



BLESSED, BLESSED... BLESSED

*The untold story of our family's fight to
love hard, stay strong, and keep the faith
when life can't be fixed*

STAR OF **A&E**'S *DUCK DYNASTY*

MISSY ROBERTSON

with Beth Clark

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Blessed, Blessed . . . Blessed: The Untold Story of Our Family's Fight to Love Hard, Stay Strong, and Keep the Faith When Life Can't Be Fixed

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Foreword



SHORTLY AFTER MY EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAY, I made a declaration that I would be a single man for the rest of my life. That was it! No more dating for me. The vow of lifelong celibacy was in response to my latest dating relationship gone awry. A few days later, I picked up Missy at her house so we could attend a football game at her high school. We didn't view this as a "date" since we had both recently gotten out of relationships. I decided to make an exception to my new vow because I knew she was a young woman of faith in God, and her stunning beauty was impossible to overlook. She quickly became my best friend, and nearly three years later she would become my wife and lifelong partner.

I was so happy when she actually said "I do." Despite our physical attraction to each other while we were engaged, we decided to focus our relationship on our mutual faith in God and remain pure until marriage. The spiritual foundation we laid for our life together was based on love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These qualities are known as the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who we believe exists in our hearts.

Since we'd waited, our wedding night was all the sweeter. Missy and I decided to wait a while before we had kids so we

could continue building a strong foundation for our future family. Being together made us both happy—or as my dad would say, “happy, happy, happy.” That’s happiness with a double dose of validation.

In our nearly twenty-five years of marriage, we have been blessed, blessed . . . blessed with three wonderful kids who we believe are gifts from God. To me, the meaning of the word *blessed* is similar to the definition of happiness but goes even deeper, reflecting a joy that comes from a divine origin. There are times when blessings from God are difficult to recognize because we cannot see the world through God’s eyes, and we’re unable to understand all of His ways. But God asks us to remain faithful to Him and wait until the blessing becomes apparent. Missy and I are not ashamed of our faith in God and welcome every opportunity to share it with others.

The two of us were thrilled when our two sons—Reed and Cole—were born. And then came our daughter, Mia. From the time we could see her in Missy’s womb, we knew her life would be filled with special challenges. I vividly remember how she struggled to breathe when she was born. When she was being whisked away to intensive care, my first thought was, *Please, God, let her live!* And she did! That day I made a promise to Mia in my heart that I was going to help her in every way possible.

For the most part, this book is about the dot, dot, dot in *Blessed, Blessed . . . Blessed*. Missy has been an incredible mother during Mia’s journey and has helped me deal with the “new normal” in our family multiple times throughout this difficult process. Missy is the most qualified person I know to recount Mia’s courageous marathon with her cleft lip and palate because Missy has been just as brave throughout this ordeal.

People often ask me, “How’s Mia?” I usually answer “good” no matter what procedure she is facing, but in my mind I’m thinking, *It’s complicated!* Most people think that cleft lip and palate is merely a cosmetic issue that can be quickly fixed. In fact, that was my initial mind-set too, thinking, *My daughter has a problem. Let’s fix it and move on.* If only it could be that simple. The harsh reality is that kids like Mia have surgeries and procedures to aid their speech, eating, and breathing the entire time they are growing. In severe cases, where there is no medical care available, a person could have difficulty speaking and extreme discomfort when trying to eat or breathe; in some instances, it could be life threatening. I’ll admit that a general lack of understanding about Mia’s condition has generated comments that can be frustrating. However, being from a family of talkers and ramblers, I am used to hearing a few dumb statements made with the best intentions, coming from sincere people.

We are extremely grateful that Mia’s condition is being managed by some of the most talented doctors in the world. I’ve observed the compassion of these professionals who attend to cosmetic needs while also relieving suffering—giving kids reasons to smile and in some cases saving lives. We have been blessed by the encouragement of our family, friends, and the expertise of Mia’s medical team.

Most important, our family believes that God doesn’t make mistakes. He determines each and every detail of our lives. There is an interesting story in the Bible in John 9. Jesus and his disciples are walking together and encounter a man who was born blind. The disciples ask Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (verse 2). “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but *this happened so that*

the works of God might be displayed in him” (verse 3, emphasis added). I know that “the works of God” are being displayed in Mia’s life and are impacting people every day.

