

CHANGED FOREVER BY HIS GRACE

*From bondage to freedom
Post-abortion brokenness to healing and forgiveness
Fearful wanderer to woman of destiny*

Rhonda Lea Elliott



Changed Forever By His Grace

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ISBN 978-1-941173-09-1

Second title page artwork from first edition cover,
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created with her student, Ella Zehr
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Cover and interior design by Cheryl Zehr, Olive Press

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Published by
Olive Press
Messianic and Christian Publisher
www.olivepresspublisher.com
olivepressbooks@gmail.com



Our prayer at Olive Press is that we may help make the Word of Adonai fully known, that it spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere. We hope our books help open people's eyes so they will turn from darkness to Light and from the power of the adversary to God and to trust in **ישוע** Yeshua (Jesus). (From II Thess. 3:1; Col. 1:25; Acts 26:18,15 NRSV *New Revised Standard Version* and CJB *Complete Jewish Bible*) May this book in particular cause hearts to more fully understand our Savior's grace.

This book is dedicated to the Lord God of Israel; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Without His eternal, immeasurable love for me, none of this could ever have been written.

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“Hit First and Ask Questions Later!”

SKETCHES OF MY EARLY CHILDHOOD

How did my life come to this? Here I was, half way around the world far from home in a country I said I would never even visit! How would I ever get away from the dishonest and controlling man I was living with? Full of fear and anxiety, I felt like I was standing on the edge of a cliff without hope. Where would my hope come from?

I made my arrival into this world on March 23, 1946 in a small, red brick building, which was the first Mt. Sinai Hospital of Toronto. Later, my sister Gilda was born in that same hospital as were my older brothers, Larry and Stan.

My childhood memories are a bit sketchy. I have been told that not too long after Gilda's birth our mother had what they called a nervous breakdown. I was just a toddler at the time. Apparently, my brother Larry was at home alone with Mother when she fell unconscious to the floor. He was a young boy of perhaps eleven years old. He telephoned one of the relatives and the next thing he knew, an ambulance arrived and took his mommy away on a stretcher. She was sent to an asylum in Whitby, Ontario. When I was a young girl, my father related to me that he had insisted on taking our mother out of the hospital after she had been there for nine months. She had been refusing to eat and he was worried that his Esther might die if he didn't take action.

Apparently, my two aunts cared for my sister Gil and me for a period of time while our mother was absent. After she returned home, a number of nannies were hired to care for us until Mother was able to do so herself. The only one that I remember is tall, redheaded Kay.

I was too young to know much about Kay. All I knew was that she and her young son shared a room on the second floor of our

house and that she was Catholic. I was very curious about the statue of Mary over her bed. I knew it was Mary because Kay told me. She sternly instructed me never to touch the statue because Mary was the mother of Jesus. I had no idea what she meant but I was too timid to ask. Because of Kay, we switched from chicken soup on Friday evenings to fish and chips. We carried on with this tradition after Kay left us and when we were old enough, Gil and I had the task of going to the fish and chip restaurant on Avenue Road and Davenport to bring the meal home. We loved it. The hot food was wrapped in newspaper and we clutched the parcels close to our chests as we scurried home with the delicious aroma wafting up into our nostrils. That's enough about fish and chips. Now, let me tell you about my mother.

My mother's name was Esther Miriam. She was born March 11, 1907. When she was thirteen she was taken out of school to care for her six brothers and two sisters. She was the oldest of her siblings and her mother, whom we called Bubbie, was in poor health.

My first memory of Mother is when we were very little and had been playing out in the snow, sliding down an icy slope at the end of our street. Our snowsuits were soaked right through and Kay instructed my mother to discipline us because we had been told not to wander away from the house. I remember Kay physically placing my mother in a chair and holding her hand to show her how to spank us. As my little sister and I stood there, ready to take our punishment, we looked on in confusion at our mother who appeared to be in a comatose-like state. This must have taken place not too long after she came home from Whitby because that is the only time I can recall her being in such a condition.

