

Jeff Reitz Life Story

primarily taken from Jeff's testimony written by him and shared Feb 6, 2005. Additional fill-in content added from notes given to his faithful caregiver Vicki Read from 2019 through 2020

I was born at a very early age, on July 30th 1931 to be exact, with the given name 'Gerald Keith', born into a very poor family.

Rom. 5:3 says "... we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience."
My early life of tribulation, I believe, was preparation for later life.

I came from what would be referred to today as a dis-functional home.
I am the youngest of six children (but another brother, Richard, died when he was just a day or two old).
The house that I grew up in didn't have electricity or indoor plumbing so we had an outhouse and our well was close to the back door for drawing water for baths. Even so it was always two kids at a time in the tub on bath nights. Winters were cold.

My brothers and I would warm up a brick in the fire and wrap it in a towel and put it in our bed, but it didn't help much. Our room was so cold there would be frost on the window for us to write our names in. And if it snowed, since the windows weren't sealed, we'd actually have snow in our room when the wind blew. The house would be so cold that the common drinking bucket downstairs would often have a layer of ice on it in the morning.

In order to keep a fire going during the day and at night (again, no electricity), we would have to put coal on top of the wood to keep it going all night long (this is called banking the fire). Keeping the supply of wood to make sure we could keep the fire going, was a lot of work and me and my brothers had to keep the wood supplied inside the house. We'd make sure we had the wood inside before it got dark because we couldn't see our hands in front of our faces at night. Being a young child, my imagination would run wild worrying about animals being outside that we couldn't see.

But as cold as it was in the winter, it was equally as hot in our house in the summer. Scorching hot. There was very little ventilation and no cross breeze upstairs between my and my brother's room, and that of our sisters, as they would not leave their door open.

We always had a large garden in the summer, and we all had to work it daily to keep it weeded. It was very hard work for a little guy like myself, but my dad made me keep working. We always planted potatoes and always on Good Friday and then we'd plant the root vegetables in the dark of the moon and the plants that grow above ground, like tomatoes, we'd plant in the light of the moon.

One time, and I was quite little, while planting potatoes I started getting sick to my stomach and went to sit down in the shade for a few minutes. But that was unacceptable to my dad, he yelled at me and made me go back into the garden. This incident (and others) made me determined to never treat my children in the same way.

We used The Farmer's Almanac for all planting for timing and method. One time when I was about eight years old, my older brother thought up the idea that if he connected me and my other brother to the cultivator, we could pull this machine through the fields to cultivate the dirt like horses. To my dad it didn't matter how the ground got turned up, just that it did.

There was not a lot of food to be had at our house. I was an early riser, and would get up before everyone else, go up the hill to the mulberry trees, pick a bowl of mulberries and have them for breakfast. The trees were in a sand pit. I will always remember the snakes that would get trapped and unable to get out of the pit.

A normal breakfast would be oatmeal or cream of wheat with canned milk (we didn't have a refrigerator). Sometimes we would have cornmeal mush though, and that was a treat. My mom would soak the cornmeal and mix in an egg bake it in a bread pan, then slice it and fry it. Sometimes we had eggs for

breakfast but not often as we had to sell what our chickens produced, for money. Lunch that we took to school was a sandwich made out of moldy bread that had been intended for the pigs (mom would cut off the mold) and then spread it with a very watery elderberry jelly that mom had made. It was so thin that she held the bread on its' side so that the jelly could run off back into the jar and none would be wasted. The sandwich would go to school in a piece of paper tied up with string.

Dinner was usually fried potatoes, but on Sunday they were mashed, and we'd have some ground beef and mom would make beef gravy with it. We did have a turkey for Thanksgiving. We'd raise it and keep it inside the barn. One day when I was very little I went to the barn and the turkey started to attack me. Luckily, I found a way to get into the flatbed truck that was parked inside the barn and then yelled for help until someone heard me.

Everything was a hand me down and being the youngest child, I never had anything BUT hand me downs! Christmas giving usually consisted of one very small toy and a practical clothing item, but one Christmas stands out. A friend had invited me to go to church with him and his family and at the end of the service the pastor announced that if anyone didn't have a Christmas tree, they could take the tree from the church. I didn't raise my hand or say anything, but my friend's mom did, and we put the tree on top of the car and I got to take it home to my family. We strung popcorn for decorations – it was very exciting!

