin Scully, agreed this was serious business. "No man has ever come up to home plate in a more dramatic moment," Scully said, "and that man is Dale Mitchell."

Larsen's first pitch hit the mitt of Yankees catcher Yogi Berra. "Ball one!" yelled the umpire.

Then came the second pitch, followed by the umpire's call: "Strike one!"

The pressure on Dad was so strong I could almost see it.

My dad fouled off a pitch. Strike two!

The pressure grew even more crushing, and it seemed all 64,519 people in the stadium held their collective breath.

And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go . . .

“Strike three!”

My heart sank.

Later, people would argue over that call. But as Yogi Berra eventually put it, “The ump called it a strike, so it was a strike.”

Dad turned to debate the umpire, but pandemonium had broken out. Berra ran to the mound, jumping and wrapping both arms and legs around Larsen. The umpire took his mask off and jogged to the dugout. There was no one left for Dad to talk to.

By then the crowd was up and I couldn't see anything. Holding Mom's hand, I followed her out of the stadium.

I didn't say much, but my mind and heart were working on what I'd just seen and heard. Even at age seven I could see that competition was a big part of life. Winning, succeeding, was very good. Losing was not.

Later, back home, it was clear Dad didn't like that his strikeout might be the most famous of his career.

He said Dodgers shortstop Pee Wee Reese had met him on the dugout steps and said, “Hey, Dale—you're a part of history. They'll be talking about this game for a hundred years.”

“So what?” Dad had retorted. “I don't like being on this side of it.”

On that day Larsen had won—and my dad had become the answer to a trivia question.

Even a little kid could see that winning made all the difference. It was a lesson I'd have to remember.

Running Mate

Everybody loved Dad—especially me.

Because his own father died when Dad was just a kid, Dad had little training on how to be a parent. During my early years, though, I didn't think he needed any.

He always called me "running mate." Ballplayers usually paired up with a buddy to run sprints in the outfield before games. The teammate you chose to run with was called your "running mate." It always made me feel great when Dad called me that. I was proud of him; I looked up to him.

Unlike some fathers, Dad was loving and funny, and hugged us a lot. He was so physical with his affection, in fact, that I once protested, "Hey, Dad, maybe don't hug me so much when we're sitting at a ball game!"

There were many sides to Dad. Unfortunately, one of them was darker.

He had a problem with alcohol. My mom told me that by the time he was 11 years old he was already drinking.

When I was in grade school, he was often intoxicated. There were disastrous evenings when the alcohol would turn him into a stranger. He'd get mean. Never physically abusive, but verbally.

We didn't talk about it, but nobody did back then. People didn't admit, "I have an alcohol problem." Instead, they

“drank socially.” Like many others, he’d fallen into a trap and couldn’t seem to climb out of it.

We all put up with Dad’s drinking. For some reason it didn’t bother me like it did the rest of my family. But there were a couple of nights I went after him with my fists, even as a little kid, when his verbal attacks on my older brother, Mitch, were merciless.

“I’ve had enough!” I would shout.

My father would laugh as I tried to swing at him, holding my wrists so I couldn’t connect.

I was just too small, too powerless.

Just Push Harder

My mom, Margaret, was a friendly woman, a giver, and a kind Christian soul with goodwill for everybody.

Mom modeled caring for others nearly every day and was very strong in her faith. She laid a solid foundation for us—especially making sure we showed up at May Avenue Methodist Church in Oklahoma City. It was always church, Sunday school, vacation Bible school, mealtime prayers, and doing things right instead of wrong.

She was very involved in church life and definitely had a personal relationship with the Lord. But she may have been the only one of us who understood that part.

Dad knew the discipline of churchgoing was something he was supposed to do, a right choice. But I’m not sure he grasped the idea that you don’t earn your way into heaven

by going to church. He didn't seem to have heard the good news—that Christ did all the work, not us.

Apparently he thought, *Well, this is how you do it. You pray more, you read more, you get to church, you do a few more spiritual push-ups, and all of a sudden you're better in the eyes of God.*

Mom, on the other hand, knew that the real deed was done on the Cross. If we needed to do anything, it was to have faith in what Christ finished. Being a Christian wasn't about making a heroic effort. And it wasn't about competition.

Sitting in the pew with my family week after week, though, I slowly picked up Dad's view. I started to believe that Christianity was another arena in which I needed to push hard, compete, and succeed. I thought I'd discovered at the "perfect game" in Yankee Stadium that winning was the key to everything, and now it looked as though the same was true on the spiritual playing field. And the way to make it happen was through my own effort.

I started wondering about people who didn't compete as hard on spiritual issues as they did in things like business. Didn't they get it?

I'm sure our pastor must have been saying the right words. I just never heard them.

Whatever It Takes

As I vowed to be a competitor and a winner, I started showing signs of athletic prowess and gaining confidence.

One night, something shocking happened.

It was the night after one of my fifth-grade basketball games. I'd been doing a respectable job in basketball and baseball, but in that game I'd scored an impressive 22 points.