On the contrary, I remember my mother as a warm, affectionate woman. When I was about four years old I was standing at the top of the wooden flight of stairs on the second floor of our house. The next thing I knew, I somehow tripped and fell, tumbling down to the bottom. Mummy came running and lifted

me, a sobbing little girl, into her arms. I was frightened but not injured, so Mummy cuddled and rocked me back and forth, sitting on a dining room chair. I sank into her soft, cushiony arms and drifted off into a soothing, peaceful slumber. Mummy was the one who rushed to my kindergarten class to bundle me into a taxi cab and take me to Sick Children's hospital because I had broken my wrist playing "crack the whip" on the ice in the school yard. Other memories are of a tenacious woman who chased me through the house and out into the yard until she caught me so she could burst a boil on my stomach. Even though Mummy was overweight, I couldn't outrun her! I have memories of Gil (short for Gilda) and me, after misbehaving, running up the stairs at home with Mummy in hot pursuit, yelling, "When I catch you, I'm going to smack you down!" There was only one time when we thought Ma was really serious and we ran for our lives. We were sometimes very naughty, but she didn't have it in her heart to physically strike us.

Mummy seemed to be forever chasing after someone. If she wasn't running onto the verandah with Daddy's brown paper lunch bag as she hollered to him on the street, "Albert, Albert you forgot your lunch," she was running down the verandah steps after Gilda and me on our way to high school, shouting, "Rhonda, Gilda, I have scrambled eggs and toast on the table for you!"

"Sorry Ma, we're late for school," would be our quick reply as we raced along the street to catch our bus at the corner.

Often, I would dash back to the house because I had forgotten one of my school books and, as Mummy handed it to me she would say, "Rhonda, you would forget your head if it wasn't attached to your neck!"

My two older brothers, Stan and Larry, have both been a strong positive influence in my life, although I didn't see as much of Larry in my early years. He is ten years older than me and had left home by the time I was six or seven. He visited often but because of the age difference, we didn't get to know him very well

when we were children. I was closer to Stan since he is only four years older than me.

Stan was the one I could talk to about my problems and know that he would really listen. He was also the one who was there for me, to dry my tears. I remember one time I was so upset about something or other that I cried until I could hardly open my eyes. Stan found me in the upstairs hallway and took me to the bathroom where he laid compresses of warm water on my eyes and talked soothingly to me until I felt better. At times such as that, Stan was like “John Boy” with his little sisters in the Walton series.

Other times he was the typical mischievous brother. One winter, our bedroom on the third floor was so cold that Gil and I kept our socks on when we went to bed. One night Stan told us, “Don’t you know that potatoes will grow between your toes if you keep your socks on while you sleep?” What’s incredible is that we actually believed him!

My siblings and I grew up in an area of Toronto that was called “The Annex.” We lived at 73 Dupont Street which was not a Jewish neighborhood as were Kensington and Brunswick Avenues. My mother’s father, Grandfather Wilson, had purchased the home for our parents. It was a red brick, semi-detached, three storey building with a narrow alley between ours and the next semi-detached home. We had a wooden verandah in the front which had a powder blue floor and steps leading up to it with a cream colored railing trimmed in green. There was a small porch off the kitchen at the back of the house where a clothes line ran along the length of the back yard to a post at the end. My brother Larry fixed a contraption on the porch ceiling with which he did pull ups. It worked fine until he pulled the roof down.

When I was about three or four years old, a photographer came to our house to take a professional photograph of the four of us children. The night before the big event, I had to endure Kay painstakingly inserting bobby pins in my hair to make it curly like my little sister’s. Gil had large blue eyes and a head full of thick

blonde curls. She reminded us of “Little Orphan Annie” from the popular comic strip at the time. In contrast, my hair was jet black and as straight as a board.

