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Foreword by Pastors Robert and Debbie Morris

# 8 IS ENOUGH

A True Story of Life, Death,  
Faith, Hope...  
+ Love



Shannon Alford



## **DEDICATION**

*This book is dedicated to my brother, Michael, and my sister-in-law, Stacey, who loved their six children and each other. Although they went to be with the Lord earlier than expected, they are now reunited with their son, Daniel, who died from a heart defect. I know they are glad to see him and will be equally excited to have all their children together again someday. We love and miss you both!*

# **8** IS ENOUGH

A True Story of Life, Death,  
Faith, Hope... + *Love*

**Shannon Alford**

**CREATION  
HOUSE**

## Chapter 1

### KNOW HIM

**I**T WAS A typical Thursday morning in May as my two boys, Si and Austin, stumbled out of bed, quickly dressed for school, and ran downstairs to fight over who would eat the last of the toasted waffles. Just as I yelled up the staircase for my daughter, Brooke, to come down and eat, the phone rang. It was only a few minutes after seven. *Who could be calling this early in the morning?*

I answered the phone and heard the anguished sound of my mom crying on the other end. I couldn't understand a word she was saying. I stepped out of the kitchen and went into my bedroom where I could calm her without alarming the children.

"Mom, take a deep breath and start over," I whispered.

"Oh, Shannon," she sobbed, "Stacey had a heart attack in the middle of the night and passed away."

Immediately I fell to the floor and wept. I couldn't believe what I had just heard. All I could think about was the commitment my husband and I had made to my brother three years earlier, just before he'd died of cancer. We had promised that if anything ever happened to his wife, Stacey, we would take all five of their children.

I had three children of my own, so in my thinking, three plus five equaled *8 Is Enough*.

How could this be happening, and what was I going to do?

Why is it that life is full of situations and circumstances that cause us to stop and ask for clear direction? God never intended for us to be separated from Him. In fact, it's when we are placed in difficult situations and our backs are against the wall that we realize we need a power higher than ours to make the right decisions in life. That's when we all want a God larger, stronger, and wiser than ourselves.

My husband, Sion, was in our home office, packing his briefcase for the one-hour drive to work when I told him about the call I'd just received from my mother.

"OK, Shannon," he said as he wrapped his arms around me. "The first thing we need to do is tell the children. Then I'll call the office and let them know what happened while you call the kids' schools and get someone to take your place in the carpool this morning. We'll leave as soon as we get everything into the car."

Si, Brooke, and Austin, ages fourteen, thirteen, and ten respectively, were as stunned as I was at the news that their Aunt Stacey had died. After all, it had only been

three years since they'd lost their Uncle Michael. Despite their shock and sadness, they were excited that they would soon get to be with their cousins, who ranged in age from four to fifteen.

Our family of five had converged several times each year in my hometown of Panama City, Florida, where both of my parents and my brother's family still lived. The eight cousins loved spending endless hours at the beach together, swimming in the beautiful Gulf waters, collecting shells, and building sand castles. My three children had no idea that their aunt's death meant we would all come together as one family.

The next hour was a whirlwind of activity at the Alford house as we gathered the clothing we'd need for the next week and packed our bags. I also gathered plenty of bottled water and snacks for the thirteen-hour drive from our home in Mansfield, Texas, to Panama City, Florida.

Once we pulled onto I-20 heading for Louisiana, my mind turned to the seemingly insurmountable list of things that needed to be taken care of and the decisions that had to be made. I knew my mom and dad would likely assist Stacey's mother with funeral arrangements. But how were the children going to deal with the events of the coming days?

After my brother's death, the children were devastated at losing their fun-loving father figure who had made their backyard seem like Wally World amusement park. Elizabeth, the oldest of my brother's children, was especially affected by his death because of the fond memories of her dad taking her with him to work and to run errands. Yet now, much of the responsibility of raising the children was placed heavily upon her shoulders.