Suddenly I realized that my dad and brother were bragging on me. They were speaking as if I weren't there—and saying amazing things.

“He made shots that people twice his age don't make.”

“Those were unbelievable baskets he was making!”

“He's gonna really be something when he's older if he's able to do that as a fifth grader.”

Compliments weren't cheap at our house. Dad had always been especially tough on my brother. Mitch was great in football, basketball, and baseball, but my father never once told him he played a good game.

I'd say, “Hey, Mitch is leading the state in hitting. I don't know why you're being so critical of him.”

Dad would say something like, “Well, he's not hitting the ball hard enough.”

I wasn't sure why Dad did that. Maybe it was how he'd been treated as a kid. Maybe he thought he was doing what dads were supposed to do—crack the whip.

Or maybe it was because he was so fresh out of the major leagues. He'd been pressured for 10 years: “Better produce today, or you may get shipped out tomorrow.”

So to have them talk about me that way was surprising.

Then I thought, *Well, that's what is expected of me from now on—at least 20 points a game. The bar's been raised, and I need to produce and perform.*

I wanted more compliments, yet the harder I worked to earn my father's praise, the more elusive it seemed. I was the best player on the baseball team the summer Dad was our coach, but he was so tough on me that I was miserable.

Each practice, every day, would end with him hitting the ball to me at shortstop. Over and over, with the whole team standing there watching. He walloped the ball so hard that I either was hit in the face, humiliated, or both.

He tried to drill that into my psyche. *You're alone. You're on an island, and your teammates can't help you. You'd better figure that out. And the better you do as an individual, the better your contribution is going to be to the team.*

He was right, but there were unintended consequences. Something else was drilled into me at the same time—a self-centeredness that said, *Your part is more important than the other parts.*

No doubt Dad didn't mean it that way. But the idea took root anyhow. I had too much drive and competitiveness and grew to feel responsible for every outcome. Whether it was sports or business or church, I started thinking, *I'll do whatever it takes, even if it's sometimes at the expense of my family and friends.*

That competitive mind-set stayed with me as my family moved to Colorado. By the time I reached my senior year at Thomas Jefferson High School in Denver, I was All-State in basketball and baseball and All-American in basketball. For two years we had great teams in both sports; we won three state championships. Winning became the norm. Dad measured

me by my performance in those wins. If I got three hits and struck out the fourth time, the strikeout was the only thing Dad wanted to talk about. “What were you doing up there the fourth time?” he’d say. “You weren’t even paying attention.”

If I hadn’t known it before, I knew it now: These weren’t just games I was playing. They were proving grounds for the future, where excelling and succeeding would determine my worth.

Finding Faith

My quest to prove myself on the basketball court and baseball diamond irritated some people. When we’d win a championship and take the platform as a team to accept a trophy, I’m sure some teammates looked at me thinking, *Glad that’s over!*

They might have been happy to learn that I was about to undergo a life-changing experience—the most crucial one of all.

It had started years earlier, when I’d spent so much time at church in Oklahoma City without knowing why. I’d sat in the pew for 15 years, never understanding what it meant to have a relationship with God.

Mom understood. But she needed help to get through to the rest of us.

She got it from an unexpected source—the New York Yankees.

When we’d lived in Houston, the Yankees had opened the Astrodome in an exhibition series. My dad, having retired from baseball nine years earlier, knew all the players.

So we'd gone into the locker room to meet the guys. I'd seen Mickey Mantle again, and watched him unbandage his leg. Whitey Ford was there, and Yogi Berra, too. And all these guys were drinking beer.

But star second baseman Bobby Richardson was drinking chocolate milk. I thought, *That's what I drink!*

Later I told Mom about it. She said, "Let's see if we can find a book about this guy."

It was her way of exposing me to real faith. I thought I was going to read about baseball and the Yankees in the book. Instead, Richardson talked a lot about Christ and his own commitment to the Lord. He wrote, "You can have a personal relationship with Christ." It was the first time I could remember hearing that—or at least the first time I paid attention.

Hmm, I thought. Interesting.

So Bobby Richardson influenced me—right before Don Reever's did.

I met Don a few months after our family moved to Denver. I was a high school junior, missing my friends in Houston, lonely and scared in this unfamiliar city. I kept asking myself, *How can my parents do this to me?*

Then I met Don—a handsome former college basketball player from Tennessee. He was there at the right moment, with the right style. He was quiet, patient, but firm on one thing: *Let's talk about Jesus Christ.*

First Don dropped by during basketball practice. When we talked, it was mostly about sports. Finally, I asked, "What do you do, besides watch us practice and hang around?"

He said, “Well, I’m on staff with an organization called Young Life.”

I said, “What is that? What does it mean?”

I didn’t know that this Christian ministry’s mission is to introduce teens to Jesus Christ and help them grow in their faith.

Instead of preaching, Don encouraged me to question him. And his answers were always good.

One day after school, we were sitting in a restaurant when I asked Don to explain to me what it meant to be a Christian. “I don’t get it,” I said. “I’ve always gone to church, but I’ve never heard this.”