I was very fidgety and did not want to hold still while my hair was being worked on. I could hardly wait to get away from her because she had been drinking and her breath made me feel sick and dizzy. It seemed like she took hours. I was so relieved when she was finally finished. I slept with pin curls in my hair and the next morning, when the bobby pins were removed, I looked like a dark-haired Shirley Temple.

The photographer arrived and seated the four of us on our maroon colored sofa with the diamond patterned upholstery. Gilda and I were placed in the middle with Stan and Larry on the outside. Stan was beside me and he had quite a job to try to get me to stop crying so I would look at the camera. I was paralyzed with fear. The big black box had a curtain over it and was balanced on four thin poles. I was traumatized as I saw a man’s arm sticking out the side holding a huge orange bulb attached to a rubbery hose. I wanted no part of it. I finally looked up with a sullen face long enough for the flash of blinding light and then it was over. I slid down off the sofa and scurried away as fast as my little legs would carry me.

Early one morning, about a year later, Daddy brought home a mysterious cardboard box for my sister and me, now around four and five years old. With a twinkle in his steel blue eyes and a silly grin on his face, he told us he had a big surprise. With excited anticipation we could hardly stand still in the middle of the kitchen. As I remember, it was before breakfast and we were in our pajamas. We jumped up and down in our bare feet on the cool linoleum floor while Daddy carefully put the box down and told us to open it. How delighted we were when inside we found an adorable, furry little kitten. Gil and I took turns holding and cuddling it. It was a tortoiseshell color and Daddy said he picked out a male cat because he did not want more kittens. So, we named

him Tommy. But in the spring, Tommy got pregnant so we had to change his name to Teresa.

Our mother loved Teresa even though, as the cat grew, she would get under Mummy's feet in the kitchen. When we heard a screech, we knew that Mummy had accidentally stepped on Teresa's tail again. Mother sometimes even gave our cat raw eggs and fresh cooked chicken livers as a treat. She told us that it would make her fur nice and shiny. I think she was right. Our cat had the smoothest, shiniest fur that I had ever seen.

God had gifted our mother with a beautiful singing voice. "Oh Danny Boy" was one of her favorite songs along with several Christmas carols. I therefore grew up with a love for Christmas carols. I loved hearing them on the radio or in a department store during the Christmas season. There were certain ones that moved me to tears, and still do. Three that had the most impact on my heart were "Oh Holy Night", "What Child is This?" and "O Come O Come Emmanuel." The Holy Spirit was drawing me to Jesus from a very young age.

Ma also had a favorite lullaby she would sing to us: "Here Comes the Sandman." When we were still giggling, rather than sleeping, she would exclaim loudly, "Do you want me to sing this or not!" Gil and I would then settle down and close our eyes like two little angels.

My mother had a child-like innocence and naïveté about her that defies description so that she always seemed to see the best in every situation. I still remember the twinkle in her eyes as she would sing a tune or use her incredible gift to create a new rhyme or saying to fit any occasion. On rainy days when my sister and I were bored, Mother would make fireman's hats for us out of newspaper and recite, "Rain, rain, go away, come again some other day." If we asked, "Mummy, mummy, what should we do?" Mother would reply, "Sit in a chair and fall through!" This would set us to giggling and we would quickly forget about our boredom. To make doing dishes seem like a game, she would say,

"Do the dishes allowishes." Then, Gilda and I would pretend that a wicked task master was over us two little Cinderellas, until we worked faster and faster to get the job done. Our paper boy never seemed to tire of hearing Mother tell him, "You're so bright, I bet your mother calls you sunny!"

