

INTRODUCTION

Divorced from my mother for more than forty years, my father periodically asks, “Why did your mother despise you?”

I wonder if he really wants to ask, “Why are you your mother’s caregiver when she never cared for you?”

When I was a child, Mom was emotionally unavailable. At times she failed to protect me. In my teens, she turned her back on my struggles. Later, when my own child was seriously ill, she kept a safe distance. We remained polite but estranged.

Then, in 2011, Mom began to call on me to take her for groceries, help manage her banking, make and keep appointments. Over time I came to realize her requests were a grudging admission of a truth she was loath to accept: without help, she could no longer manage to function independently. The undiagnosed cause was dementia.

Her capacity diminished and my brother and I became the unwilling recipients of her paranoid fears as she ranted and accused us of elder abuse. Yet I kept going back, providing her care.

Why? Did I still seek my mother’s approval, or was there something more?

For a year, my brother and I laboured to meet Mom’s needs and fulfil her requests. For a year, I struggled with her demands, managing to meet them only when I set myself aside and relied on Jesus.

In the process, I learned the truth of 2 Corinthians 12:9: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”.

CHAPTER ONE

No Other Resource But You

Our mother may be ninety years old, but when she's in a fury, she's a force to be reckoned with. Or not, as the case may be. Hence, my brother's sudden departure.

He phones me on his cell from a truck stop café just outside of town.

"I know it's the dementia," he says in a tense voice, "but the things she was doing, saying...Her dementia doesn't mean I should let her get away with just anything."

"What set her off?"

"She locked me in the basement," he fumes. "Again. I told her yesterday she had to leave the deadbolt open when I'm sleeping down there. What if there's a fire? She seemed to grasp what I was saying. She even apologized. And I reminded her when I went down to bed last night— 'Don't lock the door.' But this morning it was locked again. I pounded on the door and called, but she didn't answer. Finally I just went back down, had a shower and packed my stuff. Then I sat and waited. She opened the door at ten."

"Did you ask her why she locked it?"

"Not really. If she couldn't tell me yesterday, why would she be able to today? I did tell her I wasn't staying any longer if this was how she was going to treat me. It's just not safe."

"You're right," I agree. "It's not." *Poor Lawrence. What a difficult position. Driving all this way in the middle of winter to visit our mother, and then this.*

"I did try to explain the safety factor again," he says. "But the discussion deteriorated really fast. She wouldn't see reason, and told me I could just get out if I was going to be that way. Like I was twelve years old or something! I wasn't going to stay another night anyway, not if I was going to be locked in again, so I grabbed my stuff and left."

I sigh. His own sigh echoes in my ear.

“I don’t know what to do,” I say, feeling as confused and helpless as Lawrence sounds.

“Neither do I,” he replies. “If we had Power of Attorney we could take some action, but there’s nothing we can do without Mom agreeing.” I can hear him paying his bill as he prepares to leave the restaurant. “Maybe give her a call when she cools down,” he adds, “and see if you can find out what was going on.”

“I’ll do that,” I say and wish him safe travels.

We say goodbye and Lawrence drives the five hours back to his homestead in Northern Alberta, his intended weeklong visit having lasted just two nights.

I try to reach Mom by phone over the next few days, but with no success.

What to do?

Lord, when it comes to caring for Mom, I’m way out of my depth. All I can think to do is lay my confusion before you. I don’t know how to pray. I don’t know how to help. Every indication is that Mom’s dementia is increasing. I know she needs help, but she insists on remaining independent. I want to do what’s right in your eyes, but I don’t know what the right thing is.

As I wrote these words in my journal, I had a sudden revelation.

That’s exactly where you want me to be: not knowing what to do. Only then will I turn to you to fill my needs.

Psalm 145:15 entered my mind: “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time” (Psalm 145:15).

When I was a child, I always knew Mom would provide meals for me. I didn’t go to her during the day to remind her that I’d be hungry later. I didn’t check to see if she had enough groceries. I didn’t ask if she had a recipe ready. Over the years she had proven herself trustworthy in this. It didn’t occur to me to doubt her provision.

If I could trust my mother for adequate provision, how much more could I trust Jesus? Had Jesus proven himself trustworthy? The answer was indisputable. Yes.

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28, 30).

Lord, can I take you literally? Can I give you my concerns, quit thinking about all this and carry on with my life while I wait for you to direct me?

It seems that’s what you’re saying.

Okay then. This feels irresponsible, but so be it. I’m going to serve my mother with no resource other than you. You’re the potter, I’m the clay. I’ll show up at Mom’s house when you lay it on my heart to visit, and I’ll let you take charge when I get there. I place my mother and her needs in your hands.

I sat back from my prayer and relief washed over me. The contrast in my spirit was tangible. Until I let it go, I hadn't been aware that I'd been feeling such a heavy weight of responsibility for my mother. As I realized those cares had been cast on Jesus, my stress diminished like a balloon deflating.

The following days were filled with a wonderful sense of peace. I felt no urge to call or visit. I didn't fret. I wasn't trying to figure out Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. True to his word, Jesus gave me a week filled with peace and rest.

Then came the day when Jesus said, "Go."