

► By Kelly Ng

Growing up, Joann* (not her real name) was always plugging away at her school work – she'd rise in the wee hours to self-study, spend as much time as she could at school, and pretty much topped her class throughout secondary school.

But it wasn't just that she wanted good grades. Joann believed, even at a tender age, that doing well in school was the only way she could even have a slightest shot at life.

26 From an abusive household, Joann was always told that she was unlovable and a good-for-nothing.

"My biological father didn't allow me to study at home because he said, the more I studied, the more stupid I would get. So I was only told to do housework, or sit or stand at a corner," said Joann, who is now in her late teens.

GOD

in the midst
of abuse

...A story from life to life

"So I would study at night when everyone was asleep. I studied very hard, because I thought that in the future, I would have to take care of myself, and stay alone, get my own house, and all that stuff."

School was also her "safe place", Joann added. Sometimes, at least.

Unless she ran into her older siblings in school. "They would always criticise me when I was with my friends. Whenever I looked happy, they would scold me or say something unpleasant. So I started to close up. I told my friends

not to talk to me after school because my sisters would get angry," Joann recalled.

BASE YOUR FAITH ON WHAT IS TRUE

By divine provision and grace, Joann became acquainted with her foster parents over two years ago, and is now living with them. She is still learning what it means to be loved by an earthly family, and to also show love to them and becoming vulnerable.

But the years leading to this significant event were no less life-changing.

Those years were when Joann first got acquainted with the perfect and present heavenly Father, wrestled with her faith, and then continued to keep close to God through the ups and downs of life.

When she turned 12, Joann was sent to a Christian residential home for young girls. Although that environment came with other challenges, it gave her a break from living on her guard every moment, nervous about when the next blow would strike.



LOOKING
FOR A HOME

It was also at the home that Joann first heard the gospel.

She recalled, "One of the staff shared about what Jesus did and all that. I don't think I really understood, but when she asked if I wanted to accept (Christ as my Saviour), I just said I accept."

She started attending church and felt loved by fellow congregants, many of whom showered her with gifts.

But then she realised – she wasn't quite experiencing God Himself. He felt distant.

"Whenever I heard others share testimonies of how God would comfort them and speak to them, I also wanted to be able to feel that. But I couldn't, and I didn't. That was when I fell away from God," she said.

Still, God continued to pursue her.

As many of the home's volunteers come from church groups or Christian parachurch organisations, Joann continued to be exposed to teaching from the Bible.

The first turning point came during a chat with one of the regular volunteers.

"He told me this, 'God is already so close to you. If He comes nearer, you will bump into Him.' It sounded funny, but when I thought about it, I felt that it made sense," Joann related.

Christianity is not only about feelings, or feeling good and happy all the time, she said.

"I guess deep down, I knew that God would either be entirely real, or entirely not, He can't be real to some and not real to others. So I felt that I shouldn't base my faith on how I feel, but based on what I know is true."

And then came news that social workers had found her a suitable foster family – years after she had given up on that hope.

"Since the first day I stepped into the children's home, I was asked if I was interested in being fostered. But after waiting and praying for a few years, I had given up on that hope. I kept getting reminded of what my biological parents said, that no one would ever want me," she said.

"So I was shocked when they told me that someone wanted to foster me. Moreover, it was a Christian family."

FOR EVERYTHING, GOD HAS A REASON

This convinced Joann that God knows the deepest longings in her heart and cares for her intimately.

"It showed me that God knows and He understands, and although sometimes it seems like nothing is happening, He is actually working behind the scenes. Although I already gave up hopes of having a foster family, He still didn't and He already had a plan for me," she said.

Asked if she thinks about where God was through the abuse and violence she had previously experienced, Joann replied, "I do wonder why I had to go through that. But I have learnt that He doesn't allow things for no reason."

She also cited the account of Joseph in the Bible, who was thrown into a pit then sold into slavery by his jealous biological brothers, but later appointed the ruler of Egypt. Joseph later said to his brothers: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." (Gen 50:20)

It would have been easy for Joseph to throw in the towel and walk away from God. Yet as the story unfolded, we see that with every setback, God was moving him toward the greatest position in Egypt. Similarly, in each setback in our lives today, God is moving us to glory.

Joann explained, "This verse comes to my mind whenever I think back upon those days. If I hadn't experienced that with my biological family and I didn't have to go to a home, I wouldn't have known God in the first place because my own family was not Christian. So in a way, experiencing all that was what led me to know God."

Reflecting now on those days when she could only complete her schoolwork by getting up before the crack of dawn, Joann sees that God's hand was in those moments too.

"Back then, I didn't have any alarm clock, or phone, or anything, so I wouldn't be able to control what time I got up. Yet it happened many times, when I'd think to myself, I hope I wake up at 4am the next day, and I really did. It was like, really 4am," she said.

"At that time, I didn't know God, so I always thought, well, I'm just lucky. But I know that this couldn't have been just coincidence. It's how God works; He let me get up at precisely that time so I could finish my work. And now I see how He had been working even before I knew Him."

REMEMBER CHRIST

While Joann was over the moon to finally have a family that loves her, it was still a tough process of adapting, at least initially, because of what she had experienced with her biological family.

"Although I know they are two different families, whenever I'm with my foster family, I'm less open than when I am with my friends. It was hard to open up to them and talk to them, although they are very nice and very welcoming," she said.

After much assurance from her foster parents that they would never leave her, Joann is gradually learning to embrace – and reciprocate – their love and hospitality.

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Over the last two years, she’s forged many special memories with them, including hanging out with her younger sister and going on family trips together. “We were at a theme park for one of these trips and there were all these rides that I really wanted to try, but I was too afraid to go alone. My dad doesn’t usually like to do these things, but he still decided to come so that I could experience it. And in the end, my mom, my sister came along too. It was really special.”

They also come together as a family every evening to read and pray over God’s word. Currently, they are reading from the books of Samuel.

Most importantly, Joann sees this gift of a God-centered, Christ-treasuring family as a reminder of the hope we all have in our heavenly family.

Have our experiences of our earthly fathers tainted our understanding of God’s character as the perfect Father? Even through great trials, we can know and embrace God as our ultimate Father, upon whom all our hopes rest and in whom all our longings will one day be filled.

Joann recognises firmly that even as God has provided her current family, her experiences with her biological family were also part of God’s plan.

Citing Romans 8:28, Joann mused, “Although my childhood was painful and I still may not know why He has allowed that, I believe that He works for the good of those who love Him.”

She continued, “Remembering how Jesus suffered, is the most powerful thing that will bring us through our struggles.”

“From a King, He was brought down to the lowest level, mocked by others and He suffered a painful and shameful death on the cross. Now, He is risen and with God. We should be encouraged that although there is so much pain now, that pain won’t last forever because God will take it away. I don’t think there is anything else in this world that can give us this much hope in life.”

Joann now hopes to walk with friends who are wrestling in similar challenges, so as to remind them that God is their companion through these dark times.

“I know what it feels like to be alone when you are facing many challenges. I remember I would always wish there was a friend who can help me or who can spend time together with me. Now, I want to be that friend to those who are facing these hard times. I want to let them know that even when people closest to them betray them or reject them; there are still people and God who care for them. And that there is hope in life.”



Kelly Ng is a journalist and documentary filmmaker in Singapore. She enjoys distance running, being in nature and has a soft spot for snail mail. She attends Redemption Hill Church in Singapore.