At times, I was a mischievous child. One spring when I was perhaps around six years old and my sister five, I came down with the mumps. I was in bed one afternoon when I overheard my mother's voice from downstairs, "Gilda, I tell you what. As soon as your sister is sleeping, you and I can go downtown to see a movie." Feeling left out and missing all the fun, I played a very naughty trick on my mother. With quiet determination, I slid out from under the sheets and crept stealthily into the third floor hall closet where I found my sister's spring coat and mine. I first put hers over my nightgown and then mine on top before crawling back under the blankets pretending to be fast asleep. Shortly after that I could hear Mummy looking for Gil's coat and when she came into our room she could see that I had both coats on and was sleeping like an angel. Mummy said, "Oh, poor Rhonda must be feeling chilled. We can't wake her up as she needs her rest. We will just have to go to the movies another day. It's too cold outside to go without your coat." Gil cried from the disappointment. I started to feel a little guilty, along with being terribly overheated, but I didn't have the courage to open my eyes and confess the truth.

On many a summer Sunday afternoon, Mummy took Gil and me to the Royal Ontario Museum located at Bloor Street and Avenue Road. I never ceased to be astonished and impressed with the vastness of the high domed ceilings and the immaculately polished floors. I had an irresistible urge to run and glide over the glossy surface—if I could only escape my mother's watchful eye for a moment. Gil and I never tired of asking Mummy to take us to see the Egyptian mummies. We were absolutely fascinated by them.

As we walked home downhill on Avenue Road she would exclaim, "Girls, let's have a sundae on a Sunday!" So, we would stop at the grocery store and purchase a Dixie Cup which was a small paper cup filled with ice cream. We would happily devour our ice cream with little wooden spoons as we walked home.

The second floor of our house consisted of our parents' bedroom which had a small balcony out front. Halfway down the hall was another bedroom, then a bathroom. On the other side of the bathroom there was a bedroom which my father converted into an upstairs kitchen looking out onto the backyard.

We had boarders who would rent the bedroom and kitchen on the second floor. They couldn't have had much privacy because the bathroom separated the kitchen from their bedroom and that was the only bathroom in the house. So, we usually had anywhere from six to eight people sharing the bathroom which was not unusual in those days.

Having renters gave us the opportunity to become acquainted with many unique and interesting personalities. One particular lady was from Nova Scotia. Her name was Dora and she loved baking lemon meringue pies. It seemed that she was always baking those pies and to this day, I really enjoy a good lemon meringue pie! Another renter, Bill, accidentally took a gulp of fresh warm chicken fat from a jar in our refrigerator before he realized what it was. It hadn't hardened yet and looked just like apple juice! Needless to say, he was more careful after that. My father said that if he had poured it into a glass before drinking it he would have noticed that it was fat and not juice.

One of our renters turned out to be a rather unsavory character. His name was Irving and he worked for a tabloid newspaper. Our father evicted him and as Irving was leaving the house, he started shouting obscenities at my little sister and me while we were playing with our skipping ropes on the sidewalk. He was spewing terrible accusations at our father as we stood there frightened and dumbfounded. Our big brother, Larry, happened to be

visiting that day and he came bounding out the front door, down the steps, chasing Irving all the way to the end of the street. "Don't you dare come back! And stay away from my little sisters!" he belled in a voice that could be heard all the way to the Toronto Islands!

Larry was born in 1935. He had rheumatic fever when he was a small child and after he was cured, Mummy would often declare, "It was Dr. Giddens who saved your brother's life with penicillin!" Larry went to Huron Street School. There were three elementary schools in our district at the time, Huron Street School, Brown Street School, and Jesse Ketchum. Jesse Ketchum was known to be in a rough neighborhood, but more about that later. The walk to Brown Street School was uphill most of the way so Mummy chose Huron Street School because, in Larry's weakened state after his illness, the walk on level ground would be much more beneficial to his health. Naturally, the rest of us followed him there.

I have recently discovered from Larry that his bout with rheumatic fever was not his only fight for life during childhood. The most traumatic incident was when he was eight years old. He was chased by a gang of boys who shouted, "Get the Jew!" as they ran after him. Terrified, Larry ran as fast as he could along the railroad tracks across the street from our house. The boys caught up with him and tied him to the tracks with ropes. They ran away and Larry started screaming at the top of his lungs as he heard the train approaching. Praise be to God, a neighbor heard his cries for help and ran to him just as the train was approaching. He picked up an old glass bottle, broke it and used it to untie my brother. Larry related to me that he was too embarrassed to tell anyone about what happened that day.

