

## Aunt Bessie

When we think of a loved one who has gone to be with the Lord, their personal mannerisms often bring them to life in our memories. But their real impact on us usually comes from the basic values that drove and shaped their lives.

As I recall my childhood visits to Aunt Bessie, I remember her nervous hands. While reciting the current situations of a thousand unheard-of relatives, she would either drum her fingers on the arms of her recliner or lean forward and fidget with them in front of her.

Even to a child, her attitude toward the growing complexity around her seemed simple and uncomplicated. Foreign words were no problem: *café* rhymed with *safe*. And when the bad guys tried to sneak up on the good guys on television, what else would a good citizen do? She warned them—in full voice—while muttering her theories about their wicked schemes (usually the communists were to blame).

I remember when she smiled, her warm, childlike personality spread all over her face. As far as I know, that smile never faded, though she lived more than 90 years. And if you needed anything, her heart and hands were wide open.

But her influence on our family is much deeper than such images. She was the oldest of 11 children; my dad was the youngest. When he was two, their mother died of tuberculosis. Their father worked day and night, fighting to save their farm during the Great Depression—a battle he eventually lost. Still a young woman, Bessie willingly became mother to a brood of younger brothers and sisters.

She could only do so much with them under the circumstances, and as you can imagine, they didn't always take her too seriously. As a result, my father grew up like a wild weed, largely unsupervised. Even in his later years, he spoke of his youthful years with regret, leaving most of the stories untold, even to his family.

But Bessie kept the younger kids in church. On Wednesday nights, a bribe was necessary. If my dad would make the two-mile walk with her to prayer meeting and back, she would buy him a treat on the way home.

To most people, that may have seemed like a terrible investment—buying sweets for an unruly and unappreciative boy when her family was struggling for economic survival. But when Dad testified about his conversion as a young adult, he credited Bessie's faithfulness.

Though she never married, my family still enjoys the fruit of her unselfish love and simple faithfulness.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. (Hebrews 12:1, NIV)*

Aunt Bessie reminds me that the gospel that is growing within me right now has been handed down from heart to heart and hand to hand for two millennia, like a baton in a relay race. One day when all things are revealed and I can trace my relay team clear back to Jesus, I wonder how many Aunt Bessies I will find—unknowns who carried the baton through some pretty rough going. How many small acts of daily faithfulness were vital links in a chain of life reaching thousands through the centuries?

I must also ask how many generations yet unborn will eat the fruit of my life-style, my values, my habits. In the face of conflicting pressures, it's easy to forget which issues are crucial and which are insignificant. But my children and their children's children will either be enriched or impoverished by those decisions. Their lives will feel the difference.

Most of all, as I think of Aunt Bessie, I want my children to understand that they are never alone. They are surrounded by generations of loved ones who have invested in them. When they are truly successful, they reap what many others have sowed—others who now share their joy. And when they fail, the lives of their spiritual mentors call out in encouragement and hope, assuring them that the Lord's mercy never tires, and His faithfulness is new every morning.

The Lord stands with us right now, face-to-face and heart-to-heart. As we realize His presence and simply trust Him, our weakness becomes His strength. Our inconsistency is swallowed up in His faithfulness. And our feeble response of faith blooms into His harvest of lives and hearts and peoples and nations.

*Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Revelation 5:13, NIV).*