

Vicki Talley McCollum

REAL FAITH

LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF UNCLE FLOYD

Be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. (Deuteronomy 4:9, NIV).

In 1926, at the onset of a national epidemic of infantile paralysis in the U.S., Floyd Gaines Clay was born to Ernest and Lola Clay, who lived amid extended family in a small farming community on Sand Mountain in Alabama. Floyd was delivered at home by the family's trusted physician, Dr. Gaines of nearby Crossville.

Floyd did not meet normal growth milestones. He looked small, had a weak arm and leg, and by age three, he still did not walk. Brought in for examination, Dr. Gaines informed Ernest and Lola that their small son had contracted infantile paralysis, also known as polio.

Polio—it had taken the lives of many children and crippled countless more. As Robert H. Rankin described in his 1938 article, “This Question of Infantile Paralysis,” the polio epidemic had panicked the nation and caused states in impacted regions to close their borders to travelers “in desperation and in terror” in an attempt to stop the spread of this horrible disease.

During a time when worried parents' questions went unanswered;

when prescribed medical treatments of “splinting and casting” to immobilize limbs, along with prolonged bed rest, caused already weakened muscles to atrophy; Ernest and Lola sought God's intervention—they asked God to heal Floyd.

Lola sent for her uncle, Burris Jones, a country preacher with a reputation as a man of prayer, to ask God for healing to allow Floyd to walk. Early that morning, Ernest arrived at the Jones's door to find him already on his knees in prayer.

While Burris and Ernest prayed for Floyd's healing, Lola sat her son on the kitchen table and asked him, “Do you believe that Jesus can heal you and make you walk?”

Three-year-old Floyd smiled up at her and nodded, “Yes, Mama.”

She placed her hand on his head and prayed, “Lord Jesus, I ask you to heal Floyd and make him walk—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

She stood her son on the floor. “Now Floyd, you can walk.” He took his first three steps toward her.

He was healed.

I grew up in this family—a family that always remembered the day God answered their prayer. Because of them, I do not remember a time of not knowing the name of Jesus. They talked about Jesus in terms that caused me to expect him to walk into my Grandmother Clay's house at any

moment, just like any family member. Their theology was simple: Jesus lives and he answers prayer. From my family's faith stories, I learned Jesus was someone I could trust with life's brokenness.

Floyd, my uncle, was nurtured in his family's faith as a child. At age sixteen, he took that faith as his own. In 1942, at a summer revival held at Mt. Tabor Baptist Church, Floyd went forward in response to an altar call and received Jesus as Savior.

Floyd's life exemplifies God's grace: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Despite his struggle with the residual halting effects of polio, he did not respond to God with bitterness and resentment. At seventeen, determined to be physically strong, he developed his own fitness training program. He lifted and carried 100-pound feed bags on his shoulders to strengthen his muscles. Floyd believed that he could do “all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

Floyd called his trials “close places,” and said that he couldn't have made it through those close places without Jesus.

I know about some of my uncle's close places, like his continuing struggle with disability. And there were profoundly painful events—the deaths of three of his young children. In the late 1940s, Floyd and his wife, Elnor Garmany, buried two boys who died



Floyd Clay (right) as a boy



Floyd Clay with his sister Mildred, 1958



Cathy and Larry Clay, 1958



Floyd and Elner with their foster children



Elner and Floyd Clay

I grew up in this family—a family that always remembered the day God answered their prayer.

in infancy. Then God blessed them with a son, Larry, strong and healthy, with a love for math, basketball, and practical jokes. Three years later, in 1954, their daughter Cathy was born. At age six—in first grade—she was diagnosed with Bright’s disease. I was five when she died. I have vivid memories of a beautiful, blonde little girl, lying “asleep” in a small white casket in my grandmother’s living room—funeral wakes held at home were still common in the South in the early 1960s. Cathy’s death was difficult for the whole family, but especially so for Floyd and Elner.

While these events deeply grieved him, Floyd never lost hope. Despite his sufferings, the man I knew was joyful and kindhearted. He amazed me—I suspect that in his place, I would not have done as well.

After Cathy’s death, perhaps to es-

cape the pain of it, Floyd and Elner moved to Atlanta. Of course, they were never alone. Family and friends of family found their way to Floyd’s home, some in need of a place to stay while they looked for jobs. Among them were my mother and her three children. We were all welcomed.

Those sunny days at Floyd and Elner’s house were filled with excitement. There were loads of children for playmates and lots of activity in my uncle’s house. As children, we were too busy dancing to 45 rpms and “helping” my Aunt Elner bake cakes and cookies to know that “money was tight.”

In Atlanta in 1964, Floyd was hospitalized for four weeks after he suffered a stroke. This time the diagnosis was muscular dystrophy. His doctors told him to stop working, “You are 100 percent disabled,” they said. They

predicted he would never walk again, confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

But one doctor held out hope.

“Get a job that keeps your arms and legs moving,” he told Uncle Floyd. “Stay up on your feet and do as much as possible.”

Floyd welcomed this advice. More than ever, he was determined to live his life whole, rather than hindered, by submitting to disability. *He remembered he had been healed.*

He got back on his feet and moved his family to Alabama. That summer he built a three-bedroom ranch house on his farm with the help of his car-

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penter-father, the sixty-seven-year-old Ernest, and Larry, who by then was fourteen. Dogs, pigs, and cows were added, as well as two giant commercial chicken houses, installed by Elner to raise poultry for Campbell's Soup and other markets.

Floyd learned the trade of laying ceramic tiles and, with Larry, started his own business. (Twenty-three-years later, after another stroke wrought further damage, he retired.)

A few years after returning to Alabama, Floyd and Elner learned of three children who were being placed in foster care. The siblings, a shy five-year-old boy, his three-year-old sister, and the youngest boy, a toddler in diapers, were being separated, as no one wanted to take in three children. Floyd and Elner's home had always been open to those in need, so the children moved in.

The first time I met them, they were sitting together in a little cart—their bright eyes dancing with joy—as they were drawn around the farm by a Shetland pony purchased especially to welcome them to their new home. Eventually their twelve-year-old sister joined the family. They grew to adulthood in Floyd and Elner's home.

After fifty years together, Elner died. Floyd grieved profoundly for her, and his family prayed. Several years later, God provided Rachael, a childhood friend of both Floyd and Elner's, to become Floyd's wife and companion.

God walked with Floyd as he trod a difficult path. Floyd expressed his faith in God with authentic obedience and simple words. If faith is only real when there is obedience, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, then real faith is reflected in Floyd's life.

At seventy-nine—and only recently requiring the use of a wheelchair—he told me, “The Lord led me in the way he wanted me to go. I always did my best to follow him. I would not have made it through those ‘close places’ without him.” □