

A person stands on a large, dark rock formation on a mountain peak. To the left of the person is a tall, dark evergreen tree. The background shows a vast valley with rolling hills and mountains, partially obscured by mist or low clouds. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The overall scene is serene and majestic.

Big Challenges, Even Bigger GOD

*Finding God
Faithful in the Hard
Moments of Life*

Shireen Spencer

Trust and faithfulness: two vibrant threads that are beautifully woven throughout an often dark life tapestry. From a childhood with a blind parent to extended sexual abuse to two miscarriages to numerous major surgeries to a devastating cancer diagnosis, Shireen's journey has been daunting. Yet even as the fabric of her life has revealed varying hues, because of her deep trust in God, Shireen has consistently leaned into His faithfulness. Wrap yourself in her story... soak in her lessons of comfort and provision... and embrace the God who loves us through all of the colours of our lives.

—Ann Mainse

Heart to Heart Marriage & Family Ministries
Author, Speaker, TV Host of *A Better Us*

In *Big Challenges, Even Bigger God*, Shireen shares her story with transparency and explores every moment in which she faced overwhelming trials. Her determination to walk through fires with faith is deeply inspiring. God's fingerprints and the evidence of His presence in these moments are explicit. How great is our God that He can reach His hands down from heaven to carry us through moments that seem insurmountable. Thank you, Shireen, for the courage you had to write this memoir that points back to our Heavenly Father and His deep resounding love.

—Cyndi Desjardins Wilkens

International Speaker
Author of *Shine On: The Remarkable True Story
of a Quadruple Amputee*

Big Challenges, Even Bigger God presents a glimpse into the real life and real faith of a wife, mother, and pastor. Shireen Spencer passionately and brilliantly epitomizes the truth that life does not have to be perfect to be fulfilling, whilst navigating the experiences of life. This book is more than just a great read—it's a road map for successful living in the face of adversity.

—Richard J. Brown
Lead Pastor, Kingsway Community Life Centre
Toronto, ON

This book will inspire you! The stories regarding Shireen's life will help you to see a big God who truly works in the good and bad experiences in your life for something good. A positive and godly perspective on life's problems. If you are currently going through a life storm, this book will encourage you to keep trusting God, no matter what situation you are facing.

—Rev. Dr. Tina Pitamber, B.Sc., M.Div., D.Min.
Lead Pastor, Solid Rock Community Church of the Nazarene
Richmond Hill, ON

BIG CHALLENGES, EVEN BIGGER GOD

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Chapter Four

BEAUTY FOR ASHES

It was the era of Michael W. Smith and Amy Grant. We sang a lot of their songs at the top of our lungs as we travelled on the buses for youth group or missions trips. We were those teens, sticking our heads out of the bus windows, singing, waving, and laughing in between the lyrics. We were silly and happy. Those were the good old days. I don't know how the more mature adults handled it! They must have really loved us.

One of those trips is forever etched in my memory. It was one of the last missions trips I did as a youth. How many young people get to go and make a difference in the lives of so many people—from babies to seniors? These lives were precious to the Lord, and I was so privileged to be a part of what God was doing.

The acoustics of the barn were second to none. Even those who couldn't sing sounded beautiful in the depth and space of this room as we gathered to praise God and pray for one another. These moments were precious, strengthening us for the challenges ahead of ministering to families in great need. They needed clothes and food. They needed medicine. They needed

jobs. I wondered how my presence was helping them, and soon found out that they needed practical hands to show that someone cared. We enjoyed fellowship. I babysat the most beautiful baby girl with jewel blue, clear, ocean-coloured eyes. I cleaned. I took food to them. I served, and this made my heart very glad. They needed Jesus, and I was able to share His love and lead people to a relationship with Him. This was an experience I would never forget. This trip changed my life forever! I am still in awe of how God used me. He was working to strengthen and heal their lives.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)

Negatives only produce great photos in darkness. When they are finally done and exposed to the light, what they reveal is beautiful and can be enjoyed. God can take what was very painful and dark, and make beauty from ashes. He has done that for me. His light shines in through my dark spaces.

One of the most painful experiences in my life happened when I was just embarking on adulthood and doing what the Lord called me to do. I was sexually abused by a man in leadership at the church. It happened over a period of months, starting while I was volunteering at

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the church I attended, continuing while I was leading a missions trip, and only ending when we returned home. There are many things about this time in my life I could have done differently. I could have told someone sooner. I could have positioned myself in such a way that it didn't happen again or multiple times. Who knows? Saying "would've, could've, should've" doesn't change the fact that it happened, or the heartache that took years to repair.

