



GOD'S END OF THE ARENA

My Spiritual Journey

But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8 (NIV) Some of my earliest recollections were of my grandmother, Hattie Hooker Shelley. She started the first Sunday School in our little Gila Valley club house. I remember being excited about going there and being with other children in the valley. My grandmother lived right up the road from us. I would go to her house a lot. She would sit by the window and sing songs from the old Hymn books. She was very kind and had a sense of peace about her. Later, I would think about her in times of stress in my life. I often longed for the peace she had. But I didn't know where it came from. In those times of stress, the words from the old Hymns would come back to me. It was then that I wished I could talk with my grandmother again.

My brothers and I grew up working the cattle ranch. We usually worked right through the week-ends. I do remember going to church at Easter and Christmas. I always had a hunger for God. I used to climb to the top of a little mountain near the house and reach out my hands to the sky and talk to God. When my grandmother died, I cried a lot. I asked God for help. I really missed her.

Cattle prices went down and my father took a job in the mines in Santa Rita, New Mexico. He then ran for sheriff of Grant County and served in that office and as chief deputy for eight years. We moved from the ranch into town my sophomore year in high school. I hated leaving the ranch. It was a great place to grow up with the animals and mountains all around me. I felt so lost at this time of my life. My mom had started drinking, and I never knew from one day to the next what it would be like in our home. My inner struggles were mounting. Because we did not live on the ranch anymore, I had no horse to help me escape to the mountains. But, I did have more opportunities to go to church.

I went to college at New Mexico State University. It was there that I would often stay with my cousin, Jean Shelley Parmalee. It was during that time that she took her life. It was one of the many suicides in my family. This was a very difficult time for me. I longed to understand more about life and how to cope with tragedy. My escape from thinking about life was work and horses. I had a horse at school and would ride him for hours. I also spent time practicing goat-tying and barrel racing. I was on the college rodeo team. I spent a lot of time keeping my grades up so that I could go to the rodeos on week-ends.

It was after winning Miss Rodeo America, three World Championships, and into my second marriage that I really began to seek some spiritual answers. My father killed himself and a year later, my older brother, Buster, was killed in a truck accident. I flew home to be with my family. My sister-in-law asked me to take Buster's two daughters to the funeral home. I could always do difficult things like that without blinking an eye. But as I stood at his casket with those two little girls, I knew that I didn't have the extra

strength that I always had in the past. My self-sufficiency failed me. When I went back home, I began to work harder than ever before to help numb the pain.

My mother came to Lincoln, Nebraska where I lived. She was drinking, and had a bad car accident. She was in the hospital a long time. She married again, and her second husband committed suicide a year later. At the time, I was pregnant with Bobbie Jo and couldn't work the hours that I had before. Les Loomis, my brother-in-law, began coming by and telling me about Jesus Christ. Up till now, I had been in church off and on, but did not understand how to make peace with God. I went to a Christian Women's meeting with a customer's wife. I saw women there who seemed to be full of joy and peace. It reminded me of what my grandmother had. I was very curious about them.

Soon after, my son, Opie, wanted to go to church. I would take my son to church and drop him off. One Sunday when I picked him up, he was all excited about something. He said he asked Jesus to come into his life. Someone at the church had underlined some verses in his Bible. He showed those verses to me. It really touched me. I had to know more. I drove to the church and asked the minister to tell me more. I asked him if he had any books I could read about the church. He told me they only had one book and it was the Bible. He shared with me how a person could make peace with God. He asked me if I wanted to accept Jesus into my life. I still wasn't sure. He invited me to some special meetings the church was having. I went and heard a man speak about how Christ was going to return to this earth on a horse. After hearing this, I asked Jesus to come into my life. I can still remember going to the front of the church where there was an altar. As I talked to God I started crying. I felt so new. I went back to the meetings every night until they were over. And I brought everyone I could with me.

That November my daughter Bobbie Jo was born. During her time in the hospital she stopped breathing three times. Somehow each time the nurses were able to bring her back to life. I promised God that if He would let her live, I would raise her to know Him. She was released from the hospital twelve days later. I began studying the Bible. God became more real to me everyday.

I now had a desire to tell others about Jesus. Jesus had changed my life and I wanted others to know Him. There arose opportunities to start church services at the shows. God was working to get the services started. He provided the singers and speakers time and time again. Sometimes Bobbie Jo and I would sing. I would talk about things from the Bible at these church services. I had a great time learning more about God and telling others about Him. But being a Christian did not end all of my problems. Over the years I experienced many fantastic ups and tragic downs.

My mother was killed in a car accident. Later my Aunt also died. Both were alcohol related deaths. My son was sentenced to jail the same week I got a divorce from Bob. (My son finally got his life turned around in jail. He was released after a few months). The more problems I had to face the more Jesus Christ became real to me.

I have learned that the purpose of life and real fulfillment is simple. I came to realize that I was created to worship God and to tell others about Him. This makes life so simple. He is there to encourage, comfort, guide and walk with me each step of the way. His love and power have helped me face all of life's challenges. I have gone from a self-sufficient person to one who depends on Christ for everything. I look forward to the future. I know that no matter what else happens, God's love and peace cannot be taken from me. I'm so blessed and thankful to be one of God's children!! I have made peace with Him through His son Jesus Christ.