Mary Catherine, the second oldest with the nickname MC given to her by her father, focused her attention on swimming competitively on a team, which pleased her mom. She coped with the grief of losing her dad by staying busy with friends.

Emily, the third child, as loving and tenderhearted as she was, had developed a bad case of middle child syndrome. Many situations left her feeling unloved and left out.

David was the only son since their brother, Daniel, had died at home ten days after his birth due to a heart defect. David was totally outnumbered by all of his sisters' estrogen-leveled chants of the motto "girls rule and boys drool." He had serious anger management issues and was often left helpless to defend himself.

Caroline, the baby of the family, was just two years old when her father passed away. She only knew him by pictures and the stories she'd heard about him from others.

All of this was racing through my mind as I thought of these five children and tried to imagine what the future looked like for them. Thankfully they had their grandparents, as well as several aunts and uncles on their mother's side of the family, who lived nearby. Yet each time I thought of seeing them face-to-face, my eyes would well up with tears.

It was then that I realized Sion and I would be putting into practice the years of teaching and hearing about prophetic praise—you know, the kind of praise that acknowledges God for what He's going to do on the basis of what you know about Him and His Word. God comforted us by reminding us of His Word in Romans 8:28:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” And in Jeremiah 29:11 we read, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

Sion and I didn’t want our kids to know we’d been designated as their cousins’ guardians, because we didn’t want to give them any false expectation. Worse yet, we certainly didn’t want them saying, “Guess what? You’re going to come live with us.” So we looked for opportunities to whisper under our breath as we drove, sharing various scenarios of possible logistics while Si, Brooke, and Austin were busy with music and games or napping.

After sixteen years of marriage Sion understood that I process information verbally, meaning I like to vocalize ideas and scenarios. I appreciated the fact that as Sion drove, he was allowing me to deal with what we were facing in my own way. I also appreciated the fact that once we had all of the information regarding Michael and Stacey’s wishes, including their will, he would become engaged and put his leadership skills to work.

As an executive pastor of one of the largest churches in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, Sion had oversight of scheduling and managing worship teams and musicians for more than thirty weekly events held at each of the church’s two area campuses. He had become an amazing budget-crunching administrator to a rapidly growing church body. This kind of leadership skill is not something that is acquired. One is born with it, and I love and appreciate this quality about him.

As we drove, I tried to wrap my head around the idea of how making the transition to a new life was going to work for all of us. Stacey’s kids would be out of school for summer break in just a week, but my kids still had three weeks of school remaining. At first we’d considered having Sion take our children back to Texas while I stayed in Florida to take care of my four nieces and one nephew, but since Sion had to drive one hour each way to and from work every day, we realized this was not a good plan. Besides, our children needed me at home to help them finish the school year.

All of this was going through my mind, and at the same time I was crying and wondering how Michael and Stacey’s kids were going to handle this terrible loss after all they’d already been through. David had stayed with us the previous summer, and I knew he already had a great deal of anger and frustration stemming from his father’s death. I wondered how he was going to process the loss of his mother. And then there were the potential group rivalries that could happen as a result of living under one roof—like five girls sharing the same bathroom.

At that point I began looking forward to a good night’s sleep.

We pulled into a gas station just outside of Panama City a few minutes after midnight. The kids were fast asleep, so I got out of the car and stood next to Sion while he pumped gas. Just as it occurred to me that I must be quite a sight after being in the car for thirteen tearful hours, Sion leaned over and kissed me.

“Happy anniversary,” he said with a smile.

*Happy anniversary? What is he talking about?* Then I realized it was now May 15, our seventeenth wedding anniversary.

“Happy anniversary to you too,” I said as I slipped my arms around his neck. Then I asked him, “Would you have married me if I’d told you we were going to be raising eight children?”

“No,” he said with as straight a face as I’d ever seen.

That’s when we both burst out laughing. We really needed the comic relief, because at that point the reality of what was about to happen was beginning to set in. Our family was never going to be the same. *Could we face the challenge of never again being just five, but now ten?*

When we returned to the car for the short drive to my mother’s house, I leaned my seat back, closed my eyes, and thought about the wonderful man who was seated next to me: my husband and the father of my children.