There is always a spiritual response to the things that happen to us physically. Jesus offers a new normal, if we have accepted Him, through His grace. A transformation occurs from the inside out through the Holy Spirit.

As the years have gone by, I’ve realized how Mia has helped me to grow spiritually. I have seen firsthand how she lives out Romans 5:3-5. The physical suffering Mia has experienced has produced in her incredible perseverance, character, and hope.

In Romans 5:6-8, the apostle Paul reveals the person who has suffered the most for all of us—Jesus Christ. “While we were still sinners, Christ *died* for us” (verse 8, emphasis added). It is the ultimate expression of God’s love, a gift freely offered to you and to me.

Mia has handled her challenges much better than the rest of us. I believe it is difficult to live with circumstances that you have very little control over, but she seems to do it with lots of laughs and a zesty personality that people are drawn to. When innocent people suffer, it motivates the rest of us to stop complaining and start living unselfishly. Those who display courage inspire us to live life to the fullest. May you be encouraged through Mia’s journey.

Thank you, Missy, for all you do for our family and also for writing this book. Without you I could not be me—but God knew that, didn’t He?

I love you.

Jase

Introduction



I GREW UP WANTING to make a difference for God. For as long as I can remember, something inside of me has longed for Him to use me in a significant way. For many years, it didn't seem like it would happen. Then, in a completely unexpected turn of events, two situations began to weave themselves into everything else in my life. God orchestrated and combined those two things in a way that has given my husband, Jase, and me a platform and a level of visibility in the public eye we never, *ever* imagined we would have. Not in our wildest dreams.

The first event happened in the summer of 2003. I was pregnant and scheduled for an ultrasound at thirty-one weeks. It was truly a family affair, with our two young sons, Reed and Cole; my mother-in-law, best known as “Miss Kay” Robertson from the television show *Duck Dynasty*; and my sisters-in-law Lisa and Jessica with me. Jase wasn't there in person, but I knew he was there in spirit and would share in the excitement later when he saw the video.

We were all eager to see the new baby in amazing detail on the monitor, but a few minutes into the procedure, the ultrasound technician's expression signaled that there was a serious problem. She was a friend, and I knew her well enough to read the look of

concern and sadness on her face. When she left to find the doctor, Miss Kay quickly whisked Reed and Cole out of the room.

Minutes later, when the doctor came in and checked the ultrasound, she broke the news that our unborn daughter had a cleft lip. I knew that was not good, but I did not realize how that one moment would put me and my family on a journey we had never imagined. A journey of faith, a journey of prayer, a journey that has sometimes been anxious, stressful, and painful, but one that has strengthened us and taught us lessons we never would have known without it.

Jase and I had already been blessed with two healthy boys without special needs, but there wasn't any doubt that Mia was a blessing, too, even when we learned that her condition was more complex than what was originally seen in the ultrasound. Yes, we were truly blessed, blessed . . . blessed with three children, each of them a unique gift to us from God.

Mia's condition has allowed us access to a community of people dealing with childhood medical challenges, a whole new world we never before knew existed, but one we are glad God allowed us to discover. We have met some of the most amazing people, especially patients and families also dealing with cleft. At times, those people have been lifelines and support systems for us, and at other times, we have been able to provide them with the resources and encouragement they need.

And personally, for Jase and me, we have learned to understand each other and work together as husband and wife in ways many couples never have to think about. That is a blessing all its own, adding to the deep level of power and strength shown to us by extended family and Christian friends.

If all we experienced were the many people we have met as a

result of Mia's journey and the relationships we have developed along the way, we certainly would have felt blessed. That would have been enough. But God had more than that in mind. Back in the day, we would have laughed our heads off over the idea that our family would ever be on television, but God knew He would shine a spotlight on us, and one way Jase and I would use that visibility would be to bring attention to what Mia was going through. This way we could help other families walking the same journey that is now so familiar to us.

The second development that put me in the unexpected position to be used by God in the way I had longed for since childhood was *Duck Dynasty*. Trust me, I don't know if anyone in the Robertson family, except Jase's brother Willie, would ever have come up with the idea of putting our family on television. In our minds, we have always been normal people doing our best to love God, love each other, and raise our children well. Those commitments have shaped Jase's and my lives since we first met. Had we been able to do those three things in complete obscurity, we would have been perfectly happy.