He said the same thing Bobby Richardson had said in his book: that I could have a personal relationship with God through Jesus by accepting Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Bringing out a Bible, Don showed me John 3:1-4:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

“How can a man be born when he is old?”

Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

Don explained how sin had created an unbridgeable gap between God and people, and that Christ's sacrifice on the Cross was the only way to bring them back together. Finally, I understood what it meant to ask Christ into my life to be my Savior and Lord—to become a Christian—and why it was such an important decision to make.

Don added that at some point every person must make the choice to either accept Christ or reject Him. I was ready to do just that.

“Why wouldn't *everyone* want in on that deal?” I asked.

“I don't know,” Don said. “It's kind of simple, isn't it? But for now, why don't we just talk about *you*?”

“Well, I'm in. What do I do?”

He asked me to follow him in a short prayer. It included confessing my sins, requesting forgiveness, and asking that Jesus come into my heart and make me a Christian by my profession of faith in Him.

Just like that, it was done. I was born again.

Now I understood what my mother was talking about.

“You probably won't feel a lot different,” Don said gently. “But you are.”

I began to see life differently, and I was surprised to find that my new viewpoint threw a wet blanket on my desire to compete in athletics—at least for a little while.

That was definitely a change. The previous summer I'd been a counselor at a baseball camp in Chandler, Oklahoma. A dozen counselors and I, ages 15 and 16, had worked hard

to build a beautiful locker room for ourselves. But when I struck out three times during a game, my rage flared out of control. I took a bat and in five minutes destroyed what had taken a week and a half to build.

A kid named Mike stood there, staring at me. “You really need Christ,” he said.

Now I knew how right he was. There was no more bat-throwing, no more violent tantrums at the tail end of a strikeout or a lost contest. I thought, *These are games we’re playing. In the eternal perspective of things, they probably don’t matter quite as much as I used to think they did.*

The absolute, hard-line competing on everything subsided. It seemed I’d gained perspective when I received Christ, a more eternal worldview, a better balance.

At least for the foreseeable future.

Gari’s Story

I grew up in a family I loved. We had dinner around the table almost every night, eating Mom’s great meals. My siblings and I learned to camp, hunt birds, and fish. As a little girl I’d sit for hours in duck blinds with Dad, freezing in the early morning, having to be quiet as he sounded his duck calls. Like Bo, I loved sports. My dad and mom encouraged my interests in golf, tennis, and skiing, and these became areas of success for me.

As in Bo’s family, performance expectations in my family

were high. One of the main principles in my house was, “If something is worth doing, it’s worth doing in an excellent way.”

The upside was that it helped us work hard to do our best and reach success. The downside was that it became a measuring stick. If you did well at something, you were just meeting expectations with little celebration. If you didn’t, the criticism came because excellence was always the goal. That could sometimes leave us feeling conditionally loved, even though our parents never meant us to feel that way.

There was something else our families shared: the abuse of alcohol.

I grew up in the “cocktail hour” era of the 1950s and 1960s glamorized in movies at the time. My parents had their drinks before dinner so liquor was a daily part of my childhood. I didn’t think this was strange because my friends’ parents were doing the same.

When my parents weren’t drinking, life was peaceful and fun. When they drank too much, my siblings and I didn’t feel totally secure because with alcohol you never knew what you were going to get. I certainly didn’t understand the negative emotional impact the abuse of alcohol had on me when I was a child. I wouldn’t fully understand that until many years later.

But I left my childhood behind when I started college at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Music was a big part of my college life, and I sang in a trio called “Folks About Towne.” Our first time to perform publicly was in front of a

large group at a Young Life event. After the program we were packing up our gear when a man named Bob Straun asked if he could speak to me.

The first thing he asked was whether I knew Jesus Christ as my personal Savior and Lord. The baffled look on my face probably told him I had no idea what he was talking about.

After I made a feeble effort to defend my philosophy of life (a mixture of Buddhism, Hinduism, and ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson), Bob explained that Jesus loved me and had a wonderful plan for me. At least I think that's what he said. When he was done speaking, all I really knew was that my carefully constructed worldview had gone up in smoke. Five years of putting it together, and in only five minutes the false had been upstaged by the true.

I still wasn't ready to take the leap of faith. But seven months later, after singing at Young Life events around the country, watching Young Life skits, and hearing dynamic speakers talk about the good news of Jesus Christ, I finally heard the message.

On a beautiful summer night at Silver Cliff Ranch near Buena Vista, Colorado, I knelt under an immense canopy of stars and asked Jesus Christ to come into my life as my Savior and Lord. I asked Him to forgive my sins.

Immediately an intense wave of peace filled me from head to toe. I felt profound relief that Jesus knew me—and that He had the answer to every deep question I could ever ask.

Excited about my new faith, I soon introduced Young Life to one of my sisters as well as my parents. Eventually they

GRACE BEHIND BARS

received Christ, too, as did my aunt, uncle, grandmother, brother, and youngest sister.

As the fall semester of college began and my trio kept on singing, knowing Jesus filled me with hope. The adventure of a lifetime was about to begin.