I first met Sion Augustus Alford IV during my junior year of high school. He was a young, tall, dark, and handsome pre-pharmacy student at Chipola Junior College with an offer to attend the University of Florida, home of the Gators, the following year. Sion played the piano for my local church youth group on Saturday nights. He was from Chipley, Florida, a small town fifty miles north of my hometown of Panama City.

One night, after talking with him for more than an hour after the youth fellowship, I went home and told my parents all about this wonderful young man. The first thing my mom asked was if he was an American. After all, the name Sion (pronounced like the biblical name Zion, only with an S) was pretty unusual for our native Redneck Riviera.

“Yes, Mom, he’s an American,” I replied. “He invited me to go water skiing this coming Tuesday, and he wants to come by the house and pick me up at noon.”

My dad patted me on the back and said, “That’s good, Shannon,” and continued watching the news. “OK,” Mom said as she turned to look at me in the eyes and recite the conditions. “Bring him by the office as soon as he picks you up so we can meet him before he takes you off water skiing to a lake we’ve never seen.”

My parents, Sam and Jeanne Schwartz, had worked hard at building their dental practice. As the office manager, Mom was in charge of hiring and payroll. All the employees loved her funny personality and generous heart. If anyone had a problem or needed someone to talk to, Mom’s office provided a safe haven to run to for advice.

As she saw us coming up the back walkway the following Tuesday, she came out of her office to meet Sion. I could tell at once by her facial expressions that she liked him. She invited us in and then went to see if Dad could join us for a few minutes between taking care of his patients.

Both of my parents were fun and friendly people, and Sion didn’t seem nervous at all. I got their blessing, and off we went to Crystal Lake. I learned later that my mom had at first been skeptical of a young college kid wanting to take her high school daughter to the lake. But she told me later that as soon as she met him, the Lord spoke to her and said, “Look, Nathanael [a disciple of Jesus], in whom there is no guile.”

At that time I attended a small Christian school. My parents had selected it because it sheltered me from the pressures of larger schools and gave me the opportunity to

learn more about the Bible. I decided not to cheer my senior year so that I could be more involved with the youth group and be with Sion as much as possible. I'd grown up singing, yet I'd always felt like I was a dime-a-dozen singer. But our youth pastor believed in mentoring young people, and he allowed Sion and me to be leaders among our peers. He gave us the opportunity every Saturday night to sing in the band, minister, and experience the presence of God firsthand. Through that youth group God birthed in us a passion for ministry. Sion would later joke that he'd crammed two years of junior college into three during those years, but God had planned for our paths to cross—and I'm so glad they did.

Sion and I dated throughout our college years, despite the fact that we attended rival schools. He attended the University of Florida in Gainesville, and I studied at Florida State University in Tallahassee. We both graduated in May of 1992, me with a bachelor's degree in fashion merchandising and marketing, and Sion with his doctorate in pharmacy. (We've since made it a tradition to sit at opposite ends of the couch when the two teams play football right after Thanksgiving every year.) Two weeks after graduation we were married in a beautiful ceremony, surrounded by beloved members of the Schwartz and Alford families and many of our friends.

A month prior to our marriage, Sion had visited his sister and her husband in Columbus, Ohio, where they attended a church that had a Bible school for worship leaders. This visit stirred up a word that had been spoken over him and his gift before we met. A former Integrity music worship leader had declared Sion would write music that would go all over the world. We had always talked about finding a place where we could serve and be involved in worship, and we felt that this church was where God wanted us to begin.

Before we could move to Ohio, Sion had to take the Florida boards in order to obtain his pharmacist license. He passed the Florida exam, and then he went on to pass the Ohio exam as well. Soon afterward he was hired at a Kroger pharmacy in Ohio, and we moved in June of 1992 to the town of Pickerington, right outside Columbus.

