

# *Return to Your First Love*

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A Journey Back to God

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A Journey Back to God

Teresa R. Jones

**WAVERLY**  
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Published by:

Waverly Media Group Inc.  
150 N. Michigan Ave  
Chicago IL 60601  
[www.waverlymediagroup.com](http://www.waverlymediagroup.com)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN- 978-0-9840974-0-1 (cloth), 978-09840974-1-8 (pbk)

1. Religion: Christian Life - Spiritual Growth, 2. Self-Help: Motivational & Inspirational, 3. Family & Relationships: General  
For Worldwide distribution

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: August 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Book cover designed by NuLogic Creative

**Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love.**

*Revelation 2:4 (NKJV)*

## **Author's Note**

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## *Dedication*

I dedicate this book to my first love, Jesus Christ. I thank God for walking with me on this life journey and for loving me through all the trying times. I am grateful for the promising future that is unfolding before my very eyes. It was the Lord who inspired me to write this book. In His patience, He provided the blessings, enabling and qualifying me to bring this work to completion. Thank You Holy Father.

## *Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank my parents for their love and support. I thank God for their acts of selflessness and sacrifice toward my siblings and me. Although they were not conventional, I know in my heart that they always wanted the best for me. I exalt God for two of His shepherds that are instrumental in my spiritual growth, Reverend August Minor who planted, and Bishop Horace E. Smith who waters. It is not easy to find a pastor who truly loves and worships God, a pastor who understands that God called him to hover over and love the flock that God has entrusted to him. The Lord blessed me twice to cross paths with such chosen vessels. I am also very appreciative of the encouragement and inspiration I received from my mentor, Arthur E. Holland Sr., who is a phenomenal writer. I am grateful for my children Alexis and Trevor, who have brought joy and a deeper sense of purpose to my life. Last but not least, I thank God for my husband Alex for his love and admonition, his support and for inspiring me to dream. Alex is the angel that God sent into my life at a point when I so desperately needed rescuing.

## *Introduction*

**M**y pastor, Bishop Smith posed a question to the congregation one Sunday afternoon. “If you had a chance to be one of Jesus’ disciples, which one would you choose to be?” he asked. I thought, “I believe I would want to be Paul.”

Think about it. Paul wrote about two thirds of the New Testament. Paul reminds us that no matter how bad we are or what dreadful things we have done in our lifetime, God's love endures forever and that God is always willing to wipe the slate clean (1 Tim 1:15,16). Paul is a prime example and a reminder of God’s love and willingness to receive me as His own. Paul is the “Good News” disciple of the Gentiles; therefore, we know that we all have access to the Holy Spirit and everyone can be made in the righteousness of God. I am sure that most would agree that Paul was the most effective apostle, especially regarding propagating the Gospel. To say that Paul was simply a martyr for the Gospel would be an understatement. The Scriptures tell us how Paul was stoned, beaten, shipwrecked, and left for dead several times (2 Cor 11:24-26) and eventually died a violent death by decapitation. Paul was mortal, but he had supernatural influence, and even demons respected his spiritual authority (Acts 19:15). I personally admire Paul's fighting spirit. To answer Bishop Smith's question, “Paul is the most distinguished of the apostles. Yes, I would choose to be Paul.”

I assumed Bishop Smith's response would follow suit. He surprised me when he said, “I would choose to be John.” I thought, “Why John?” Bishop Smith went on to explain that Paul was definitely the most profound of all the disciples, but it was John, who truly understood the love of God, which is reflected in many ways in his account of the Gospel. John is known as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (Jn 20:2). Immediately, I reflected on my previous pastor’s favorite passage of scripture; “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16).

Bishop Smith continued saying that John was the disciple who received the blessings and the one caught up in the spirit realm to witness heaven and write the book of Revelation. John was also the only disciple that did not die a violent death. John had grasped the depth of God's love for His creation called “man.”

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and understood how man was to respond in love to God. I listened and thought, “Bishop Smith is onto something, but I would still choose to be Paul.”

I pondered the concept of truly understanding God's love, and man's love for Him. To be honest, most of us, especially Christians, probably have not truly grasped agape love. The Bible tells us that without love, we are nothing (1 Cor. 13). One could argue that the root of this world's problems stems from the lack of understanding God's love for us, let alone the love we should have for Him.

Deuteronomy 6:5 states: “And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” Jesus reminds us that this is the greatest of all the commandments (Mt 22:37,38).

The premise of this book is my humble attempt, inspired by God, to help someone that has an ear to hear and a heart to understand God's love and the importance of our love toward Him. Throughout this book, I will share with you my life experiences and lessons learned that have made me the person I am today. This book perhaps will spare you some pain or some may find direction toward the road of healing and restoration.

