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BEHIND THE LIGHTS

THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE OF A MUM AND HER FAMILY

AN EXCERPT FROM *BEHIND THE LIGHTS* BY HELEN SMALLBONE

Before Rebecca St. James and for KING & COUNTRY were filling arenas and impacting millions through their music, they were part of one family learning what it meant to trust God when the future was anything but certain.

In *Behind the Lights*, Helen Smallbone tells the story from a perspective youth-workers do not often get to hear—the mom behind the artists.

She shares what happened when she and her husband, David, moved their seven children from Australia to the United States with sixteen suitcases, no safety net, and a conviction that God was leading them.

What followed was not an overnight success story. It was a journey through financial struggles, closed doors, unexpected provision, a church family that

stepped in when they needed it most, years on the road with Rebecca, and eventually the emergence of Joel and Luke as for KING & COUNTRY.

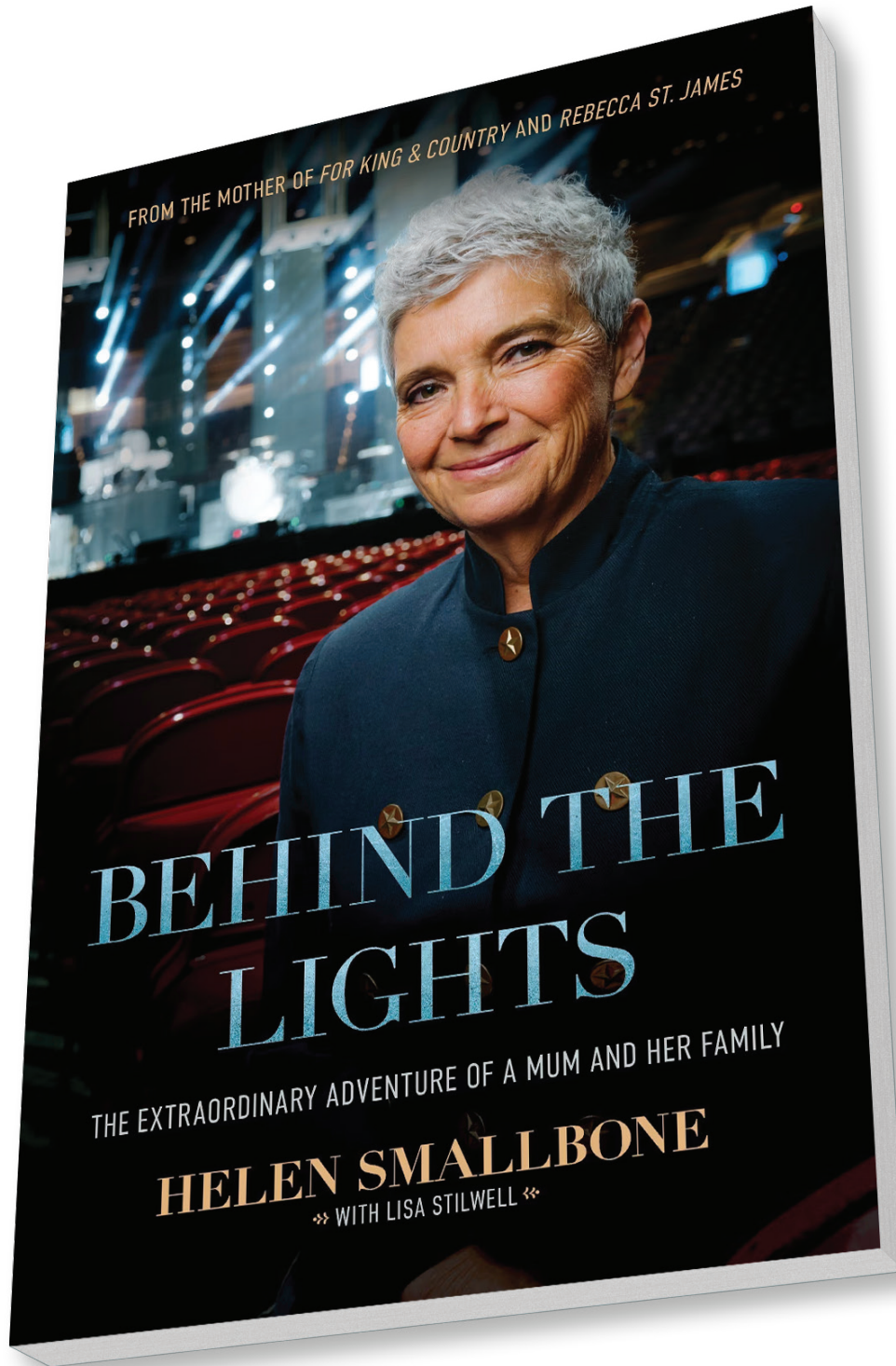
Through it all, Helen offers a powerful picture of what can happen when parents intentionally build faith, resilience, creativity, and trust in God into the life of a family.

As we focus on Parents & Family, we want you to hear Helen's story for yourself.