Both Sion and I had been raised in the warm climate of the South. Although we were not all that excited about the cold northern weather, as newlyweds we were totally excited about the new adventure that lay before us. I have to admit Dad was right when he described Ohio's weather as arctic cold. To cope with the freezing winter temperatures, I would take a shower twice a day just to knock off the chill. We definitely were not accustomed to gray skies and not seeing the sun for months, but Sion and I loved the Bible school and we loved our church.

Because I needed to be available for our weekday morning Bible classes and on weekends for services, I couldn't work a regular retail job. However, on the first Sunday service we attended, I read in the bulletin that the church's Christian academy needed a family living and home economics teacher. I applied for the job and was hired; God's plan was coming together perfectly. We could go to Bible school five days a week in the morning and then pack our lunch and go to work in the afternoons. Sometimes Sion worked late into the evenings in addition to long hourly shifts on Friday and Saturdays every other weekend. But we were young and excited to be a part of such a dynamic ministry, so we just made it happen. What an exciting place to be! We volunteered in the music department and either sang in the choir or on the

worship team every time the doors were open.

As a newlywed, there were times I wished we weren't spending so much time at church. But I thought the more I did for God, the more He would love me and we would live happily ever after. With this quest in mind, we both worked hard to prove our love and devotion to the church and to God. We were very zealous and passionate about being a part of the church and developing relationships with people who were already doing what we wanted to do.

Attending the worship school was amazing for Sion and me. We loved the anointed teaching we received from the worship leader, and it wasn't long before he and his wife became close friends. We were inspired as we watched them write songs and then go on to record albums that were distributed nationally.

When this amazing couple felt the call to move to Orlando to start a church the following year, they asked us to consider joining them to help with administration and sing with the team. The year we spent in Ohio attending the worship school had given us a firm foundation in our calling. Now we were about to step out and put that education to use. Besides, Orlando was only six hours away from home. Our families were excited for us to be moving close enough to see them on a regular basis.

I got a job as a fourth grade teacher at a Christian school, and Sion worked at a local Eckerd pharmacy while we served faithfully at the church and helped it grow. We led worship for the youth, and we were also on the Sunday morning worship team. We were walking in our calling and growing in our understanding of praise and worship, but God was drawing us to know Him more.

One of the apostle Paul's greatest prayers for us is found in Ephesians 1:17. It says, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better." One day God revealed this scripture to Sion in prayer. And with that, Sion and I began to pray for wisdom and revelation over our lives so that we could know Him more. When we were dating, we would pray and tell God we were giving Him our lives and would do whatever He wanted to do through us. Little did we know that God was now setting us up for another transition and move.

We received a call from our hometown church with an offer to return to Panama City to serve as both the youth pastors and the praise and worship leaders. Sion and I were thrilled because we had discovered that I was pregnant and would become parents sometime in November. While we enjoyed being only six hours away from our families, we now longed to be even closer. We were more than ready to go home and be reunited with friends and family, especially since my brother Michael and his wife, Stacey, were expecting their first child at any moment. Their daughter Elizabeth was born just two weeks before we returned to Panama City.

Sion worked at the church Monday through Thursday, and he pulled a thirteen-hour shift every Friday at Eckerd to keep up with his license and help pay the bills. I worked at my dad's office in accounts receivable Monday through Thursday and sang on the worship team every Sunday while we awaited the arrival of our son.

Sion Augustus Alford V, was born November 23, 1994, the day before Thanksgiving. Sion's mom came and stayed with us for a week to help with the

cooking and laundry, and both she and my mom were instrumental in teaching me the ins and outs of caring for a newborn. I rested for two weeks and then returned to church to practice for the special Christmas program.

Sion had written a Christmas musical entitled *The Shepherd and the King*, in which I was scheduled to sing the title cut song for the presentation at the church in just three weeks. My dad played one of the wise men in the musical, and he was going to lift baby Si up as Mufasa lifted Simba in *The Lion King*. Si made it to some of his first debut performances, but not all of them. When he was at the church, a friend of mine stayed with him in an off-stage room, and I ran back and forth to nurse him between scenes.