I don't claim to be all that I should be, but I'm not who I use to be. I have just learned how to position myself to become the individual that God has predestined me to be before the foundation of the world.

Walk with me through the pages of my life as I share with you how I returned to my first love.

# Chapter 1

## Origin of Love

**B**orn in Chicago, Illinois on January 19, 1966, I was the second of five children and the eldest daughter. When my parents brought me home from the hospital, I didn't have a first name for two full weeks after I was born. To this day, my birth certificate does not have my first name on it. People warned me to have this bureaucratic glitch corrected to avoid problems when I become a senior citizen. I must admit this has not been high on my list of priorities. My family is large, and plenty of people in this world can vouch for who I am. Besides, my husband has a bigger problem; the first name on his birth certificate is “Alexandria!”

My mother told me how her sisters debated among themselves about what to name me. My Aunt Lynn wanted my name to be “Venus.” My understanding is, Aunt Lynn didn't just want to name me, but also offered to adopt me. She already had a son, but I guess she still wanted a daughter (but maybe wasn't willing to go through the motions). Aunt Shelly wanted to name me Jennifer. In the end, after consulting with his sisters, my dad had the final verdict; my name would be Teresa.

After hearing this story, I couldn't help but think, Is Teresa the best they could come up with? I vowed never to name a daughter of mine “Teresa.” My siblings would often tease me about my name, implying that it lacked luster and prestige. “You have the worst name of the group!” they would often exclaim. Ironically, I was the only child my father named.

Later in life, I discovered my name literally means, “Reaper” in Greek and “Generous Giver” in Italian. According to the book, “*What's in a Name?*” the character quality or Godly characteristic meaning is “Industrious,” with my suggested lifetime scripture verse being Psalm 18:32, “The God who girds me

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with strength and makes my way perfect.” Perhaps my dad was onto something after all.

I grew up on the South side of Chicago in the Woodlawn neighborhood with my parents and siblings. Those that are familiar with the Chicago area consider Woodlawn to be on the “low end,” at least it was during the time I grew up there. Today, Woodlawn is slowly but surely making a comeback and like most US inner-city areas, Woodlawn has seen the worst of days and is going through a massive phase of reconstruction. Formerly, rundown apartments are now newly remodeled condominiums. I have ambivalent feelings toward all of this. On one hand, I welcome the aesthetic view of new and clean properties with manicured lawns in contrast to old dilapidated buildings layered with graffiti and streets blanketed with trash and broken glass. On the other hand, I regret that I won't be able to show my children how I grew up, especially since my husband, and I value the importance of remembering our humble beginnings.

### *Father*

My father JT was born and raised in Midway, Alabama. One of 14 children, he had three brothers and ten sisters. My father had a strong sense of responsibility at an early age. When he was twelve years old, my grandfather took him out of school to handle the family's business affairs, such as paying bills and trading crops raised on his family's farm. I recall Dad telling me how he would hook a horse up to a wagon filled with goods for bartering so that he could purchase items needed at home. He would travel across several miles away from home at the tender age of 12. I could not imagine.

My dad grew up in a very strict environment, which didn't sound nurturing. He and his siblings did what they were told and didn't dare to ask questions or even sigh because the consequences were detrimental. My father told me that his father would use a piece of leather about two inches wide and two inches thick to beat him with for discipline. One day Dad mustered up the courage to challenge my grandfather when he was in the process of beating my father, he grabbed the strapped and told my grandfather never to beat him again. My grandfather didn't beat him after that, but he had other methods of punishment.

Growing up, my Dad was had a great love for dogs. My grandfather shot my dad's dog because it killed one of the chickens. I am certain my father was heartbroken. Knowing my dad, he probably held it in.

Dad always said he didn't want his children to have bad feelings toward him, the way he felt about his father. My dad never punished us in the extreme manner

that he received. In fact, I can't recall ever receiving a beating from my dad (I was the only child that didn't).

We seldom saw a compassionate side of my father, unless he had been drinking, which became a way of life for him. My dad rarely showed affection. Surprisingly, he did have a sense of humor and would occasionally joke with us. He usually kept a stern front, not letting anyone see what was going on inside. This is a trait he would bestow to his children. I was 25 years old before I ever saw him cry.

