

The Agony of Serving Others

How One Person Found Hope in Rejection

by Jeanette A. Stewart

Paul's experience in discipling others makes it clear that there will be times when we invest in the lives of new Christians and they reject us. How can we cope with the rejection and disappointment we feel under these circumstances?

Jeanette Stewart and her husband, Bill, are a gifted lay couple who work with medical students on the campus of a large, South-eastern medical school. Dr. Stewart, a professor at the medical school, is currently authoring a textbook in his field of surgery. Jeanette pursues a ministry of discipling women. They have a wealth of experience in equipping medical students, nurses and doctors for a lifestyle of ministry.

Although we had been meeting together in a discipleship relationship for almost a year, Judy's spiritual growth had been slow and erratic. Sometimes I wondered whether I had made any difference at all in her life. When I thought back on all the time and emotional energy I had invested, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of disappointment.

When we first met, I was excited with the prospect of building into her life. Although a believer, she had little knowledge of the scriptures, and couldn't articulate the essentials of faith in Christ. Yet she seemed eager to learn, and I felt privileged to be her teacher.

We began meeting weekly, and as the months passed her commitment to Christ seemed to deepen.

I spent hours with her, teaching her the scriptures, answering her many questions, and providing her with biblically based responses to life's many dilemmas. For a time she lived with my husband and me in our home, eagerly experiencing every detail of a Christian lifestyle.

But Judy's demeanor slowly began to change. One day Judy chose to leave us and return to her previous environment, one that was fraught with the temptations that had overcome her in the past. It seemed as if she were making a conscious choice to rebel against the God she was coming to know.

I began to wonder if my efforts toward her had been worthwhile. I had spent more time discipling Judy than any previous individual, yet ultimately she seemed to respond less. Discouraged, I began to wonder about others who had faced situations similar to mine. Had they ever been discouraged?

I remembered Paul's experience. When he was imprisoned he wrote to Timothy and said: "All those in Asia have turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes" (2 Timothy 1:15). And again Paul said, "for Demas [Paul's co-worker] has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (4:10). I wasn't alone, Paul also experienced the disappointment of people who rejected him after he had invested in their lives.

But I remembered another story that rushed vividly to mind; it too brought me hope and encourage-



ment. It is the story of a woman named Mrs. Edwards and her next door neighbor, a girl named Ella.

Life was less than ideal when Mrs. Edwards first met Ella. Britain was embroiled in war with Germany. Necessities were rationed and the shadows of German planes loaded with their bombs cast a dark gloom over daily life.

Not only was her country in turmoil, but Mrs. Edwards also faced a difficult home situation. Mr. Edwards was housebound with a debilitating illness. Their son was only a few months old. It took little imagination for Mrs. Edwards to remember happier times.

In spite of all her problems, Mrs. Edwards couldn't help but notice Ella, the young girl living next door. She knew that Ella's father had died years ago. The financial struggles which ensued forced her mother to send all nine children to an orphanage to live. Ella, the youngest, had only recently been released from the children's home and moved back to her mother's care.

Ella's life was bleak. Her mother paid her little attention. Her brothers seemed reckless and wild, and she had few opportunities for fun. At age fifteen she already held a full time job, contributing her entire income to the household budget. Despite these problems, Mrs. Edwards saw in Ella a needy and potentially receptive heart. She decided to approach her with the message of the gospel.

Time after time Ella rebuffed Mrs. Edwards' approaches. Ella would think to herself, "Mrs. Edwards wouldn't be so bad if she would just quit talking about all that religious stuff!" Ultimately Ella denied any interest in spiritual things although she did respond to Mrs. Edwards small tokens of friendship. The homemade cookies and pies gave Ella ample reason to drop in!

Mrs. Edwards prayed consis-

tently for Ella's heart to become receptive to spiritual truths.

One day Ella announced to Mrs. Edwards that she and her family were getting ready to move to the other side of Liverpool. Mrs. Edwards couldn't believe her ears. "Oh Lord, what now? How can this young woman move away before she comes to know You? How should I approach her now?"

Mrs. Edwards considered her next approach. She remembered Ella's love for music. Nightly meetings with special music were scheduled at her church in the coming week. She decided to invite Ella.

She prayed as she knocked on Ella's front door. "Dear Lord, please let this be the time she will respond." Mrs. Edwards was greeted by Mrs. Fletcher, Ella's mother. After exchanging niceties, she told why she had come. "I know this is a hectic time for you, but I wondered if you could spare Ella on Sunday. I would just love to take her to church with me before you move away."

From a nearby room Ella could hear Mrs. Edwards. "Thank goodness Mother will have the sense to say no to that religious fanatic," she said to herself. "Soon we'll live in a new neighborhood, free from her persistence!" Suddenly she couldn't believe what she heard. "I think it's fine for Ella to accompany you to church just this once. I'll tell her to be ready on time."

Sunday night finally arrived. As Mrs. Edwards had hoped, Ella enjoyed the music. However, she showed no response to the gospel message; in fact she seemed more antagonistic than usual. Undaunted, Mrs. Edwards invited her to come again. "How would I get there?" asked Ella, making the first excuse that came into her mind. Mrs. Edwards' preparations caught her off guard. "Here's the schedule of bus connections from your new home to the church. I'll meet you at the bus stop."

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Mrs. Edwards continued to pray for Ella. She didn't really expect her to come to church again. Imagine her surprise when she saw Ella descending the steps of the bus! Ella had returned to church for reasons that she couldn't explain. "I just felt I had to come," was the only answer she could muster. Sensing God's work in Ella's heart, Mrs. Edwards continued to pray. Several weeks later Ella accepted Christ as her personal Savior. But, that was just the beginning!

When Ella told her family of her new found faith, they were incensed! How dare she "get religious!" Her wild brothers antagonized her at every turn. They tried to make her life as miserable as possible. One day Ella came to Mrs. Edwards in tears. "I just can't take any more. I think I am going to leave home," she confided.

An idea came to Mrs. Edwards mind: perhaps she could invite Ella to live in her home. No sooner had she thought this than she began to doubt the feasibility of her notion. "My husband is sick, my baby is small, there's hardly enough money to meet our own expenses; how can we ask Ella to stay with us?" Nevertheless she mentioned the idea to her husband. That next week Ella had moved in!

Ella loved her new life. She had never imagined a peaceable home governed by Scriptural principles; now she lived in one. She spent many evenings with the Edwards, huddled around the kitchen table studying the Bible, asking questions, and devouring biblical truths. For the first time, she began to grow spiritually!

Ella stayed with the Edwards for almost a year before she returned to her mother's home. When she went back she was able to defend her faith and to conduct herself with wisdom toward her family. Although they still occasionally made fun, they had gained a new respect for her as they saw

the seriousness of her commitment to Christ.

She continued to attend church with Mrs. Edwards. Several years later she met and married a fine Christian man. They brought great joy to Mrs. Edwards as she watched them establish a Christian home and begin to use their house as a base for ministering to others. Mrs. Edwards had provided a model which Ella had adopted as her own. Through her devotion to hospitality, Ella was seeing people come to Christ and grow in the faith.

"Yes, discipleship is worth the effort," I thought.

Although discouraged with Judy, I remembered the words of the Scriptures which must have provided encouragement to Mrs. Edwards as well. God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah affirmed: "So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth. It shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

I was more encouraged about Judy, realizing that evangelism and discipleship are both a process that I can participate in, but God is responsible for the results.

After all, if Mrs. Edwards had given up her faithful efforts with Ella, I would never have been able to minister to Judy in the first place.

You see, Ella is my mother. □

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