Apparently, our father had taught him to "shadow box" to protect himself when he was very young. Larry tells me that our father said to him, "Hit first and ask questions later!" This advice came in very handy for my brother many times as he was growing up in Toronto during and after World War II.

There was a group of boys in the neighborhood who called themselves “The Gang of Seven.” They were seven brothers and they delighted in hunting down Jews and beating them up. One day when Larry was about twelve years old, he and his friend, Leo, were strolling along in the ravine near Davenport Road. Leo was a Jewish war orphan who was being raised by an elderly Jewish woman. He was the only Holocaust survivor from his family from Europe. On this particular day, Larry and Leo’s pleasant adventure turned into a battle for their lives. Suddenly, from behind them, they heard those familiar shouts, “Get those Jews!” The Gang of Seven came straight for Larry. Leo panicked, running as fast as he could down the hill, leaving Larry to fend for himself.

Apparently, Larry had gotten into a fight with one of the brothers the previous day and had pinned him down until he cried, “Uncle.” Now, all seven were out for revenge for the humiliation suffered by their brother at the hands of a “Jew boy”! They formed a circle around Larry and decided to make it a “one on one” event. Out came the biggest fifteen year old boy Larry had ever set eyes on. He says that the kid looked like he had been body building since he was two years old! Larry said to himself, *Here’s where I die!*

His survival adrenaline kicked in, and he tells me he just flew through the air and started sticking his fingers into his opponent’s eyes and nose and mouth. The bully started screaming in agony. As the others came running to help, Larry took the opportunity to take flight, running away as fast as he could, eventually catching up to his friend, Leo. Leo was trembling with fear so Larry walked him the rest of the way home. When the elderly lady who was caring for Leo came to the door and saw how dirty and disheveled the boys were, she smacked Leo across the head and chastised him for running around the streets like that. So, my brother never told anyone about this episode either.

There was another Jewish family on our street who later asked Larry to walk to school with their son Harvey, and act as his body-guard. The word must have gotten around among the Jewish boys

how brave Larry was, even though he didn’t think of himself that way. He was simply fighting for his life. He told me that he never mentioned the scraps he had gotten into to anyone because he felt embarrassed and ashamed. It’s amazing to me that I have never known these things about my oldest brother until now. I can see that God has had His divine hand of protection upon him from the beginning.

When Larry was fourteen years old, our father took him out of school. It was legal and not unusual in those days for a parent to do this. They had to go to the school and sign the child out if they were under the age of sixteen. Dad felt it was time for the oldest boy to go out and earn money to help support the family. That is the way our father had grown up and it was all he knew. He encouraged Larry to learn a trade as he had done when he was fourteen. At age fifteen, Larry was working at the Toronto Stock Exchange, which was also a common practice at that time. The boys were provided with uniforms to wear while working on the floor assembling the stock exchange numbers onto the boards and taking them down. One day while in the locker room, which had a marble floor, another employee started shouting and swearing at Larry because he was a Jew. Larry grabbed the guy’s foot until the older boy fell with a heavy thud onto the cold, hard floor. He never bothered my brother again.

We all experienced anti-Semitism to some degree in our Gentile neighborhood. As kind and loving a person as our mother was, she was especially targeted for mocking and ridicule by some of our neighbors. After returning home on one of the occasions when she had been called a “Christ killer” and a “dirty Jew,” my five foot mother stood cooking soup on our old gas stove.

As a six year old I loved to stand beside Mummy while she was cooking because, inevitably, she would let me have a little sample to taste. Just like the time that Gil and I exhausted Mummy when she was frying herself an onion sandwich on rye bread. As we stood there like two starving little urchins, Mummy asked us if

we would like to try a little. She was sure that we would not like it but we kept asking for more! “If I keep giving you girls more fried onions, I won’t have any left for myself!” This set us off to giggling as we gobbled up the rest of the onions, leaving none for our mother. Mummy laughed, “Oy vey! Next time I will eat MY sandwich first!”

