

### My Life with God

William Murray is the son of the infamous atheist, Madalyn Murray O'Hair. In his childhood, he was used by his mother as the catalyst to help bring about a godless environment in our public schools. As a result of the lawsuit in 1963, public Bible reading and prayer were done away by a Supreme Court decision. Amazingly, Bill Murray not only recanted of his atheism, but converted to Christianity. Later he wrote the book entitled "My Life without God."

My personal history is quite the opposite. All I ever knew was a life with God. Allow me to reminisce in these next few lines of what that means, what that looks like.

#### **1. I was a "prenatal" Baptist.**

I went to a Baptist church nine months before I was born. Doctors agree that fairly early on, a child hears in his mother's womb. We know John the Baptist heard before he was born because the Bible says, "*For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy*" (Luke 1:44). Only the Lord knows when I first heard the first mention of the name of Jesus through my dad's preaching or my mother's voice singing praise to His name. I can say with the song writer, Lela B. Long, "There have been names that I have loved to hear, But never has there been a name so dear to this heart of mine, as the name divine, The precious, precious name of Jesus. Jesus is the sweetest name I know."

I was born in the Baptist Hospital in Little Rock, Arkansas. It was a hot July night when I was born and with the absence of air-conditioning they had opened the window for some fresh air to ventilate. Mom said it was Prayer Meeting night and the last thing she remembered was hearing the Baptist church across the alley singing, "Just As I Am" before I was born. You might say, I responded to the invitation and came just as I was. My Father was preaching a revival meeting in a Baptist church the night I was born.

#### **2. I played church.**

Little girls play house, little boys play war games but we often played church. This is all we knew. When it was time to play, my older brother David always announced, "I'm the preacher!" The neighbor boy said, "I'm the song leader!" Then they would both look at me and say, "Johnny, you're the sinners!" If they were feeling more magnanimous they would tell me I was the congregation. I never looked around to see whom my brother was talking to in his discourses. It was me, "the sinners!" One day I tired of being the collective sinners, so when David yelled he was the preacher and the neighbor kid hollered he was the song leader, I thought I would get ahead of the game so I shouted, "And I'm God!" My father was at the top of the stairs when I made my newly found status known. He brought me upstairs and directly "knocked all the deity out of me." I humorously say, I've never tried to play God again.

Although I joke about those days, I do remember coming under conviction to be baptized after I was saved because once we were playing church and my brother had called a business meeting and when I raised my hand to vote, he said, “Johnny, you cannot vote because you are not a member; why, you haven’t even been baptized.”

### **3. Everything and everyone pointed me to Jesus.**

Jesus said, *“Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein”* (Mark 10:15). A child is so believing, a child is so trusting. When my dad held up the Bible and said, “This is the Word of God,” I believed him. When my parents told me Jesus loved me, I believed them. When my parents told me Christ died for me, I believed them. When my dad said, “Jesus is coming soon,” I believed him. I recall so vividly playing in the back yard of the parsonage of First Baptist of District Heights, Maryland and seeing beautiful clouds moving fast through the sky and I remembered Dad preaching, *“Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen”* (Revelation 1:7). The fear of God was arresting my heart and I became most concerned to be in right relationship with Jesus. Mother’s flannel-graph lessons from the Bible were used of God to bring me to Christ.

I had just turned six years old when Billy Graham was preaching in Madison Square Garden in New York; it was the summer of 1957. Television was just beginning its burgeoning influence on our culture and we were doing very well to receive two of the three channels available, ABC, CBS, and NBC. Historian, Uta Andrea Balbier said, “From the third week of the New York Crusade on, the ABC-TV Network covered the crusade on Saturday evenings for an entire hour from coast to coast. The television ratings for the event were so high that ABC rebroadcast parts of it on seventeen evenings.” This preempted all other viewing in the Pope household. I remember so well sitting in front of the TV filled with wonder -- Cliff Barrows leading the singing, George Beverly Shea singing “How Great Thou Art,” and Ethel Waters making her debut at her first of many years with Dr. Graham and singing for the first time, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” The mesmerizing moment came for this yet unconverted little boy when Billy Graham preached. I could not take my eyes off him. Our room was dimly lit, my family silently surrounded me and oh, how I was moved as he threw his hand to the small of his back, curl his Bible in one hand and fearlessly throw his other hand to the sky and spoke of Christ in unmitigated authority. This longing for Christ intensified until just a couple of months later I committed my heart and soul to Christ for the rest of my life at the age of six.

### **4. I surrendered to the family business.**

I entertained my family when I was only five by imitating Elvis Presley. I was never impressed with him like my sister, but I did enjoy the attention I received by doing “Hound Dog.” The British invasion of rock-n-roll was what really caught my attention. My veering from the straight and narrow did not last long. My dad gave me orders: if I were to use the guitar, it would be for Christ.

Dad assigned me my first special in church, “The Wonder of It All.” Mom told me men would let me down; I needed to look to Jesus, He would never let me down and He has never let me down or disappointed me. So at the age of eighteen I began to preach and can say I have been caught up with the wonder of Jesus for these many years. I am doing what my dad, two of my uncles and my two great-grandfathers did; I preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Word of God. Dad believes our line of preachers goes back to Jeremiah Pope a Blue-stocking Presbyterian minister living in what is now Northern Ireland, who in 1739 wrote an entire commentary of the Bible. It’s great to be in the family business! *“Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ”* (Ephesians 3:8).

My life with God has been a grand and glorious journey. By God’s grace, I have lived a charmed life. God has been good to us! I married Miss Barbara Wright, a deacon’s daughter reared in just as Christian environment as I was reared in. We reared our children with no regrets in the same environment in which we were reared.

I would not change this influence for anything in the world! I would add this one word, especially to you who were placed in the same atmosphere of faith: It is not real until it’s personal. If you have not already, please make it personal. We must all answer the question that Pilate asked, *“...What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?...”* (Matthew 27:22). Come, join us and enjoy this same life with God!

-Pastor Pope-