**For My Mother, Heather Lanea Chrisman**

**By: Alexis Chrisman**

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I’m here today with an impossible task; summarizing my mother and her life in a few short minutes. Anyone who knew her can understand how truly impossible this is. There is simply too much of her to put into words.

But if I could choose a few words to describe her, the first that comes to mind is passionate. She never did anything half-way. She and my father used to joke that she only had two settings, 10 and off. She was either on her feet, running full-speed, or she was asleep.

The second word would have to be tenacious. She knew what she wanted, and she would not be denied in getting it. She would hold on. Even when she was a young girl, this was evident. She wanted to live in a beautiful place, and she loved making things beautiful. Throughout her childhood, she was constantly redecorating and rearranging her bedroom. This continued throughout her life. She wanted to be a cheerleader, so she got a trampoline and taught herself and practiced constantly. She cheered all though middle school and high school.

But above all, even from a very young age, she wanted God. She always had, as she described it “a tender heart toward God”. She would often ask, of her own initiative, to be taken to Sunday school. She maintained her faith all through her school years and into college.

It was during this time that she was hired as an assistant manager in a Cinemark Movie Theater in Kentucky. It was there that she met my father, who at the time was working as a projectionist. He always said that there was only one woman in the world who he remembered seeing for the first time, and that was my mother. He thought she was beautiful from the first moment he saw her. But he used to tease her, saying she was wearing red pants at the time. She always responded that he was wearing pink plastic suspenders and a bow tie.

At the theater, late at night, usually only one manager and one projectionist were left working. My parents usually tried to manage it so they were there together. During those times, they had many discussions about faith. My father had been raised in a Christian home, but had left the faith and was at the time a strong atheist. He had many good arguments against Christianity, arguments that had made other Christians feel angry and threatened. But my mother was neither. She would always respond with “That’s a good argument. I don’t have an answer to that, but I still believe.” Even in the face of doubts that she couldn’t answer, she clung tenaciously to her faith.

Eventually, she brought him back to God and they married. After my sister and I were born, they moved to Virginia, where they had their other seven children. Altogether, my mother and father moved together fourteen times. One of the things about her that always amazed me was her ability to turn any house into a home in a very short amount of time. It would seem like no time at all before the house was painted and decorated and she was fixing eggs in the kitchen.

Houses all over Kentucky and Virginia still bear her mark, because she once lived in them. Her motto was “Leave everything a little better than when you found it”. And she did. Every place she went, everything she touched, she left a little better. But what I think she never realized was that this applied to people too. Every person she met, she left a little better, because she once knew them.

My mother’s degree focused on Special Education. She always had a heart for those with disabilities, and they were naturally drawn to her. She had a special way with all of them, neither pushing them away, nor talking down to them, but treating them like what they were, fellow children of God. I remember many of her stories about the children she taught and loved when she worked as a teacher. She always said her favorite part was the children. But eventually, she left working to raise and school my sister and me, and eventually all her children.

But her influence was never limited in that way because she had a kind of way with all people. She made everyone feel valued and important in a special way. I was often amazed when she returned from talking to a stranger for a few minutes, only for her to proceed to tell us their life story. People talked to her, because she listened and she cared. Cashiers and servers came to know her by name, and miss her when she wasn’t with us. She used to speak fondly about all her friends spread out in the stores and restaurants of Bedford County. She loved them all dearly and knew them by name.

When she was a little girl, one of her dreams was to someday live in a big white house. That dream finally came true only last December, when we finally purchased Wolf Hill, our family farm where she will be buried. She loved it deeply, and it was the place she picked for our final home. We can think of no better place to plant her seed. We will bury her today int the traditional Christian way, facing the east, ready to be resurrected to meet her Lord at His triumphant return, when death is finally fully defeated.

Toward the end of her life, she was very sick, and often in great pain. I believe her suffering was more than any of us knew, because she never complained. Instead, she focused on us, asking if we were happy and comfortable, if we were having fun. She once sent us a note when she was unable to come see us. We’ve lost it, but in it, she told us that she loved us. She told us to run, laugh, dance, read, sing and play. She herself throughout her sickness spent her time praying and listening to sermons

In Malachi 4:2, it says, “But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.” One of my mother’s favorite things to do on the farm was raise up motherless calves, feeding and brushing them. We often saw them come leaping out of the stall and her energy and spirit was like theirs. And we know that one day, like them, she will come leaping out of the grave, finally healed of all pain and sickness.

Near the end of her life, she often said to my father, “You saved me”. He gave the life she wanted for herself and her children. But what I think she never realized was that she saved him, and saved all of us, because she was the one who led him back to God.

My father has influenced many people through his life, as a pastor, a short-term missionary, and now as a law professor here at Liberty University. But my mother was always a quiet, private person, the force unseen. She gave up everything to stay at home, serving her husband and children, pouring her over-flowing life into each of us. She never liked to be in the spotlight, never liked attention. But in a way, everything my father has done, his ministry, it all comes back to her.

I don’t think she ever really realized how many people she touched. On last Thursday morning, I dreamed that she was alive again. And the first thing I told her was, “You should have seen how many people loved you and honored you, how many people cared and reached out to us”. And I know that one day, when we are both alive again, that will be the first thing I tell her. But I’m sure she will already know.

To us, she was much more than our mother. She was our teacher, our guide, and our friend. To my father, she was much more than his wife. She was his greatest advisor, his business partner, and his best friend. Through this hard time, my father has often said that he doesn’t even know how to think of himself apart from her. I believe that goes for all of us. We simply aren’t able to conceive of ourselves without her. She was the center of our family, the heart and soul of our home and our very lives. Without her, we will break, we are breaking, and we are broken.

The night before she died, we were all in the family room watching the old Ben-Hur movie. My mother was too sick to join us. But the next day, as we were grieving, one of us remembered about Jesus being in the movie. She wasn’t able to come watch it with us on Sunday night, but Monday morning, she saw Jesus for real. And we know that there are many things that we see only a pale imitation of, that she is finally seeing for real.

My mother once said that she didn’t want us to be sad when she died. She said she would rather have us have a party with chips and salsa. She would want us to continue living, traveling ever closer to Jesus. So I would like to finish by reading a poem that I think captures that sentiment. It is an old Irish funeral poem. My mother was always proud of her Irish roots. I found this poem when I was thirteen years old, and I showed it to my mother at the time. She liked it, and now I feel it truly captures how she wanted us all to feel when she died. It’s called “Remembered Joy”.

Don’t grieve for me, for now I’m free!  
I follow the plan God laid for me.  
I saw His face, I heard His call,  
I took His hand and left it all…

I could not stay another day,  
To love, to laugh, to work or play;  
Tasks left undone must stay that way.  
And if my parting has left a void,  
Then fill it with remembered joy.

A friendship shared, a laugh, a kiss…  
Ah yes, these things I, too, shall miss.  
My life’s been full, I’ve savoured much:  
Good times, good friends, a loved-one’s touch.

Perhaps my time seemed all too brief –  
Don’t shorten yours with undue grief.  
Be not burdened with tears of sorrow,  
Enjoy the sunshine of the morrow.