We're including Chapter 1 of *Behind the Lights*—an inside look at the family behind some of Christian music's most influential artists and the faith that was being formed long before anyone saw the lights.

Included courtesy of the Smallbone family. ■

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CHAPTER ONE

FROM HEAD TO HEART: A STRONG FOUNDATION

*I will ask the Father, and he will give you
another Advocate, who will never
leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into
all truth. The world cannot receive him,
because it isn't looking for him and doesn't
recognize him. But you know him,
because he lives with you now and later will be in you.*

John 14:16–17

As I've come across people over the years, many are amazed at my family's story. Our ministry and musical outreach have been so large for so long, spanning the life careers of Rebecca St. James and for KING & COUNTRY. There's a surprise from others about how these two entities came out of one family and curiosity about how we all came to be who and what we are today.

They want to know how it is we've worked and stayed together through obstacles and detours most "normal" families don't encounter.

There isn't one response I can think to give. Our journey has been filled with a variety of faith-stretching occurrences that could only have been orchestrated by God, both in their inception and in His miraculous outcomes. But for me, as a mum who loves Jesus, I am convinced that nothing we have accomplished or overcome would have happened without His divine intervention and our commitment to follow His lead, regardless of how unusual or against the flow His plan seemed.

I'm also convinced that a person won't realize the incredible magnitude of what God has in store for them unless they are all-in in their relationship with Him.

With that, I'm very intrigued with the interaction between the dual inputs of our head and our heart and the decisions we make. By that, I mean that sometimes we learn things through our head knowledge without experiencing them in our heart.

I realized this when I was growing up as a Methodist minister's kid. I grew up in the church and was involved in church and Sunday school every week. At the time, we lived on one of the busiest street corners on the northern side of Sydney in a quaint English-style parsonage next to a beautiful, historic stone church in Chatswood. It was expected that my brothers and I would be actively

involved in my dad's ministry. At times we were his secretaries answering the phone, and I knew and often interacted with the church staff.

It was there in 1968—at thirteen years old—that I went forward at a Billy Graham crusade. After listening to him, I realized I had never actually made my own decision to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior, and I was ready.

Looking back, I know now that it was a decision I made with my head, and it changed my life. For the first time, I had an incredible thirst for reading my Bible and acquiring knowledge about God—something I had not done before. I also had a deep hope that my strained relationship with my mum would heal. I was the youngest and only girl, with three older brothers.

My mum told the story that, after she gave birth, the doctor said, "It's a girl."

Mum then said to the doctor in amazement, "Are you *sure* it's a *girl*?"

And he said, "Yeah, I can tell the difference between a boy and a girl!"

The problem was that as I grew up, she wanted me to dress in feminine styles and do indoor things that girls traditionally did back then. But I wanted to be one of the boys.

Before moving to Sydney, we had lived in a small town in rural New South Wales where there was room enough to roam. I loved being outdoors with the dogs and chickens and playing games with my brothers. Sometimes I'd

even take off on my bike with a friend and be gone all day without anyone else knowing where I was. So there was a constant underlying tension between my mum and me, and I was all too glad for my dad's sweet, kind, and fun demeanor that acted as a buffer.

By the time I turned fifteen, things changed for my family. Mum, who was quite energetic, took off on a foot race with my brothers down a hill and slipped a vertebra in her back so that it began pressing on her nerves. She had to go onto bed rest for three months. It was a difficult season because, at the same time, my dad was getting discouraged in the ministry. He had a strong, simple faith, and I admired him for his love for people and his humble belief in who Jesus is. But he wasn't seeing the Holy Spirit working—people weren't coming to Christ. Plus he was growing tired of the continual drain of being a pastor.

It was then that my mum's doctor, who was a Christian and attended our church, told her and Dad about a faith healer coming to town, and he wondered if she might be open to going. So they did. Mum went forward for prayer, and God touched her in a very real way. The next morning, she was able to sit in church for the first time in three months! She didn't receive complete physical healing all at once, but there was a noticed improvement that brought her hope and continued healing as time passed. Even more, she and my dad experienced a spiritual change that opened up both of my parents to the charismatic

movement and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that occurred in Australia in the early 1970s.

Eventually, they brought all of us kids to the gathering, and it was then that I went forward once again—this time to receive the Holy Spirit—and experienced an encounter with Jesus I'd never felt before. My faith went from the head decision I'd made the year before to a full-on heart decision. I knew then that I had the Holy Spirit inside of me, just as His Word says He will do if we ask Him (John 14:16–17).

It was completely transformative—and it was the beginning of seeing my mum in a whole new light. I began talking with her and Dad on a deeper level, and Mum and I were finally able to begin repairing and healing the years of strain and brokenness, for which I am so thankful.

Dad also changed and developed a renewed passion for Jesus. Over the next year we continued to become more involved with the charismatic movement and watched it transform the church. Dad was seeing more conversions and believers having an added excitement about their faith. My brothers and I got very involved in the youth ministry, and for the first time I saw the Holy Spirit literally fill a room with His presence. I saw His Spirit break down the hardness of hearts, convict us to repent, and cause an outward expression of joy that only His forgiveness will bring.