When the idea of a television show surfaced, Jase and I viewed it as a chance to go public with our faith. We were not swept away by the ideas of fame and fortune. For us, fame never was important. And fortune? We were people who lived within our means already and practiced great discipline in our finances. By the time *Duck Dynasty* came along, we had lived frugally for years, and while the idea of having more money, and the freedom and opportunities that come with it, sounded nice, it was not something we got especially excited about. We were fine with or without a television show. We determined early on that we would not allow any of the trappings that come with being celebrities

to change our values, shift our priorities, or cause us to try to become people we are not. We knew we would find certain things easier to do once our level of income increased, and that has been true. But overall, I think anyone who knew Jase and me fifteen years ago would quickly say that the essence of who we are and the fundamentals of what we believe have not changed.

Aside from being a lot of fun and providing amazing opportunities for our family, *Duck Dynasty* has given Jase and me public personas we would never have had without a television show, allowing us to raise awareness of Mia's condition and how much it affects others. We can empathize with anyone who is struggling with a medical situation, or any kind of significant challenge, to help them put everything in perspective.

Many times, parents find a childhood medical condition completely overwhelming. Almost before they know it, that illness or injury can take over the parents' marriage and the life of the entire family. When this happens, everyone suffers.

One reason I wanted to write this book is to help families navigate through their difficulties, rather than having the challenges take charge and rule the family. Another reason I wanted to share our story is to encourage people facing any type of trouble in life that there is always hope, that the burden you think you can't bear is already in God's hands.

As any reader will see in the following pages, Jase and I have endured more sadness and difficulty than many people realize. Through every circumstance, we have leaned on our faith, and we have found God to be completely trustworthy and faithful. We know what it's like to hear bad news. We know how it feels to pray that God will do one thing in a situation, only to realize He has done something else. We know how easily each member

of a family can be thrown off balance by one person's challenges, and we are well acquainted with the financial strain of a major medical situation.

Whether you find yourself reading this book out of curiosity because you are a fan of our show, out of desperation because you, too, have a child with special needs, or for some reason in between, I'm glad you picked it up. I hope our story will strengthen your faith, encourage you to keep trusting God with your impossible burden no matter how bleak things appear, and remind you that prayer really does make a difference. I have made every effort to tell our story with as much transparency and honesty as possible. You'll quickly see that everything has not been easy for us, as I'm sure it has not been easy for you. But in the end, as you walk with God, I pray that despite the challenges you face, you will view your life as I view mine: *blessed*.

I
Blessed Beginnings

THE ULTRASOUND ROOM was abuzz with happy anticipation as the technician, a former coworker of mine, prepared for the scan. As the image of our daughter's face became clear on the screen, we were ooh-ing and aah-ing and commenting on how cute her little cheeks were. Then the adults in the room grew quiet.

"Does her nose look smushed to you?" I asked the technician. She simply said, "I need to get the doctor."

This wouldn't be the first and only time that we would be seeing doctors on Mia's behalf. Little did Jase and I know that a whole new chapter of our lives was about to unfold. Thankfully, we had come a long way from our very start, a memorable Christmas in 1988.



I did not have to say a word.

The look on my face communicated everything to Jase Robertson when he presented me with my Christmas gift in 1988. It was a potted plant, not even a very big one or some exotic species, just an ordinary plant in a plain clay pot. Since I could not hide my confusion, I stared at him with a look that clearly said, "Are you *kidding* me?"

Sensing that I was not exactly pleased with this present, Jase could hardly restrain himself from grinning as he told me to "dig around in the dirt." As I dug, I found a small box covered in felt (and dirt). I knew immediately that it was a jewelry box but had

no idea that the box held a beautiful engagement ring! Once again, the look on my face communicated everything I wanted to say, which was great, because I was so excited and surprised I could not speak.

Jase looked at me and proposed in his unique way, not gushing about how much he loved me and tenderly asking for my hand in marriage. He simply said with complete confidence, “Well, you’re gonna marry me, aren’t ya?”

Too thrilled and shocked to say very much, I managed to answer yes, and that was the beginning of a commitment the two of us still hold and treasure to this day, one that now includes our two amazing sons, Reed and Cole, and our remarkable daughter, Mia. We have a wonderful life together, but it did not just happen to us. Since the very beginning, when Jase and I first met, we have had challenges to overcome. We are still facing challenges, and with God’s grace and help, we are still overcoming them.

