

# SHELTER IN THE VINE: AN UNEXPECTED SANCTUARY

Charlotte B. Thomason on a Spiritual Haven

*“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will  
say to the Lord, my refuge and my fortress, my  
God, in whom I trust.” Psalm 91:1-2*

The term “sanctuary” evokes images of houses of worship, retreats, havens, and other places or conditions that create a sense of safety. For individuals who experience trauma, finding a place of safety is not always easy. Sometimes safety comes in an unexpected way that integrates the physical and the spiritual to create a sanctuary for an abused child. At age eight, I found safety in an old grape arbor in our backyard. Below is an excerpt of the chapter from my memoir, *What Kind of Love is This? Finding God in Darkness*, where I describe how Psalm 91:1-2 (quoted above) came to life for me in a profound way.

There are characters, terms, and concepts that may require some contextual explanation because the excerpt is from Chapter Three of the book. Russell is my older brother. *The game* is the term my family used to describe the abuse. Finally, I wrote the story through the lens of my younger self. When I describe watching my father abuse a little girl, I am dissociating. The little girl in the bed is me.

\*\*\*

After my baptism, I wondered why Jesus didn't stop the abuse. I also wondered why I couldn't feel Jesus in my heart like the pre-baptismal teacher promised. I didn't understand how Jesus could be in my heart. When I tried to figure it out, I had more questions than answers.

*Maybe it's the warm feeling that I had in the water, but I don't feel that way all the time. Where are you? Why don't you rescue me? Did I do something wrong? Were you lying to me when you said I'd be clean?*

Eventually, I realized His hiding place was right in front of me.

Each Sunday I hung on every word my Sunday school teacher said, hoping for answers to my silent questions.

*How do I fix this? Where do I find Jesus?*

"Why does Jesus hide?" I asked the teacher.

"What? He doesn't hide," she replied, looking up from her lesson.

"Yes, he does," I challenged. "I can't find him."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I CAN'T FIND HIM," I shouted. "Did I make Him mad at me? I felt Him, but now, He's g-g-gone," I could barely get the words out.

"He's not mad at you, sweetie," she assured me. "He loves you, and He's in your heart."

How can he be in my heart? I don't feel him. He's gone. He must hate me.

I raised my arm, clenched my fist, and pounded my chest so hard I choked and crumbled to the floor, sobbing.

"No, He's not."

The teacher dropped her lesson book, kneeled beside me, and tried to comfort me. I put my arms up to block

her touch. "It's ok, sweetie, it's ok," she whispered as she patted my back until I stopped crying. Still holding me, she went on with the lesson. Then, she spoke the most important words I had heard since I saw the picture of Jesus, "The Bible says Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches, but to grow, we have to stay connected to Him."

*The Vines. Yes, that's how I find Him. He's in the vines. NOW, I KNOW how to find him.* I smiled at the teacher and hugged her as hard as I could.

As we walked out of the classroom, Russell interrupted my thoughts. "That was embarrassing. They think you're crazy."

"I don't care. I know where to find Jesus. Didn't you hear her, Jesus is the vine?" I announced as we went into the sanctuary.

Russell rolled his eyes and slipped into the pew next to Momma. I didn't hear a word of Daddy's sermon that Sunday. As I fidgeted with a ribbon on my dress, I couldn't wait for church to end.

*I'm coming, Jesus. I'm coming to see you.*

When we got home, I quickly changed into play clothes and rushed to the backyard.

*Please be here. Please be here.*

During the first two years we lived in Ogden, Russell and I spent hours in our backyard, creating adventures where we were invincible. Once the adventure began, everything else faded from view, and the make-believe world became the place where we were in control. An apple tree in the center of the yard soared high above the house like a giant guarding the occupants. Depending on the story, the tree became the center mast of a pirate ship or a rocket to outer space. The wall of a free-standing

garage framed one side of the yard. Inside the garage, dust-filled beams of sunlight pierced the darkness and became lights from a rocket or the blasts from ray guns. Hooks of many sizes lined the wooden walls of the garage, and scraps of wood and metal littered the floor, providing tools and weapons for our imaginary adventures. Withered grape vines covered the bottom half of the tall chain-link fence that separated the yard from the school playground. In one corner, remnants of a grape arbor provided a makeshift shelter for a lost hero, a cave for a damsel in distress, or a hideout for a villain. Now, the arbor took on a new meaning.