During this period, because of the war, we saved everything. We saved string and aluminum foil – even foil from chewing gum and from cigarette boxes, and then we would turn it in at a place that collected it for the war effort. Nothing was wasted. We also had gas rations and shared rides with others to maximize all of our rations. My dad would even straighten out nails from a structure he'd have to tear down so that they could be used on another project.

Because of our lot in life, we never went anywhere when I was young as a family. (I never went to the zoo until I took my own children many years later). But when I was in the fifth grade, in Miss Mitten's class I got to take a bus into Detroit to play in a rhythm band on radio station WJR, and it was a BIG deal. I played the bell. We were chosen the best in all of Wayne County.

Because of my low self-esteem, I was never able to tell anyone what to do. Besides all this my mother always told me "don't fight don't fight". However, it wasn't enough to keep me from engaging in some pretty serious fights with an unrelenting bully. This led to however, the only time I can remember my dad standing up for me. When the bully's father came to our house to complain about his son's messed up shirt, my dad pointed out that he never cared when it was my shirt that was messed up, pointed to the street and told him to leave. I thought for sure he would lash out at me when the man had left, but he never said a thing. The bullying experiences were hard, but as hard as they were, I believe, they were used by God to soften my heart.

I never told anyone at home what to do either. That included our dog, a German Shepherd named 'Prince'. My mother was a heavy woman and couldn't run so when she would get after me for anything I would run and the dog would catch me by the pant cuff and hold me til my mother came. One day I was throwing pebbles at him. When I decided to go in the house he grabbed me by the arm, it hurt enough that I immediately dropped to my knees. Although he never broke the skin, he was telling me that he too was my boss.

My dad was crazy about Prince and when Prince got older, 14 or 15, he got sick but my dad couldn't bring himself to shoot him, so he took him to a neighbor and asked him to shoot the dog and put him out of his misery. My brother and I were the ones who had to bury him after watching the neighbor shoot him. This was very traumatic for me.

When I was about 11 years old, I got a job with a lady about a mile away from my house. The job was supposed to be tending her garden, but it turned out it was cleaning out the chicken coop. The smell was so strong that it almost made me pass out. My pay was \$1.00 a day and because my mom had no money of her own (except for the little money she made by crocheting doilies and selling them to the 5 and 10 store after riding the bus into Wyandotte), I gave her half of my earnings.

However, in spite of all the simplicity of the way that we lived, my brothers and sisters and I never thought of ourselves as poor.

I share these things just to give an idea of the atmosphere in which I grew up. There was much work and hardship, and very little love or playing (although I was pretty good at marbles). I do remember my dad playing ball with the older kids, but I never remember him playing with me.

I was the least of the least, at least in my own eyes. I grew up feeling that my father never had an interest in anything I was doing or where my life was heading. He never asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up or about any interest that I had. He was very detached. And my dad was tough. He was very strict and not very loving. But I knew that my mother loved me.

If my father told you to sit down you were lucky if there was a chair there. While a young boy I wanted so much to please my dad. But it was inevitable, I could not. If I drew a picture, or anything else I did, he might have said that's alright- "BUT".

I remember asking him to tie my shoes and his response was "tie your own blankety blank shoes". So I went crying to my sister, and asked her to teach me. Understand I wasn't slow or anything, I just never was shown. She was patient with me. I tied and untied them many times until I had it down pat. I then went to show my dad my accomplishment. Only to hear him say "you leave those blankety blank shoes tied". I then went off and cried some more.

My self-esteem was very low. I would throw pity parties, and no one came. You know, it was like how can anything I do make any difference in anyway. All of my early life I had a persecution complex. I believe now that if you think you have a problem "you have a problem".

Going to school was difficult because all through grade school I was the shortest kid in my grade, except for brief periods when I would pass this one girl. Only to have her pass me back up soon.

My given name is 'Gerald' but growing up I was short and chubby and I got bullied a lot. My brother Kenny and I were given nicknames by some of the kids. Kenny's was 'Mutt' and my nickname was 'Jeff' – based on a popular cartoon at the time. And 'Jeff' stuck with me.