Apples and Oranges

The differences between Jase and me were obvious from the start. For one thing, he had already graduated from high school by the time we met, while I still had two years left. Beyond that, our backgrounds had almost nothing in common, except that we were both committed Christians and had both been raised in West Monroe, Louisiana.

Jase was the second son born to Phil and Kay Robertson, whose tumultuous early years of marriage are well known. Jase grew up having to take care of himself in many ways or under the watchful eye and caring hand of his older brother, Alan. I was born in Lubbock, Texas, but my family moved to West Monroe

when I was six months old. My father was a preacher, and my mother was a music teacher. My childhood was as stable and structured as Jase's was unsettled and unstructured.

By the time Jase's family got established in rural West Monroe after living in Arkansas and in a couple of small towns in Louisiana, he was surrounded by three brothers; a host of aunts, uncles, cousins; and his paternal grandparents, Granny and Pa, who lived in a little house on Phil and Miss Kay's property. The Robertsons were accustomed to big family meals, large holiday celebrations, and having lots of people around. Phil and Miss Kay have always had an open-door policy in their home, eager to feed someone, clothe someone, or give someone a place to sleep. Many times, Jase walked out of his bedroom to find a stranger sleeping on the sofa, and he hardly ever walked out his front door without running into a relative.

I, on the other hand, grew up with one brother, and with no grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins nearby. When we wanted to visit family, we had to travel out of town, which we could do only once or twice a year. My mother's parents often invited missionaries or traveling preachers to stay at their house, but my father's family kept to themselves and did not welcome outsiders into their home. When my parents married, they basically followed my paternal grandparents' example, and we rarely had guests for meals or an overnight visit.

Every Saturday, my brother and I helped our parents with household chores, such as dusting, vacuuming, and cleaning. My dad often said, "Cleanliness is next to godliness," and after meeting Jase, I quickly realized that the Robertson family did not regard this proverb as highly as my family did.

I remember one Saturday when Jase called me and asked if

we could go out that night. I told him I'd like to but I had to dust first.

"Dust?" he asked. "What does that mean?"

"You know, dust the furniture."

Silence.

"Like, take a rag, spray Pledge onto the furniture, and wipe it clean."

Yes, I actually had to explain to Jase that the word *dust* could be used as a verb as well as a noun.

Obviously, the Robertsons' open door and relaxed, unstructured ways were completely foreign to me, but I liked them.

I went to a private Christian school. Jase went to public school. As a teenager, I liked spending weekends with friends or going to ballgames. Jase wanted to spend his weekends outdoors and was happy as long as his activities included a fishing pole or a shotgun. My family bought ingredients for our meals at the grocery store. Jase's family had two primary ways of providing dinner for themselves: They either caught it or shot it, then skinned it and dressed it. My family lived in a well-kept house with a paved driveway in a suburban neighborhood. Jase's family lived in the country, and everyone parked their cars in the front yard.

When Jase and I first started dating, I had no idea how little crossover existed between the ways we grew up. All I knew was that he was very good looking, he was serious about his faith, and he had a self-possessed, self-confident quality that I had not seen in other guys. He was not interested in impressing anyone, including me. He was so comfortable and secure in who he was that I knew right away "what you see is what you get." He was determined to be true to God and true to himself. I understood that about him soon after we met, and I liked it.

Jase wanted to make sure I understood something else about him. When we reached a point in our relationship where we knew we could become serious about each other, he said to me, “You need to know something about me. I hunt *every day* of duck season. I will not give that up. Are you prepared for that?”

“Okay,” I said. “If this relationship goes where I think it might go, I will not complain about your duck hunting every day of duck season. But in return, I want you to agree to send our children to OCS.” OCS stands for Ouachita Christian School, the school I attended growing up. My parents had helped found the school, and my mother had taught music there. I had such a wonderful experience at that school, and being able to provide that same opportunity for my children was important to me. Jase agreed, so we had a deal.

I Had No Idea

Exactly what it means for a man to go duck hunting *every day* of the season may need some explanation. Duck season can last up to about three months, but it does not open and close on the same days every year. Some states also have a break in the season for about two weeks; that break is called “the split.” When the split occurs in one state, ducks can still be hunted in other states. When Jase said he hunted every day of duck season, that meant he could be away from home for a couple of weeks at a time.