The smell of rotting apples filled my nostrils as I ran past the apple tree. In my rush to get to the arbor, I tripped on a fallen branch and crashed to the ground. As I brushed the leaves and grass off my arms, I spied a stick lying near the branch that caused my fall. For a second, I forgot why I came to the backyard. I ran my fingers across the stick's edge.

*SWISH, SWISH, I have you now, you dirty scoundrel.*

I wielded my weapon at an imaginary foe.

*SWISH, SWISH. Wait, the vine, I have to go to the vine.*

I dropped the stick and continued walking toward my destination. I pushed aside a few straggling tendrils at the entrance and stepped into the enclosure. A few green tendrils weaved their way up the fence, across the chicken-wire arch, ending at the ground on the opposite side. Dry, dead branches interweaved along the arch, creating a solid wall on either side. A short wooden fence at the back completed the enclosure. Sunlight streaking through gaps illuminated a small tree stump. I ambled toward the stump, being careful to avoid the remnants of Russell's and my past adventures.

*Have you been here all this time, Jesus?*

As I touched a branch, a soft breeze brushed my face. I sat on the stump, closed my eyes, and waited.

“What are you doing back here?” Russell interrupted my solitude.

“Nothing, just sitting.” I wasn’t about to share my secret with him.

“Wanna play pirates?”

“No.”

“Come on, please.”

Ignoring his plea, I turned my back to him.

“Come on, play with me.”

“How about superheroes and villains?” he suggested. “You can be the hero this time.”

With a sigh, I gave the arbor a parting glance, grabbed the stick, smiled, and exited the arbor.

The mission to save the world from a supervillain soon overtook reality. As promised, Russell let me be the hero while he was the villain. Thoughts of triumph filled my head as I plotted ways to defeat my foe. The yard transformed into an intergalactic battleground where I was in complete control. As the story unfolded, an unfamiliar rage filled my body. With a strength I didn’t know I possessed, I knocked Russell’s weapon out of his hands and struck him on the head with my make-believe sword. He fell to his knees to surrender, but I continued my assault, hitting him repeatedly with all my strength. He turned into a monster I had to defeat no matter what the cost. My entire body shook with rage as I struck his face and arms.

“Stop it, that hurts.” Russell raised his arms to shield his face.

Ignoring his plea, I shouted, “You won’t hurt anyone again. You must die.”

My sword landed another blow.

“You can’t escape.”

“NO. Stop it. Stop hitting me.” He gripped my arm so hard that I dropped my sword. I tumbled backward but steadied myself before I fell. The intergalactic landscape faded, the sword turned into a stick, “I’m s-s-sorry.” I rushed to the arbor and curled up in a corner.

*What is wrong with me? Why did I do that? I’m sorry, Jesus. I’m sorry. Don’t hate me. Please don’t hate me.*

Tears fell on the dirt beneath my trembling body.

*Where are you, Jesus? Where are you?*

Fear replaced rage as I curled tighter, hoping to disappear. My heart pounded like a wild animal struggling to escape its prison. I couldn’t breathe. A shadow blocked the entrance to the shelter and a voice, “Charlotte,” made me inhale enough air to keep me from passing out.

Hopeful, I looked up, but the shadow was not who I expected.

Daddy’s gigantic frame blocked the sunlight. “Russell said you hit him. Why did you do that?” To my surprise, he smiled, but his kind face didn’t convince me I was out of danger.

“I-I-I don’t know. I’m sorry. He made me mad.”

He reached out his hand. “Come here, let’s go inside.”

I recoiled further into the corner, shook my head, and attempted to speak, but sobs prevented any words from escaping my lips.

Daddy’s eyes widened, and his face turned crimson. Through a clenched jaw, he demanded, “NOW, Charlotte, come with me, NOW.”

The dry branches of the grapevine rustled as a breeze disturbed the stillness.

*Is that you, Jesus?*

“I said, NOW.”

Yanking me from my perch on the stump, Daddy pulled me out of my refuge. My feet left grooves in the dirt as I resisted his effort. At the entrance, one hand caught a vine, and I begged. *Don't make me leave. Help me, please.*

On the way to the back door, he picked up my sword, grinned, and swung it at my bare legs.

“You can't just hit your brother.”

*WHACK!*

“How do you like that?”

*WHACK!*

I danced around trying to avoid each swipe, but most of them reached their target. By the time we got to the house, my legs were on fire.