It was revival. It was also when I met David.

* * *

A pastor's salary back then was not very high, and with four kids to feed, it was normal for Mum and Dad to take in boarders for the extra income and to help some needy young man. Besides, what was having one more young man around when they already had three sons? Needless to say, it wasn't uncommon for us to have an extra face at the dinner table.

Well, one Sunday night after the church service ended, I went straight home to change into my pajamas. Mum eventually came home and said, "Gosh, there's a nice young man I talked to at church tonight, so I asked him to go to the coffee hour afterward." That was where all the young people hung out after church.

Then she said, "It would be good for you to go over there too."

I said, "Eh . . . okay," and got out of my pajamas and dressed again. Then I randomly took our galah (a rose-breasted cockatoo) named Charlie out of its cage, put him on my shoulder, and left. I have no idea where my thinking was, but I guess that since I thought I *could* take the bird with me, I *would*!

I walked over to the gathering place, and as I was about to enter, the young man Mum had met walked out. He could not walk straight past me. After all, I had a galah on my shoulder.

He said, "Oh, you're Helen!"

"Yes, how did you know?"

He went on to explain how he'd seen me in church and then seen some photos of the youth group with names and ages on the wall in the coffeehouse, and he recognized me in one.

Well, I was intrigued by his attention to detail, so we stood outside on the porch and talked for five or ten minutes, at which point David asked if I was only sixteen.

"Oh, no, I'm seventeen now!"

The entire time, Charlie sat on my shoulder, and I think David thought it was absolutely hysterical.

After that night, my mum invited David to a family outing and learned he was unhappy with where he was living. She also learned he came from a good family in Brisbane, so she invited him to live in our caravan (the Australian term for *camper*) that sat outside the parsonage. We were planning to relocate in three months to a new church about twenty minutes away, and she said, "You know, he's a nice young chap, and I feel sorry for him. If after three months it doesn't work out, I'll just say 'We're moving! See ya!' and that way nobody's feelings will get hurt."

Well, he moved in.

In the meantime, Mum saw how well we got along—we talked every time we could, whether on the porch, in the yard, on the phone, wherever. She told David that

since I was still a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl and he was twenty-one, there could be no relationship with me, and she said as much to me about him.

* * *

As David and I got to know each other, we were amazed at all we had in common and the similarities between our families. I came with three older brothers, the oldest named David. David also came from a family with three boys and a girl that was the youngest, and he, too, was the oldest. We both had dogs named Chip. And years later, I found out that when David discovered his mum was pregnant with her fourth child, he even suggested she name the baby Helen if it was a girl.

My dad was a Methodist minister, and David's dad was a Methodist lay preacher but bank manager by profession. My parents were strong in the Temperance Union—meaning clean living, no cards, no dancing, etc. David's grandmother and mum were the stalwarts in their town for the temperance movement. Both of our families moved regularly, so we both came from rotating, insecure lifestyles compared to most other families.

It was crazy, all the similar nuances and understanding we shared about each other's lives. Through it all, we became very close friends, and deep down, I knew I liked him. But there was one thing that held me back: David wasn't serious about Jesus. He had the head knowledge

but not the heart relationship I had. Being that that was more important to me than anything, I decided against a close relationship. I knew it wouldn't go anywhere in the long run.

In the meantime, the three-month trial period of living in our caravan went by quite quickly, and my parents decided to invite David to join us when we moved to another Sydney suburb called Turramurra. Dad started ministering at their new church in the beginning of 1972. Since David was not where I needed him to be spiritually for me to have a serious relationship with him, I thought I would keep my eye out for other eligible young men. For me, a new church meant a new beginning.

It was not long after moving that I met a young man who was the current youth leader at the new church. Bob was serious about Jesus, and we established a closer relationship over the next few months. Then one night at a Bible study and prayer time we held at the parsonage, David attended and sincerely asked for prayer. He knew he hadn't been walking with Jesus—he was walking on the edge of a relationship with Him. He wanted what we all had. He saw that our faith was alive and real, and he wanted it too. So we prayed for him.

Not long after, Bob quickly figured out that he and I were no more! I was a bit embarrassed, but there was no ignoring that the Holy Spirit had definitely ignited the element I had been missing in David. He became very

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active in youth outreach, we renewed our friendship, and when I was twenty and David twenty-five, Dad married us. It was all really very sweet. I married my best friend, and afterward, David liked to quip, “We lived together before we got married, but we didn’t sleep together!”

* * *

Looking at our story, I say with complete sincerity how very important I think it is to have more similarities of background than not with the person you marry. It’s vital to be equally yoked and to share the Holy Spirit, not only in ministry but in daily living and in prayer together. Your similarities affect how you relate, they affect the level of understanding in how the other thinks, and they help to build a strong foundation as you grow and work through tough times as well as your successes together.

With that being said, even though David and I genuinely enjoyed each other’s company, we didn’t know just how vital our spiritual and relational backdrop would be for the series of events to come—events that would catapult us out of normal, traditional ways of living into adventures that would stretch our faith beyond our wildest imagination.