Most of what I have learned about my father's past has come from information provided by other relatives. I was 17 before I knew my father's real name because my relatives always called him JL. When I was a child, it never dawned on me to ask why, but one of my aunts informed my sisters and me that they called my dad J. L. because his name is Johnny Lee. She was surprised that we didn't know of the mistake on his birth certificate. I recall overhearing my aunts making the comment, "Who does he think he is some kind of VIP or something?" Although I was always very inquisitive, I never asked him why he never shared that with us because as far as I was concerned, no excuse would suffice. This might seem strange to most, but if you are from the South, or familiar know the ways of the South, you also know there is an unspoken code of silence. Maybe he disliked his name as much as I disliked mine.

My grandfather didn't beat my father anymore, but my grandmother gave him his last beating when he was 22. We never found out why, but that same year he left home and went to Rochester, New York with only 10 cents in his pocket, which he used to call a cousin to come get him from the bus station. The escalators fascinated him, since he had never seen them in rural Alabama, so for sport he rode up and down a few times.

Dad was under the impression that everyone that lived in the city wore suits to work every day. He figured he would also get a job that required a suit. However, he would find himself picking apples for a living. He didn't stay in Rochester long before migrating to Chicago.

His father had left Alabama for a while to make more money in Chicago and Dad figured my grandfather could put a good word in for him to get hired, since was already settled and established in Chicago, but this never happened. My father never shared the reason with us. Southerners had many subjects that were taboo.

While in Chicago, my father attended his cousin's wedding, there, he met my mother who was the maid of honor in her sister Lynn's wedding. One of my

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relatives mentioned that my father thought my mother was one of the prettiest women he had ever seen.

Shortly after, there were arrangements made for them to meet at my Aunt Lynn's house and the rest is history.

### ***Mother***

My mother Alice was born and raised in Gallion, Alabama about 120 miles from Birmingham. She was one of nine children, with five brothers, and three sisters. It's my understanding that my mother has been quiet and reserved all of her life, and she is even less affectionate than my dad. In our home, the love was just understood. My mother is withdrawn and it's almost impossible to strike up a conversation with her.

I really don't recall her socializing much with others outside of her family, and she really didn't have any friends except for a few she grew up with in Alabama. For some reason, she is very distrustful of people; a trait passed on to all of her children in varying degrees.

Like my father, she grew up in a rural area, on a farm, where the family grew most of their food, and raised cotton for a living. My mother picked more cotton than any of her sisters, either because she worked harder, or because she was not likely to complain. My mother never makes a big deal out of material possessions, and she is not hard to please. She appreciates everything that people do for her, and she has always been a very generous person, in spite of her financial condition. She is one of the few people in the world that would literally give you the shirt off her back if she believed you needed it. The downside to being this way is that some people will try to take advantage of you. It took a lot for her to be pushed too far, strike back or vent, except when it came down to her children; especially me. My mother never asked much from life, and life didn't offer her much either. Perhaps that was just my take on her situation because the Word of God tells us a tree is known by the fruit it bears. From that respect, looking from the outside in, most people would consider my parents rich.

Unlike my father's upbringing, mother was required to at least graduate high school. She mentioned how her father wanted all of his daughters to attend college, but could only afford to send my Aunt Lynn, who was then able to put her youngest sister, Aunt Maria through college. At age 19, Mom left Gallion to reside in Birmingham briefly before moving to Chicago. She lived there with relatives and worked as a maid, which was common for a black woman at that time. Shortly after turning 20, she met my father and they married in August 1961.

### *JT*

The oldest of the five of us is my brother JT. Mother chose to name him after our father. As I study the Bible, in particular the Old Testament, it resonates with me that the people during that time gave careful attention to naming their children. Names often reflect the character of an individual. With that said, from a spiritual perspective I can't help feeling there is something wrong with using initials to name someone; a name gives us our identity.

While looking through old photos of JT, he was one of the most beautiful babies I've ever seen, with a glow that caused you to zoom in on him, no matter who else was in the picture.

Growing up, JT was very timid when it came to dealing with his peers, but was very mean to his brothers and sisters. He tried to push me down a flight of stairs when I was a baby in my stroller. My grandmother said once when I was two, she was in another room and suddenly heard me scream, when she asked my brother what happened, he replied, "JT slapped her!" When my mother would take us all to the grocery store, JT always chose Honeycomb, which was his favorite and none of us dared to challenge him. He also claimed an old lounge chair in the living room as his chair, and we immediately gave up the chair when he said, "Move!" My younger brother had the guts to challenge him sometimes but JT would turn the chair over to throw him out.

Unfortunately, JT would not take charge of his life outside of the home as he would with us. Years later, this would be to his detriment.