On this particular day, the delicious aroma of homemade chicken soup drifted through the air, filling my senses, causing me to daydream of sitting down to eat those plump matzo balls and soft carrots that floated in a sumptuous broth that only my mother could cook. But I was jolted out of my daydream when my mother abruptly stated, “Rhonda, I don’t know why they say we killed Jesus. He was one of us. Why would we kill one of our own?”

How my mother, a woman who had been raised in an observant Jewish home by Russian Jewish immigrants, knew that Jesus was a Jew, I will never know. Up to that point in my young life, I hadn’t heard much about Jesus.

“Mummy, who’s Jesus?” I asked.

“I think he was a doctor because I have heard that he healed a lot of people.”

We never really talked of Him again, that I remember, but this short conversation awakened a yearning in my heart to know Him. For one thing, I wanted to ask Jesus why I was being blamed for His death and even more than that, why my gentle, kindhearted mother was being ridiculed because of Him. I kept these thoughts to myself as I continued to search for meaning in my young life.

I had some knowledge of God’s existence and His involvement in my life from a very early age. Mother would never mention a person who had died without also saying, “God rest his/her soul.” Also, I distinctly remember discussing God with some playmates at school when I was about seven or eight years old. We were looking up at the clouds in the sky and trying to figure out if

God was a cloud since He was a spirit. One child said that God couldn’t be a cloud because you can’t see a spirit.



Jeremiah 31:33 and Hebrews 10:16 *But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.*



Throughout my childhood, I had terrible nightmares from which I would wake up screaming until someone came to me. One night I awakened in terror from yet another nightmare. As my father and Kay, our nanny, came in and turned on the light, I was sure that I saw a demon from my dream slip down into a hole under my bed and disappear. Then the hole closed up. I tried to tell my father what I had seen, but he and Kay just kept telling me it was nothing but a bad dream. But I knew what I had seen because my eyes had been open. I knew I had not just been dreaming.

That glimpse into the spiritual realm of demons opened the door in my life to a fear of the dark. From that moment on until I was born again in 1982, I had to have a light on somewhere nearby when I went to sleep at night. I was afraid to even have one of my feet dangling over the edge of my bed.



John 3:19-20 *“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.”*

CHAPTER 2

“Oy Vey! The Children Don’t Have Clothes For Such A Place!”

I remember my mother taking time to teach me the alphabet and how to tell time before I ever went to school. As the time approached for me to start kindergarten, my brother Stan painstakingly taught me to spell **our surname, Middlestadt**, along with teaching me to spell “Mississippi” forwards and backwards. One significant memory I have is of Stan walking me to kindergarten. It was a very chilly fall day and I was wearing a thin, navy blue cardigan and a short cotton skirt. I had my arms crossed in front of me to try to keep warm and Stan said, “Ronnie (as my siblings called me), put your arms by your sides and swing them. Hold your head up high and don’t let Old Tom (the school crossing guard) know you are cold. If you keep moving your arms and legs like me, as if you are marching, you will soon be warm. Never, ever let anyone know how you are feeling!” I suspect that Stan may have used this tactic when he was made fun of for being a Jew. I recently asked him if he had experienced any anti-Semitism as had Larry. His answer was, “I managed to avoid it.”

I have a faint memory of wearing special brown oxfords for awhile when I was very little. They were different than the shoes that the other children were wearing. I remember sitting on the cement stoop at the end of our front sidewalk, asking my mother, “Mummy, why do I have to wear these ugly shoes?”

She replied, “It’s because you are special, Rhonda. And your shoes are not ugly, they are just different.” This didn’t satisfy me entirely, but if Mummy said it, it must be true, so I made up my mind not to think about it anymore.

As a young teenager I was always uncomfortable when I was sitting on the beach because my feet didn’t seem to match up.