When we reached the backdoor, I glanced at the arbor one last time,

*Help me, please help me.*

I felt something, not a touch, but something warm, something that stopped my tears and made me smile for just a second.

*You **are** here, aren't you? Save me, please save me.*

The warmth inside me disappeared as another blow reached my legs.

Daddy sent me to my room for the rest of the day.

*That's all?* I thought, *I'll find you tomorrow, Jesus, then everything will change.*

Just as my eyes closed, I heard, “I love you.”

*Yes, you came. I knew you'd come,* but then I realized it wasn't Jesus.

Without another word, Daddy slid into the bed and snuggled against me. The stench of his sweaty body made me want to throw up. As he touched me, the room began spinning. I closed my eyes to stop the spinning, but it didn't help. Without warning, I was at the foot of the bed, watching Daddy on top of a *girl in the bed*.

*Who is the little girl in my bed?*

I dismissed the question and looked around the room for clues, but nothing showed me the child's identity. As I played with toys at the foot of the bed, I peered at the girl in the bed a few times and didn't like what Daddy was doing to her. She was crying and fighting him, but he was so strong that she failed. Sharp, burning pain on my cheek brought me back to my bed.

"When will you learn?" Daddy whispered. He kissed me, stood up, and walked away. Sneering at me, he whispered, "No one loves you more than me."

I managed a smile, but I wanted to shout, *I don't want you to love me, I want you to go away. Maybe love is a lie. If Jesus' love is like Daddy's, I don't want it.*

When the door closed, I turned toward the wall and thought, *I'm going back to the vines tomorrow*, as tears rolled down my dirty cheeks. *Please be there, Jesus, please be there.* I thought I heard someone whisper, *You're safe, little one, I'm here.*

I remembered the warmth and safety of the baptismal water and wanted the feeling back. I had so many questions, but no one wanted to understand them or answer them. *Maybe Jesus will tell me the truth tomorrow*, was my last thought before sleep overtook me.

The next day after school, I went to the arbor as soon as I changed out of my school dress. Once inside, I turned my face upward and basked in the streams of sunlight.

*Are you here? I have so many questions for you. Please, are you here?*

*“I’m here, Charlotte,”* a soft voice whispered.

When I opened my eyes, a man stood next to me. He was as tall as Daddy but had more hair. His dark brown hair curled around his face and reached his shoulders. A glow brightened the entire arbor, and his eyes twinkled when he smiled. His white robe dusted the ground as he stepped toward me.

*It’s him. Finally, you are here. You are in the vines, just like she said.*

He sat cross-legged, reached out his hand and said, “Come, sit here,” motioning to the spot next to him.

I hesitated for only a moment before I moved toward his outstretched arms. We sat for what seemed like hours.

*I won’t ask questions today. Maybe tomorrow but not today.* I sighed as I fell asleep in His arms. No one had held me like this before, and I didn’t want to spoil it.

Trips to my sanctuary became a daily occurrence. Inside the safety of the vines, I found new imaginary friends, and I talked to Jesus. Sometimes we sat and listened to Jesus tell us stories that made us laugh.

*If I just listen and be good, he’ll stay.*

I never asked Jesus my questions because I was afraid he’d leave. Sometimes we talked, but mostly he just smiled and watched us play. Inside the arbor, I forgot *the game* that Daddy made me play. Inside the arbor, I was beautiful. Inside the arbor, I felt protected.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Thomason, “Chapter 3-Shelter,” in *What Kind of Love is This? Finding God in the Darkness*, (Chicago, IL: Kharis Publishing, 2021), 18-24.

\*\*\*

Throughout *What Kind of Love is This? Finding God in the Darkness* I describe times when Jesus showed up at moments of great need, but none were as impactful as my afternoons in the arbor. At age eight, my thinking remained very concrete, so I believed Jesus was in the vine. When we moved from Ogden, I cried for days because I thought I had lost my sanctuary. I believed Jesus would not follow me to our new home. In desperation, I took a small twig from the arbor with me, hoping He would find me through the twig. Although I could not recreate the sanctuary I found in the arbor, Jesus found me no matter how many times we moved. I did not always recognize Him, but He was there. He was my unexpected sanctuary.

*What Kind of Love is This? Finding God in the Darkness* can be purchased at: <https://charlottethomason.com/Amazon> and <https://charlottethomason.com/audible>

For a signed copy, go to:  
<https://charlottethomason.com/specialoffer>