### *David*

My brother David was the third born child. The literal meaning for David is "Beloved" and our whole family loves David dearly, but I feel some members are overly concerned about receiving his love and approval. I have noticed in families with an odd number of children the middle sibling tends to be an interesting character and my family is no exception to this.

The best way to describe my brother would be, "thorn in my side." It wasn't always this way between us; we were like peas in a pod. We shared more childhood experiences together than with the other siblings and attended elementary and high school together because we are close in age.

Our relatives said that when we were small children, I watched over David like a hen watching over her little chicks. I recall functioning in a dual role as big sister and junior mom to all of my younger siblings. When I was four and David was two, we lived with my maternal grandparents for seven months in Alabama. Unlike my brother JT, David and I would get tired of the bullies picking on us

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and decided to fight back together. I recall a letter that David wrote to me while he was in the service, telling me how he considered me both his big sister and big brother while we were growing up. One time he and I fought four boys together. We didn't win, but we didn't lose either. We actually held our own.

For the most part, David and I were inseparable. People still say, including David and my husband, that we are very much alike in many ways. I wonder where we went wrong.

### *Leslie*

My sister Leslie was the fourth child born. The literal meaning of Leslie's name is "Consecrated One." Leslie is the one that all my siblings have set apart. I was four when she was born and still remember the day my parents brought her home from the hospital. She was a very fussy baby that day and my brothers and I stood around her crib trying to console her. However, the beginning of her life would not be a reflection of her latent personality growing up. She was a warm individual and like David, I took Leslie under my wing too. The first time she went outside to play, I escorted her. I was responsible for taking her to and from school. I provided most, if not all, the assistance in helping her plan for the major events in her life, such as the prom, wedding day, and her first baby shower. You see, my mother was very reserved and didn't get excited about these special occasions in a woman's life, so I took charge.

I considered Leslie the peacemaker in the family because she was always the go-to-person, the arbitrator when there was discord. I was never able to confide in, or reveal my deepest thoughts to any of my immediate family members (due to the risk of being put down or ridiculed), but I could find an occasional safe haven for my concerns with Leslie. I am sure this feeling was mutual among all of my siblings. I saw Leslie as the calm in the midst of our storms. Over the years, this view of Leslie has changed, and I feel she has now conformed to the status quo. Where I used to be able to identify her by those special characteristics and qualities that she brought to us, she has turned into a foreigner that landed in our family. Most of the time it feels as if I don't know who she is anymore.

### *Tiffany*

My youngest sister, Tiffany, was the last child, born when I was eight going on nine. When my mother went into labor, we spent one night with each of my aunts while she was in the hospital. It's funny how a song has a way of transporting you back in time. *When Will I See You Again?* by Diana Ross, was playing on Dad's car radio when he picked us up from my aunt's house to welcome our new little sister into the world. This song always reminds me of the

day she was born. We call her Tiff for short and the literal meaning for Tiffany is “perfection.” Thinking of Tiffany and her life makes me realize that she has lived up to her name.

She was always the best dancer with me ranking next to last in this category among my siblings. Growing up, she probably had the most normal childhood experiences of us all. She excelled in high school and actively participated in extracurricular activities. She dressed well, and was popular and was even allowed to have a boyfriend. Imagine that! When she graduated from college, she earned herself a spot in the “Who’s Who of College Graduates,” and went on to obtain her Master’s degree.

Just like my other younger siblings, she once occupied a spot under my wing, I used to take her everywhere with me. One Christmas Eve, I took her to work with me for the office Christmas party and later went to another party, and we had a great time that day. She taught everyone the latest dance called the “Freddie Kruger.” Tiffany was only nine going on ten and my father got very angry with me for keeping her out so late, especially on Christmas Eve.

Sometimes Tiffany makes choices for herself that are less than perfect to say the least and my concern is that if she doesn't turn her weaknesses around, she will cancel out all the years of good accomplishments she worked so hard for.

She once told me that she was not going to mess up her life the way I did, but Sometimes, I fear she is on a collision course toward something worse.

### ***My Relationship with My Family***

You may have gathered by now that I don't have the best relationships with my family members. My family could be used as a dictionary reference for the definition of a dysfunctional family. But then again, I personally don't know anyone with a “normal” family.

If I have a special bond with any of my family members, that would be with Dad. Close family and friends would describe me as Daddy's girl, but even that relationship has hit a few speed bumps here and there. To this day, I don't feel at liberty to reveal my deepest thoughts and dreams, and have always had to vent outside of my family. I know they love me, but they did not offer me emotional support, and I learned early to be independent financially, emotionally and spiritually. In many ways, I merely existed physically in my family.