During duck season, his alarm clock goes off sometime between 3:00 and 4:00 every morning. He typically stays in the duck blind for hours—all day if necessary—to get the allowed limit of ducks per day. When we were dating, and for most of our marriage, the Robertsons’ family business, Duck Commander, operated out of Phil and Kay’s house, so Jase went there to make

duck calls once he finished hunting. I hardly ever saw him during daylight hours.

I had to come to understand that while some people hunt for fun or recreation, Robertson men hunt for a living. Duck hunting is not a hobby in our family; it's a big part of our livelihood. For years, our family survived solely off the sales of the annual Duck Commander hunting videos. If the ducks were not flying over West Monroe, Phil and Jase had to find them somewhere else in order to make that video to support our families. The Robertsons hunted long before *Duck Dynasty* ever entered anyone's mind, and they will be hunting long after the show finishes its run. Hunting is not optional for Jase; it's part of who he is. Sometimes that means he operates without enough sleep. That wears on a person—and on his wife and family.

Phil and Jase hunt more than anyone else in the family and take hunting more seriously than the others, so Miss Kay totally understands how I feel once duck season starts. She has said more than once, "I sure hope I don't die during duck season because none of the men in the family would come to my funeral!" I have to say, she has good reason to be concerned.

One day during the early years of our marriage, before cell phones, Jase left for his usual day of hunting and filming with Phil. Our routine was that Jase would usually either call me when he got back to his parents' house or have Miss Kay call me to tell me he was on his way home. This communication became a lifeline for me—knowing that my husband was okay and that another day of duck season was behind us. On that particular day, Phil had returned home in the early afternoon without Jase, eaten lunch, and was taking his nap, which I learned when I talked to Miss Kay. She assured me she would call me when Jase arrived.

By late afternoon, I still had not heard from Jase. By evening, long after the sky was dark, and just as I was about to panic, the phone rang. Jase, acting completely relaxed and even jovial about his successful hunt that day, could not understand why I was almost hysterical with worry. He had been out there alone for hours! “Missy,” he said calmly, “you need to understand something. I am more comfortable driving a boat at night, by myself, than I will ever be driving a car in the middle of the day down the interstate. You never need to worry about me when I’m out on the river. That’s where I grew up.” I have never forgotten that conversation, but I will admit I still worry every once in a while.

Since no one on my side of the family was a hunter, I did not fully understand what being married to a serious hunter would actually mean, but I know now. His early mornings and long absences are not my favorite things about being his wife, but he did try to warn me about the reality of this unusual vocation, so it’s something I’ve grown used to.

Early in 1991, a few months into our marriage and soon after US troops were sent to Operation Desert Storm, I watched a national news story in which the wife of a serviceman was being interviewed. She described certain sacrifices that her family had to make because her husband was gone. She had to quit her job in order to take care of her small children (since she and her husband had shared that responsibility before he was deployed), and money was tight. When the journalist asked her how she was making ends meet, one of the examples she mentioned was that she washed and saved aluminum foil to be used multiple times. Reusing aluminum foil? I had never thought about doing that. Jase and I didn’t have much money, but I didn’t have to save aluminum foil!

That wife's story hit me hard as I listened to the entire news broadcast, and at the ripe old age of nineteen I began to comprehend how much our military families were sacrificing for us. Not only do they sacrifice financial stability; they also sacrifice their own safety when called on a mission, a mission that is on our behalf. They ensure that the *rest* of us keep our freedoms—including choosing an occupation such as hunting.

Many times when Jase is out of town for long periods of time, one of my married friends or acquaintances will snidely remark, "I don't know how you handle it. I would never let my husband do that." First of all, that's a decision Jase and I made together, long before we got married. Yes, it has been difficult at times, especially when the boys were little. But all I could think about when hearing those comments was, *At least he's not fighting in a war overseas! Those wives are the ones who have it hard. I don't know how they do it.* Whenever I am asked how I handle Jase being gone so much, I always think of that news story. At the risk of sounding boastful, I'll tell you that I handle it like a champ!

We Were Meant to Be

Once Jase knew I would not interfere with hunting season and I knew he would honor my desire to send our children to the school of my choice, we could move toward engagement and marriage. Despite our differences, we knew we were meant to be together. The commonalities of our faith and shared values forged a powerful bond between us, in addition to the elements of enjoying each other's company and the mutual attraction we could not deny.