I didn't want to slow down and not be a part of everything, but I see now that I placed my performance and my desires before his needs. Little Si was only three weeks old, and I was pushing him to the limits to be a star. Sometimes wisdom comes with age, and I now realize how selfish I was for pushing him. What he really needed was his mom and his own bed, but we were caught up fulfilling the prophetic promise instead of living in God's will for our lives.



For the next two years my parents enjoyed watching their family grow as my sister-in-law, Stacey, and I presented them with grandchildren on a regular basis. After the birth of our daughter, Brooke, in 1996 and our second son, Austin, in 1998, Sion and I decided our family of five was complete. I was totally outnumbered with Si being three and Brooke being two years old when Austin was born. My friends would ask me, "Don't you want to keep the pattern going: boy, girl, boy, girl?" Yet both Sion and I felt a peace about our trinity. I'm so glad we did, because Michael and Stacey stayed in the race and went on to have two more children, for a total of four girls and one boy.

Not only were the 1990s a season of growth for our family, but they also marked a period of growth in ministry for Sion and me. Our pastor had a vision to reach as many people as possible, and Sion played a particularly significant part in accomplishing this goal. In addition to helping establish the church's radio and television ministries, he was also producing live musical presentations that drew people from Florida, Georgia, and Alabama. We were delighted to watch our church's congregation grow from 150 people to over 800 in what seemed like no time at all.

Sion and I were happily consumed with recording songs that were being written at the church, and we were thrilled when we released our first nationally known album, *Fresh Fire*. It was one of five albums we recorded during that period of time.

One of our favorite ministry events was the annual worship conference we conducted at our church each summer. We met so many wonderful pastors and worship leaders from all over the southeast United States, and we were especially thrilled that we could introduce them to our music. One particular couple we developed a relationship with were the worship pastors at a church in North Carolina. When they were promoted to an associate pastor position, we were offered the position of worship pastors at their church.

Initially it seemed wrong to think about leaving our home church where we'd been

married, our children had been baptized, and we'd been so blessed. But we'd been there for over nine wonderful years, and for quite some time Sion and I had felt that God had something more for us. Perhaps this was His invitation for us to step out into that something more.

There are those who believe that being in ministry somehow insulates people from life's difficulties and disappointments. This is not true. While Sion and I continued to grow in the Lord and in the ministry that we were called to, we also grieved over other issues in our family.

We had watched Michael and Stacey go from social smokers to full-blown chain smokers, a condition that was now affecting their health. Both were unusually thin as a result of not eating properly, and the rest of us often expressed our concern for their health and the ultimate well-being of their children. There was so much evidence available regarding the deadly consequences of smoking, yet they were both powerless over this addictive legal narcotic.

Occasionally Sion and I would invite Michael and Stacey to come to church with us. But my brother would tell me he didn't want to play the hypocrite game, and besides, he didn't feel accepted. What a lie of the enemy! He was offended and the Bible says that a brother offended is harder to win than a walled city (Prov. 18:19). Even more heartbreaking than my brother and sister-in-law's situation was what was going on with my parents. They'd had their ups and downs over the years as all couples do, but they were always able to make adjustments and move past their difficulties. However, since Michael and I were grown and had families of our own, the breach between my parents had grown even deeper and wider. When the decision was made to divorce, it shook our whole family.

In an effort to survive, I had formed walls to protect myself from being burdened by my family's problems. For years I had prayed for my family, desiring for them to be in ministry with me, but I was greatly disappointed. Spending time together oftentimes became strained because it seemed we were going in opposite directions.

So Sion and I saw the offer to go to North Carolina not only as the next step in God's plan for our lives but also as a way to separate ourselves from the pain of having to deal with family issues. In all our efforts to know God, we were blinded by pride, and our prayers were hindered. I couldn't see past my own hurt and pain, so I wasn't willing to lay down my life for anyone else. Isn't laying down our lives the very foundation of our Christian faith? I had to ask myself the question: Did I really know Him? While we were busy singing about revival, my family was falling apart. So you tell me what's worse, the sinner in need of a Savior or the saint who is too selfish to serve?