When I went to Wyandotte Roosevelt High I was probably the 5th smallest one with an enrollment of 2000. Most of those were girls. The only thing I had going for me was I was pretty good in school and the other kids would come to me for answers. What a way to strive for excellence huh? And by the way I dropped out of school when I turned 16. You could do that then.

When I was in my middle teens my dad began to ease up on discipline. But I was fortunate I never got in serious trouble. Now that I'm older I am thankful that my dad was too tough as opposed to being too lenient. No, I wish he hadn't been that tough, BUT some verses from the Word of God that have encouraged me are:

Psa. 119:66 Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands.

Psa. 119:67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.

Psa. 119:68 You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.

And don't you know we relate often how a heavenly father is by what our earthly father was. My earthly father, among other things, was a Jew hater, and used to curse the Jews. And for those who may not know that means God curses those who curse them. When I found that in the Bible I made a genuine effort to bless them. I see now that God put people in my life during my childhood to help me find my way to Him.

Jack & Wilma English used to pick up my brother and I, we'd sit in the rumble seat of their car and they would take us to the Christian and Missionary Church in Wyandotte (before the church was located on Eureka). Much later in life, after maturing in my faith, I was driving down the road one day and noticed Wilma English's name on the sign outside a funeral home. I stopped in and was able to encourage their family by telling them the difference that their parents had made in my life. There were others like the English's who kept me from total despair and I'm so grateful for their obedience to God's calling.

My mother (who was unchurched) used to say God talks to us with thunder. Well maybe not everybody- but he talked to me one night in a violent storm. I knew He was talking to me. No doubt about it. I knew enough about the Bible to know I wasn't living for God and I should be. I went out and bought a Bible and began to read it. This wasn't the giving of my heart to Christ, but it was a definite step He used to take me in that direction.

As a high school student, I had \$2.00 a week for expenses. \$1.00 was for bus fare and the other I usually spent on a pops or sweet treats. One last-day-of-the-week, I only had enough money left for the bus and I really wanted a soda and sweet. So, after some thought I decided to get the treat and hitchhike home.... Unfortunately, no one picked me up and I ended up walking seven or eight miles to get home. I learned the value of the cost of a bottle of pop over an eight-mile hike!

Besides pop and sweets, I also like to roller skate and skated often, sometimes three times a week at the Mayflower Roller Rink. I skated up until I met Nan (who became my wife) when I was about 28 years old. Nan was an ice skater and used to skate behind Wyandotte Hospital, but I couldn't ice skate.

In my teens and early twenties I began to yearn to be married and have kids. I would dream of things I would like in my marriage. Four kids, some place where I could have a garden in the country. A place where 4 kids could play. Someone that would love me, and I would love her. Well the places I hung around, in some of my earlier life I never would have found someone like that there. When I bought that Bible and began reading it. Things began changing. Not a Christian yet, but I started to change direction.

My older sister married a lay preacher and for a week during the summer I would go and stay with them. They also had an influence on my life. And because I had read the Bible it seemed that when I started getting away from God, I would realize I was headed in the wrong direction and turn back. But our neighbor across the street, who had opened his own business took me under his wing and began to mentor me, even encouraging me to find new friends who would not negatively influence me. And I listened to his advice.

When I was about 22 I went to a meeting house downriver and a young lady named Anne asked me to dance. I told her that I couldn't dance and compared myself to a cow with a crutch. But she said that the next week she was going to get me out on the dance floor – and she did. Her simple act of friendship and kindness was a huge confidence builder.

I met my wife Nannette at the Courtesy Drive-In on Biddle Ave in Trenton in 1959. Nan asked me what kind of work I was doing- I told her I was installing fences. She told me her dad needed a fence installed. After going with Nan for about two years we were married in 1961 a week after she graduated from Eastern Michigan University.

Our first son Ron was born in 1963, Lynnette in 1965, Cheryl in 1967, Anna in 1969 and Rich in 1973.

When we had just two children I ran into a wall as far as my future looked. I never seemed to find the job that satisfied, with love for the work, good hours and sufficient pay. And I didn't really have huge goals. The last job I had I was selling screw machine parts on commission.