By the time Jase and I became engaged, not only had we become best friends, but I also knew beyond any question that Jase

was God's man for me, and I was God's woman for him—for the rest of our lives, no matter what. We married on August 10, 1990. Our wedding took place in the same church we still attend with many longtime friends and members of our extended family.

I was nineteen years old when we married, and Jase was six days from turning twenty-one. The day was everything I always dreamed it would be. I wore a beautiful wedding gown handmade by my mother's best friend, a perfect duplicate of an expensive designer dress I had seen at a bridal store, down to its last tiny bits of beading, lacework, and tufts of tulle. As someone who has always loved music and enjoyed singing all my life, I wanted to be both the bride and the soloist at my wedding, so I prerecorded a song called "Only God Could Love You More" to be played as I walked down the aisle.

Jase and I made a deliberate decision while we were dating to remain sexually pure until we were married. Keeping that commitment was not easy, but we did it. We decided to trust God, and we were determined to honor His Word no matter how much of a struggle it was. The important thing is we made it! Two years, ten months, and two days, but who was counting? The first sexual experience either one of us ever had took place with each other on our wedding night. Jase often says it was more like an exploratory biological experiment! We have remained faithful to one another and our marriage vows since that day.

Thank You, Miss Kay and Lisa

Jase and I dated for almost three years before we married, long enough that I had the opportunity to spend a good bit of time around his family. The differences between the Robertsons and my family didn't faze me. I enjoyed visiting their home and

realized before Jase and I married that Miss Kay could teach me a lot about being a wife to a Robertson man. I had seen the way she treated Phil—her attentiveness to his every need, her servant's heart toward him, and her overall affection for him.

I knew Miss Kay was Jase's role model for his future wife. He had certain expectations for the woman he planned to marry, and Miss Kay had set a high standard. Because I admired and respected her and also wanted to please my future husband, I was eager to learn the lessons she already knew. I was not trying to become a duplicate of Miss Kay; I knew I had to be true to myself, but I also saw the value in demonstrating toward my husband the attitudes and actions she used with hers. From Miss Kay, I learned partly by instruction, but mostly by example, how to love and honor my husband.

While Jase and I were dating, and during the first years of our marriage, Jase's older brother, Alan, and his wife, Lisa, also lived on Phil and Miss Kay's property with their two young daughters. I knew Lisa, the first Robertson daughter-in-law, would also help and support me. At that time I looked to Lisa as an ideal young wife and mother, the person I went to for advice on fitting into the family.

However, I was unaware of some of the things Lisa was struggling with personally at that time—emotional scars inflicted on her for years from an abusive male relative as well as sometimes feeling ignored by Alan because he spent so much time with his parents and brothers. While Alan was helping his dad in the struggling duck call business, Lisa worked hard to support their family.

As the difficulties in her marriage began to escalate, Lisa had an extramarital affair with a casual acquaintance, followed a few

years later by a more serious affair with someone she had known in high school. While those things were happening, I felt abandoned and betrayed by someone I trusted. But Alan's forgiveness and reconciliation with Lisa restored their marriage, and over a period of time I regained my deep respect and love for her. Lisa demonstrated strength, courage, and humility once she decided to end her affairs, speak honestly about them, and embrace God's forgiveness.¹

Due in part to Lisa's unfaithfulness to Alan, Jase developed some problems trusting me around other men and had bouts of jealousy that we had to work through for years in our marriage. It was very difficult at the time for him to see his brother so badly hurt. Over time, Alan and Lisa, along with others, helped us both with this issue. She quickly became the older sister I never had. Jase and I spent many nights at their house hanging out, watching television together, and playing with their sweet babies. Lisa was outspoken, funny, a great cook, and a woman deeply in love with her husband. These qualities were admirable to me.

When Jase and I were married, I didn't know how to cook. Growing up, my mother had always prepared meals for our family, but she did not enjoy cooking the way Miss Kay does. I knew that once we were married, Jase would expect the kinds of meals his mom prepared, so I asked her to teach me to cook. I am not sure she was prepared for how completely inexperienced I was. The only cooking endeavor I felt confident in at that point in my life was making a mean macaroni and cheese out of a box. She was definitely surprised by some of the things I did not know, such as how to tell when boiled potatoes were done. But once she realized I needed serious help, she was patient and kind as she helped me find my way around the kitchen.