But aren't you glad God never gives up and was willing to lay down His life? God wants us to *know Him*.

## Chapter 2

### SERVE HIM

**D**URING OUR LIFETIME, each of us will experience a variety of transitions as we move from one season of life to another, so it's important to enjoy the journey and serve where God has us planted.

One of the things I love most about God is that He never allows anything in our lives without a purpose, and that purpose is always to make us more Christlike. He is continually revealing His Word to us line upon line and precept upon precept so that we are then able to step out in faith and move in the new direction He is calling us. Little did Sion and I know that we were about to step into a season of change that would last nearly three years.

Sion particularly loves growth and the aspect of moving forward on a continual basis. I, on the other hand, like to move slowly and ask a million questions. We both felt like God had prepared us to be part of something new. In fact, when we would talk about the "new something," our zeal for God would lead us to declare that we were going to do something that had never been done before. While we were busy making plans to do something new, God was working on making us new from the inside out.

After my parents divorced, my dad and I had a very strained relationship. Before knowing all of their marital problems, I always loved and honored my dad. In fact, I would sing a song about him: "Anything your dad can do, my dad can do better." I came out of the womb that way. The entire family loved and clambered after his attention.

Although it was hard to say good-bye to our family, our church, and our pastor who had been such an integral part of our life and ministry for so many years, we knew it was time to move forward. My parents had both remarried and moved on in their new lives, so Sion and I were ready for a new change as well.

Our first stop during our season of transition was in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where we labored for nine months with the amazing couple we'd met through our worship conferences. This couple was so gracious to us throughout our time with them. They appreciated the fact that we'd moved our family ten hours away from home and put our children in new schools.

In addition to serving as an assistant worship pastor, Sion used the expertise he'd gained at our home church to assist in the building of a studio at the Fayetteville church. Because of the connections we'd developed through the worship conferences

in Panama City, we oftentimes received invitations to come to a church and hold a conference.

I accompanied Sion as often as I could at the conferences, where we would usually begin with a “Night of Worship,” followed by a day of instruction. I worked with the choir and taught two classes, one on learning the vocal parts and practical issues, and the other on a worshipper’s heart. Sion worked with the worship teams, teaching about the difference between praise and worship and on why worship leaders do what we do. I wasn’t able to participate in these conferences as consistently as when I had my family nearby to look after the children, yet the ministry continued to grow and flourish.

Sion and I remained sensitive to the fact that we were in a season of transition. The time came when we both felt we’d completed our assignment in Fayetteville, but we had no direction about moving forward. The Bible says that “a man’s heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps” (Prov. 16:9, NKJV), so we decided we would just enjoy Christmas with our family in Panama City and let the Lord take care of directing our steps. Of course, our decision didn’t stop us from reminding Him that we’d leaped out in faith and had trusted Him for direction.

On the drive home to Panama City that December, we received a call from a friend of ours telling us about a growing church in Arlington, Texas, that was looking for a worship leader. They wanted someone who would be a part of the church on a consistent basis and who could help them pastor a choir. Our friend asked if we’d be interested, and we said yes.

My mom agreed to keep the children for a few days while we flew to Texas to meet with the couple who served as pastors of the church. They’d been holding services in a local high school while renovation on the building they had purchased was being completed. When we found out the church had an academy that our children could attend, Sion and I knew this was where God wanted us to be. We accepted the invitation to join the staff, and for the next two years we served as worship pastors for the church while Si, Brooke, and Austin attended the elementary school academy.

While we loved being part of the church, we were anxiously awaiting the opportunity to begin recording our own worship albums again. Sion and I would stay up late talking about evangelistic ways to reach more people, and the time came when once again we felt it was time to step out.