They had two locations, the other location received all the good stock. One night after coming home from a sales meeting where they pressured me to sell more (with nothing to sell) I told Nan we were starting our own business. She said "No we aren't". After some convincing she got on board. So, in 1966 with \$1250, a pickup truck and a pencil I decided to go into business. This was the birth of Detroit Automatic Tooling. The warehouse was my one car garage, and the office was our kitchen table.

In 1967 at the church we attended we had a visiting Evangelist preaching. He was big and he was loud. He didn't need a microphone. All I know was he was talking right to me. Nan and I went and knelt at the altar at the front of the church and gave our hearts to Jesus. I however thought I could handle the wallet. God never let me have rest in that. So finally I said OK OK. And let me tell you before that time, my car knew exactly how much I made. At pay day we would pay the bills and have a little money left over. Only to find out the car needed fixing. And guess how much it cost. At least what was left over.

Just to encourage you who are struggling, God let urgency come before His rescue. I used to pick up usable parts from scrap yards. On this one occasion I was ready to go ask for my old job back, because poverty was at the door. I went into the scrap yard and while looking around, saw 14 matched lathe chucks (parts). They would come in sets of 6 or 8 and be more valuable. I asked how much they wanted for them, they said \$20 more than I had in my wallet. I told the guy what I had and he said he would give them all to me for that. I turned around and sold them immediately for \$700 to another dealer. If that sale hadn't happened I would have been out of business. God provided.

On another occasion while struggling in the early days of being in business, the purchasing manager of one of my customers told me to write up a fictitious invoice for \$500 and he would approve it. I don't know if he expected a cut of the money, but because of my faith in God I knew it was wrong and I refused the offer. I've found that God trusts us with our money if we take care of it. He will start out small and increase it as we prove ourselves. Had I failed by accepting the \$500 offer maybe God wouldn't have increased the later blessings He brought me.

Around this time Ron needed to be registered for kindergarten. We hadn't registered yet, and right before we were going to, we received a mailing from a Christian school (Inter-City) letting us know they had a few openings left for kindergarten. We didn't have enough money to pay the tuition, but we trusted that God was going to have to do what we couldn't. Consequently, none of our kids went to public school. I don't want to give us credit at all, and I mean that sincerely. But praise to His name He was more than sufficient for our needs. And He used the children's schooling to draw us to Himself. Nan and I didn't become strong in our walk with Christ until after our children were born and in Inter-City Christian School

There was a time when I felt that I should be a minister, but then discovered that my passion and gifting was teaching. And I loved teaching the adult and young adult class at The Wyandotte Alliance Church. The lessons at that time were in Revelation. My daughter Lynn and her husband Mark were in the class. She said, "Dad" I think we should spend as much time as needed to do justice to it. In teaching Revelation, it causes you to grow, or the opposite. We got to the place where Judgements were falling, and I made a comment that I never will forget. "Some of us might think God is dealing too harshly with people," like as if we are more compassionate than God. The next day we unexpectedly lost Lynn.

These are some of the things that happened. Pastor Miller called at work and said Mark and I needed to come. I asked why and he just said we needed to come. When we got there, there was a Christian policeman, who broke the news. At the cemetery there was a Christian. Both of which we needed a bunch.

I now can say God's grace is sufficient. Those were flat out difficult times. And there still are times of difficulty. Whenever I talk of those times or talk about Lynn I get wet eyed. She was only 22 years old and left behind her husband and our eight week old grandson. The cause of death was never determined for sure, but it was suspected to have been due to possibly a brain aneurysm.

I wouldn't choose many of the things God has given for me to bare. And if I knew those things were optional I wouldn't raise my hand. Like, after these things I testified in church, and remember stating "what if God wanted another one of my daughters."

Next door to where we lived on King Road, we had girls about 9 or 10 that used to come over often and I would give them rides on the tractor. They would come by and sit on the back steps and we'd talk. They sheepishly said to me "we aren't supposed to come over because you guys are grieving." I said no, no it's OK because we need to keep on loving you. One of them said, funny that you say that because yesterday my father punished me and made me go to my room. And I was thinking, "at least Mr Reitz loves me."

Oh, that we would find a way to love these kids that are uncared for and unloved. Kids that feel like I did growing up. They need to know God loves them. Who is going to tell them, and many others that don't know our Savior?