We started with the basics: how to brown meat, how to mash potatoes, and even how to heat canned vegetables on the stove, which I had never done before. She also taught me how to plan a meal, including which starches go best with certain meats and how to make her famous homemade white sauce. Without her help, I would have been lost and frustrated in the kitchen, and Jase would have been hungry.

Since I had never lived alone before getting married (I mean, there wasn't really any time for that), I never *had* to learn how to cook or take care of myself. Besides, being raised in a structured environment, I ate only at breakfast time, lunchtime, and dinnertime. Period. Jase's family ate whenever they wanted to eat. If that meant frying fish at 10:30 in the morning because Phil just caught it and was "fish hungry," then that's when they ate it. They even had pancakes and bacon for supper sometimes. I had never heard of such a thing! I grew up in a family that ate to live, but married into a family that lived to eat. Talk about a contrast.

Another way I wanted to please Jase was to make a comfortable home for him. Since neither of us nor our families had any money, almost every piece of furniture we had was a hand-me-down from a family member. We had a desk and a chair from Granny and Pa, along with a sectional couch and a water bed (yes, we had a water bed) handed down from my aunt Bonny. I bought a table and chairs for fifty dollars at a garage sale. Someone gave us an entertainment center that they were going to throw out, and my grandparents bought us a nineteen-inch television as a wedding present. But I made it all work. I decorated the living room with throw pillows that had ducks on them, framed prints of ducks, and laid out duck knickknacks. It was perfect!

Loving and Serving in the Early Years

One of the things Jase and I looked forward to before we married was being able to use our home for ministry—Bible teaching, encouragement, and Christian fellowship—as I had seen take place at Miss Kay and Phil’s house. We hoped that one day, when we had a home big enough to handle it, we could open our doors the way they did. That dream became a reality, in a much bigger way than we ever expected, about two weeks after our wedding.

A week after returning from our honeymoon, Jase baptized his best friend—then another friend, then a friend’s girlfriend. All of these people wanted to know more about God, so Jase and I began teaching them. The more we shared our faith, the more people crowded into our tiny apartment, and more and more of our time away from work became focused on ministering to others. What I assumed would be cozy evenings at home with my new husband ended up being busy nights with many troubled young people searching for purpose in life.

By the end of our first year of marriage, we had baptized more than a hundred people. Many of those new believers not only needed counseling, help with studying the Bible, and straightforward biblical teaching, but they also needed somewhere to go every night to keep themselves out of trouble, all of which Jase and I were happy to provide—well, most of the time. I knew we were doing what God wanted us to do, but I longed for the moments when Jase and I could be alone. This was definitely a challenging time for our marriage, but we journeyed on.

At first, I felt overwhelmed and inadequate to teach God’s Word or share devotional thoughts with others. I had been raised in a pretty sheltered environment and was not nearly as experienced in the ways of the world as some of the people who came to

me for direction in their Christian lives. I had never been drunk, had not had sex before marriage, and had never even contemplated trying drugs of any kind. I was naive to say the least. Most of the people who crowded our living room came from broken homes, had been physically or sexually abused, or had chosen a lifestyle of wild living and had hit their breaking point.

Jase tried to convince me that God would not have sent us people we could not help, and that we simply needed to do our best and let Him work through us. He also taught me how to have a poker face when I heard about certain things people had done, as I was shocked at some of the lifestyles I was learning about and realized I couldn't show it. These people were ashamed of their deeds and were seeking a way out of their lifestyles, willing to lay it all out on the table. They didn't need judgment from me; they needed reassurance that they could move past it all with the help of Jesus.

When we moved into our apartment as newlyweds, we never imagined it would become a wedding chapel. Several young couples who came to our Bible studies surrendered their lives to Christ and decided to marry. The problem was, most of them had been sexually active for months or years. After they became Christians, we encouraged them to stay pure until marriage. Understandably, they were not interested in long engagements and some of them wanted to marry on very short notice. As it turned out, they asked Jase, who had the legal authority, to preside.