We formally established our ministry and gave it the name of “24/7 Worship Ministries.” Working with a database of names we’d collected since we first began conducting our worship conferences in Panama City, we quickly developed a group of monthly partners who faithfully supported the ministry. Oftentimes a group of several small churches would come together at one location where Sion would present a two-day seminar teaching worship leaders about intimacy with God through worship. I wasn’t able to travel with him because of the children, but at least we were writing and recording our own songs again.

In 2006 we were invited to attend a worship leadership luncheon being held at Gateway Church in Southlake, Texas, about an hour from our home. Worship leaders from all over the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex gathered in order to glean from each other, and Sion and I were thrilled to be a part of the event. That day we received a

book entitled *From Dream to Destiny: The Ten Tests You Must Go Through to Fulfill God's Purpose for Your Life*. The book, which was written by Gateway's pastor, Robert Morris, really ministered to Sion and me in our time of transition.

Although there were times when money was tight, reading Pastor Robert's book gave us the peace that came from knowing God knew right where we were. What He was doing in us would prepare us for what we would be doing in the future. It is through the tests and pits of life that we learn the journey is truly our reward.



Sion and I were not the only ones in our family who were going through a transition. Michael and Stacey had come to realize that hanging out with a company of friends who were smoking and drinking was not benefiting them or their family. Michael in particular had reached the point where he understood that he was going down the wrong road.

They became acquainted with several families who attended a vibrant Methodist church in Panama City, and it wasn't long before Michael, Stacey, and the kids were attending as well. The children got involved in the youth ministry, and Michael and Stacey became active in the children's ministry, helping in the nursery as any good member would do. Michael was always what I'd describe as a people person, meaning he had lots of friends whom he loved to help anytime there was a need. I'd always believed that he was an evangelist at heart, and my prayer was that we'd one day be in ministry together. For now I was just happy to see them all involved at their church.

Since my parents' divorce, our trips home to Panama City two or three times each year had not been as joyful as they'd once been. A subtle sense of tension always seemed to hang over our heads as we tried to keep things as normal as possible for the kids while scheduling separate visiting times with each of their grandparents. Yet despite the adjustments our family was making, when it was time to go home for Thanksgiving, I was especially excited about getting to spend time with my brother and his family, now that they were headed in a new direction.

My mom always loved having all of her grandchildren gathered together at Thanksgiving, and that year was no exception. The aroma of the baking turkey filled the house, and since it would still be several hours before dinner was ready, we all decided to go outside and play a game of football. Sion and Michael were warming up, tossing the ball back and forth to each other. That's when I noticed that Michael's throw looked peculiar; he was just side-arming the ball instead of really throwing it as he normally did. Sion teased him, saying, "Come on, man, throw the ball right," and the kids joined in with, "Uncle Michael, throw the ball! Throw the ball!"

Michael explained that he'd been having what he thought was an issue with his rotator cuff, probably a result of the construction job he was working on. When we brought up his inability to throw the football again at dinner, my mom told him he really needed to go see a doctor.

"OK, Mom," he said with a wink in my direction, "I'll make an appointment right after the holidays." I knew my brother well enough to know he'd find a way to just push through the pain and wait for the arm to heal itself.

Just as I'd suspected, Michael didn't go to the doctor after Thanksgiving, nor did he go to the doctor after Christmas. In January he finally saw a doctor. When the X-rays didn't show anything unusual, the doctor agreed that it must be his rotator cuff and said it would just take some time to heal. But then in March of 2006, he went to the doctor again after discovering a growth in the area of his neck and shoulder. At the same time his face began to droop. An MRI was scheduled on the morning of March 10, which was his daughter Emily's birthday.

My mom accompanied Michael and Stacey to the appointment, and it was there that the doctor informed them my brother had lung cancer. The doctor said the visible growth, known as a pan-coast tumor, had formed from the cancer in Michael's lungs. The tumor was also causing his face to droop. A follow-up appointment was scheduled to discuss a treatment plan.

Afterward, as they walked in stunned silence to the car, my mom asked Michael, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go celebrate my daughter's birthday," he said.