Some time later I talked of how God sent his Son to die for us. One of those girls with tears in her eyes said "I would die for you Mr Reitz". I said "but would you die for someone who was very bad?" She shook her head no. I then had the opportunity to tell her about Jesus and how He gave His life for the sins of the whole world – even the 'worst of sinners'.

And for the next 2 years after Lynn's death, I never had so many opportunities to witness. As people would ask questions, the door was flung wide open.

Shortly after all of these events a Pastor and friend asked me if I would preach at his church. He at that time would have people from all walks of life tell about their walk with Christ. Well Pastor Joe knew the circumstances in our lives and told me I could talk about whatever God put on your heart. So I told our story and continued to remind them from this experience that God's GRACE was sufficient. Well some 6 weeks later Pastor Joe called to tell me that one of his members, a 38 year old woman sitting at the kitchen table dropped over dead. Nothing had been known to be wrong with her. And her husband said to Pastor Joe, "if Jeff said God's GRACE is sufficient I'm going to trust Him for it." Now who is it that could say God wasn't preparing a lot of previous things in my life and others for that occasion. That His Kingdom might be increased.

Some time after I spoke in Pastor Joe's church, I was talking to a business friend from IL. I asked how things were and he began to tell me some years ago he was divorced and his son blamed him so much that he wouldn't even talk to him. Well, they had reconciled, and the son was even working with the father who owned the business. The son was engaged, then his son's fiance dumped him- he couldn't handle it so he committed suicide. This man too was considering the same. After a long talk I said I would send him a copy of what I spoke about. He and I talked every so often and he seemed to understand God cared. Recently I had occasion to talk again. He is doing fine, yet I don't know for sure if he is born again.

I'm reminded of the story of Joseph and all that he endured, and yet in Genesis 50:20 his testimony is: "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive."

Listen folks Lynn has a new address, and I know her address. And I shall see her later on.

Someone might say, what do you know about hard times or hard things. I would be able to say "Well let me tell you." As we stand before a Holy God we see our life and the lives of others unfolding as God uses people and circumstances to accomplish His good will. If we will allow Him, God will use our suffering to speak into the lives of others and bring them comfort.

This poem was sent to me during our dark night of grief and meant so much, it's called "God's Loan":

GOD'S LOAN

I'll lend you for a little time, a child of mine He said.
For you to love while she lives, and mourn for when she's dead.
It may be six or seven years, or twenty two or three,
But, will you, 'till I call her back, take care of her for me?
She'll bring her charms to gladden you. And should her stay be brief,
You'll have her lovely memories as solace for your grief.
I cannot promise she will stay, since all from earth return.
But there are lessons taught down there that I want her to learn.
I've looked this wide world over in my search for teachers true.
And from the throngs that crowd life's lanes I have selected you.
Now will you give her all your love, and not think the labor vain?
Nor hate me when I come to call to take her back again.
I fancied that I heard them say "dear Lord thy will be done".
For all the joy thy child shall bring, the risk of grief we'll run.
We'll shelter her with tenderness. We'll love her while we may.
And for the happiness we've known, forever grateful stay
But should the angels call for her much sooner than we'd planned.
We'll brave the bitter grief that comes, and try to understand.

Edgar A. Guest

In reality, God is the only one who can take a life and restore it later for all eternity. If we could we would master death. However the only one that has mastered death is our Lord Jesus Christ. He was victorious over sin and death so that we might have life eternal.

For it is God who gives life to the dead and call things that are not as though they were (Romans 4:17).

It is my desire that God will enable me to live my life, with all of the heartache, suffering and imperfection that is part of my story, in such a way that brings glory to His name and allows me to speak His love into the lives of others - that the affect of my life might be what Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed when he said:

When you were born, you were crying and everyone
around you was smiling. Live your life so that when
you die, you are the one who is smiling and everyone
around you is crying.
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

I leave you with this that the great evangelist Dwight Moody said when he was in his final illness.
Remember this when you hear someday that I've departed this earth. He said:

"Some day you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody of East Northfield, is dead (or Jeff Reitz of Romulus, Michigan). Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now; I shall have gone up higher, that is all, out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal—a body that death cannot touch, that sin cannot taint; a body fashioned like unto His glorious body....That which is born of the flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit will live forever."

God will redeem my life from the grave; He will surely take me to Himself.
Psalm 49:15