One couple's wedding was scheduled for a Saturday night, but they showed up at our apartment on Tuesday and said they simply could not wait any longer. They told us that they were trying their best to stay sexually pure, but since they had never refrained from having sex in prior relationships, it was proving

extremely difficult for them. I was so impressed with their new commitment to God and their willingness to live for Him. Jase performed an impromptu ceremony that night, and with the marriage license signed and in hand, their car squealed out of the apartment complex a few minutes later. The four of us kept their marriage a secret, even during their big wedding the following Saturday night. I often said to Jase after our apartment cleared out at night, “Boy, if these walls could talk.”

To say that our first five years together were intensely devoted to ministry is not an understatement. At one point, we had groups in our home every night of the week, and that went on for months. We thrived on knowing that every day of our lives was filled with spiritual purpose, but there came a point when we knew we were ready for more.

“I’m Never Having Kids”

As Jase and I began to prepare to start a family, I had to give myself credit for coming a long way in my thoughts about motherhood. I knew I wanted two boys and a girl, a big change from my younger days, when I did not want children at all. I distinctly remember the announcement I made to my parents when I was eleven or twelve years old: “I’m never having kids.”

Let me explain. My father was a pastor; I went to church every time the doors were open, and I paid attention to the Sunday school lessons and the preaching I heard each week. In addition, I knew my Bible well as a preteen, and the Bible said having children was painful. My decision not to become a mother had little to do with raising children; it had everything to do with the pain of giving birth to them, pain of biblical proportions! I knew that I was *not* interested in that.

When the subject came up one day while we were riding in the car, my dad said, “They give you pain medicine so it won’t hurt.” That information was not especially helpful because once I found out the pain medicine had to be injected, I did not want that either. I was terrified of being stuck with needles! Since I was a healthy child who rarely had to see the doctor except for annual checkups, getting a shot was a very big deal.

I loved babies and children and enjoyed babysitting every time I had the chance. In my heart, I had always wanted to raise children. *Maybe adoption is the answer*, I thought. After a little more time passed, I decided that after I got married one pregnancy might be okay—as long as I had twins so I could get everything over and done with.

But as is the case with so many young women, after I became the wife of a wonderful man, I found myself longing for a baby and wanting to become a mother. This came as no surprise to my parents. They always knew I would grow out of my adolescent declarations and change my mind once I settled down with the right person. They were right.

After Jase and I married, we decided not to start a family right away. We wanted to wait a few years, giving ourselves time to establish a firm foundation for our marriage and our relationship with each other. We wanted to prepare ourselves as best we could for parenthood before bringing a baby into the world. Besides that, we realized how young we were and knew that once we started having children, our lives would change forever. We also were enjoying being very social and active with our friends. Jase played on city-league and church-league softball teams, which took us to the ballpark about four nights a week in the spring and summer. I was involved in church musicals and singing on the

praise team, as well as keeping house for what seemed like round-the-clock game nights, Bible studies, and movie marathons.

While the nights were a lot of fun, cleaning up after twenty to fifty people the following mornings before leaving for work was definitely not something I had envisioned as a dreamy-eyed girl planning out my marriage. Sometimes I had to put a handwritten sign on our door stating “This house is closed to guests until tomorrow” or “We’re having family time.” The first time I posted the sign, I actually had someone ask me the next evening exactly what “family time” meant, and how we could have family time when we didn’t have children yet?

Well, Jase and I thought, maybe we should do something about that.

I have always been the kind of person who wants to know as much as possible about anything in which I am involved. If I know I am going to face an unfamiliar situation, especially something I have heard can be challenging, I believe knowledge is one of the best tools I can have. No matter how much time or energy I have to invest, I will read, study, talk to people, and do any other research necessary to equip myself for new circumstances in life. This aspect of my personality served me well as Jase and I began thinking about having children. Our church held several classes on family relationships and parenting, and I went to as many as I possibly could.

I continued attending classes after I became pregnant with our first child in 1994. During one of the meetings, a woman I still greatly admire to this day made a comment I will never forget. She said, “The best gift you can give your children is to love your husband.” Since the moment I heard those words, I have tried to live up to them because I am so convinced they are true.

BLESSED, BLESSED . . . BLESSED

As of this writing, Jase and I have been married twenty-five years. I cannot imagine a better husband, a better father for our children, or a better leader for our family. Talk about being blessed! The path we travel in our life together is not always easy, but I would not want to walk it with anyone else.