Sion and I arrived with our three children the following week for spring break. Instead of all of us staying together at a family beach house as planned, Michael and Stacey left the children with us so that they could focus on the issue at hand. Mom joined us at the beach house to be with all of her grandchildren, and I loaded up the van with the kids anytime we went to visit my dad.

Though everyone was having a great time during our stay, we were concerned for Michael. My parents individually assisted him and Stacey in setting medical appointments while Sion and I kept the kids occupied. At that point Michael's kids knew their dad was sick; they just didn't know the extent of the situation. We all tried to stay positive for the kids, but we knew Michael would be facing a difficult journey that would begin with possible surgery, followed by months of chemotherapy.

While our fractured family was preparing to fight the good fight of faith, Michael and Stacey were also making preparation for their children's future. My mother told me that they'd gone to see an attorney for the purpose of writing a will, and they wanted to come and talk to Sion and me about it.

"One of the questions they have to answer is about the children," she said. "They need to establish a guardian for them, should the need arise, and they want to ask you if you and Sion would be willing to accept that responsibility. I just want to give you and Sion some time to think about it before they arrive."

Later that afternoon the mood was serious as Mom, Michael, Stacey, Sion, and I sat down together. I can only imagine how difficult it was for my brother to ask, "If anything were ever to happen to Stacey, would you be willing to take all five of the kids?"

Before we could answer, Stacey added, "We wouldn't want them to be split up; we'd want them to stay together so they could draw strength from each other."

The possibility of neither Michael nor Stacey being able to raise their children was something I just couldn't wrap my head around. But Sion and I talked about all of the "what-ifs" where their children were concerned, and we affirmed that we would always do anything we could for them.

When Michael and Stacey said good-bye to us at the end of the week, they had the assurance that we would indeed be there for their children—all of them—should that time ever come.

Shortly after we returned to Texas, my mom, Michael, and Stacey had a final meeting with the attorney who was drawing up their will. When they got to the part that addressed the children, Michael and Stacey told him that Sion and I were their first choice of designated guardians, followed by Stacey's brother and his wife, who lived in South Florida.

"Let me ask you this," the attorney said. "If either of these couples is unable to take all five of the children, are you willing to have them split up?"

"Absolutely not," Stacey said. "I want all of them to be together."

Turning to Michael, he asked, "Are you sure your sister and her husband are willing to do this?"

"Yes, I am," Michael said. "Mom was there when we talked to Shannon and Sion about the will, and they know they are going to be named the designated guardians."

"All right then. I'll draw up the document and will let you know when it's ready for your signatures."



My mom and I talked on a regular basis, and she kept me up-to-date on Michael's chemotherapy. My dad usually spent the night in the hospital room with him, and Mom and Stacey took turns being with him during the day. No one wanted him to be left alone during this grueling process. His cancer was growing rapidly, and by the first of May it had already metastasized from his lungs to his bones. This was not good news. He was trying to function as normally as possible and be there for the kids, who were now dealing with the reality of their father's illness.

The chemotherapy was particularly difficult for Michael. In the past there had been times when he'd drink a couple of beers and smoke cigarettes all day long without actually eating any food. With no nutrients to keep his body going, the effects of the chemotherapy were devastating. He lost all of his beautiful, thick, curly brown hair, plus he had boils on his forehead from all the medications.

Michael was on morphine to help manage the pain, but he didn't like being on the drug because he felt like he was not alert enough to respond to anyone. To help relieve the pain, in his living room he built a harness that was used to elevate his arms. His body ached to the point that he would often ask the older girls to rub his shoulders and neck as hard as they could.

During this time an incident occurred that the children still retell today as if it had happened only yesterday. Michael had built a bookshelf for their living room but had not yet securely attached it to the wall. It was decorated with books, pictures, and other items that were all too tempting for little Caroline. She decided life was too boring and began to climb up to reach for a movie on one of the shelves.

Stacey and their oldest daughter, Elizabeth, had gone to the store. Michael was resting on the couch, and the other children were either playing or watching TV when