The night before our youth group left to go on the missions trip that I had looked forward to all year, my vision of what God was going to do in me and through me became a mess of confusion and questions! Since we were going to leave so early in the morning, it had been decided that we would all stay at the church and sleep there so that no one was late for the designated time when we would embark on this amazing adventure. It sure was an adventure, but not what I was expecting. It was amazingly hard and painful, but surprising in seeing what God can do with a mess. His strength is surely made perfect in my weakness. His grace is truly sufficient.

The boys slept downstairs and the girls upstairs. I have never been one to sleep well or comfortably outside of my own bed. Truth be told, I don't even sleep well there! When I can't sleep, I spend time in prayer or worship. It has always been a natural habit of mine. No one taught me this; I just figured I might as well do something valuable with my time. But through the years it has served me well, and I am so thankful to have continued growing in this discipline. I am sure it is what prevented that time from being even worse than what I experienced.

While we were all supposed to be sleeping, I heard my name called. It was a whisper, but an urgent one. I looked up and there he was at the door, calling me. I got out of bed and went to the office outside of the room we were in. I was the designated female leader for the trip, so I thought there was a problem that needed to be solved.

There certainly was a problem, but I could never have imagined what I was about to face. He pulled me onto his lap and reached to caress my breast, then planted a kiss on my lips. The room was spinning and the actions happened so fast, with no room for me to breathe. I couldn't get my thoughts to catch up to my reality. When I did, it had already happened. I ran out of the office and into the room of sleeping, young girls. The sight and sound of those girls should have been nothing less than peaceful, but for me it was the beginning of a very dark storm.

The morning came fast. The sun rose early and bright, but in my soul there was nothing but darkness. I had no time to even let the clouds show. I went on the trip anyway, because I couldn't let them down. How could I be responsible for ruining a missions trip? How could I prevent these lives from experiencing the mission of a lifetime that they had all worked so hard to go on? So I smiled, and went on as if nothing had happened. I couldn't let anyone know what happened the night before, so I made the choice to let it remain a secret. I just moved on with the day that everyone else was enjoying.

Later, "please don't" was all I could say, not knowing that I had already been violated again. I was standing in a communal washroom in the barn that was to be our home for the week. There was one washroom for the males and one for the females. I thought I was safe because, being a very private person, I had chosen to get up early before anyone else would think of waking to go have a shower in private. I figured that I was safe because I was quiet, and I was the only one on the trip that was such an early bird. I was wrong. Maybe I wasn't so quiet in my movements, or perhaps he had outsmarted me by watching and waiting on my every move. I walked out of the shower with my towel on, only to be faced with the truth that I had shared this space unknowingly. He was waiting for me. He stretched out his hand to take off my towel and to let me know that he thought I was beautiful. What did he mean?

On our way to this location of ministry, we'd had to stop halfway. The trip would have been too long to do it in one day, so we broke it up, and were billeted in someone's home overnight. It was a beautiful home, and the host was warm and welcoming. The meals were delicious. I can still smell the waves of fresh baking rising into the atmosphere. I can hear the innocent laughter around the table as we listened to stories of what God had done in people's lives. The sound of loud snoring when I really wanted to sleep still makes me chuckle. Although I don't remember the names of everyone there, the faces of those beautiful people still remain with me.

But that memory is relived through shattered glass. The picture is no longer as beautiful as it could have been. I didn't know until that moment in the barn washroom that when he told me I was beautiful, it was because he had watched me undress, shower, and get dressed through the keyhole of that beautiful home's bathroom. How could all of this have happened without him being caught? How was it possible that no one saw what was happening to me?

Unbelievably, God was able to work through this pain, using me to be a blessing in the lives of the younger girls I was responsible for and also the families we ministered to while away. I told myself that I couldn't do anything about my pain and the situation that I was in, and that I wasn't about to waste this trip since we were so far from home. We worked with families and helped to repair broken-down homes in areas of great poverty. We took care of seniors in a great deal of pain who just needed someone to help clean and cook. We took care of babies while their moms tried to find work. Those people are forever etched in my memory. I know that Jesus' love was shown to them, and that one day I will see them again in heaven.

At that time in my life, that was my wish and my consolation. While there was darkness in my life, I was able to bring light

to them. I remember wonderful times of praise and prayer happening, even while the enemy was at work against me. I took up my cross and followed Jesus into serving. Serving God and others takes your mind off yourself. Boy, did I need to think about something besides myself! I had every reason to be selfish, but I couldn't. Love was still compelling me forward—God's love. I was thankful that He was able to use me. The joy on the outside could only have been the Lord, because the sorrow inside was trying hard to pull me down. I kept my eyes on Jesus. I cried lots when no one was looking. I muffled my cries and dried my tears with my pillow. Prayer. Praise. Cry. Read and receive the Word. Repeat.

I held onto God, and let Him hold me. It was all I could do. I held onto the Scriptures, and those Scriptures are still the ones that carry me through different dark times in life. I believed that I was not alone, as I still believe now.

And the Lord, He is the One who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed. (Deuteronomy 31:8)

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37–39)

The many truths in Psalm 139 carried me then and continue to carry me today!

Unfortunately, when we returned home this situation didn't come to an end. What I haven't told you yet is that the person

who violated me was married. His wife had just had a baby. She and I were close—we had spent lots of time together in their home—and one day she invited me to stay overnight. I didn't want to say no. I didn't want things to change between us. I wanted things to stay normal.

Please—don't judge me. As a young person I valued my relationship with her, and didn't know how to avoid the situation while keeping our friendship intact.

I didn't think there was any way that he would be so bold as to try anything again, as we were in his home and his wife was present. If I just acted normally, everything would be fine. Right?

Wrong! The evening went well. I spent a wonderful time hanging out with his wife and playing with the baby. We cooked in the kitchen and enjoyed great conversation. My fears were only mine. They were not shared with or obvious to anyone else. I prayed a lot inside and laughed a lot outside.

However, the night came fast. I was tucked away in a bedroom in the basement while the family remained upstairs, far away from me—surely too far for any problem to come my way. But the enemy is able to sneak in and fit through the tiniest of spaces. He is able to turn something apparently safe into something so very dangerous. He makes opportunities out of things we wouldn't imagine. Yes, the night came and passed quickly, but it was the morning that surprised me! I awoke from a surprisingly comfortable sleep to the mouth-watering smell of well-cooked eggs and homemade biscuits. Remember: I don't sleep well, especially not in another bed, and even more so in the home of an abuser, but this night I had—at least for a few hours.

She must have been the one busy in the kitchen, distracted by cooking and the baby, because he came to get me. I heard the knock on the bedroom door and then it quickly opened. As fast as it had opened, it closed, leaving both of us on the same side of the door. The next thing I knew, we were both in the bed

and my safe space changed. I guess the time wasn't too long or unusual, because we heard her sweet voice calling for breakfast. In my vague recollection, there was a response that just let her know he was coming up and I was getting ready. Although what had already taken place was bad, her voice stopped the worst from happening. I am so thankful for God's intervention! Psalm 139 became real to me again. There is no place where I am not in God's presence. He stretches out His hand and saves me.

You will be proud of me. After this incident, I cut ties from both of them. I was sad for her and me. He tried to beg me to continue being friends, promising that he would stop and that he had gone to God and repented.

If that's true, I am glad. God is a forgiving God. I needed to have God forgive and heal me, and he needed God's forgiveness too. But the process of forgiveness did not need to be done in each other's company.

To be violated and have any innocence stolen from you is a hard thing to work through. To go through it alone without anyone to share it with is even harder in some ways, I think. To finally share and be blamed is the hardest. That all happened to me. The enemy really does come to kill, steal and destroy, and he was trying to destroy me in every way.

I had just begun my first year of university on a scholarship. The abuse had taken place the summer before. I was going to put it all behind me and focus on the good that the Lord had opened up for me, but my first required course changed all of that for me.

I walked into the lecture hall, and the professor looked just like an older version of my abuser—the tone of his voice and speech pattern were exactly the same! I tried to change my schedule. I tried to take the course through another professor. It just didn't happen. I had to keep taking this course, which would have already been very difficult even without this challenge, since numbers were not my strength and I truly would have hated

statistics even if this horrible situation had not presented itself! That year I lost my scholarship, since this one course caused me to lose my straight-A status.

I lost much more than that, though. It was a dark year for me. I lost myself. I hung tightly to God, but I felt like an empty shell holding on to the Lord. I became a different person. I was hiding, even from God. I was holding on to Him but not looking at Him. I appeared to have it all together, but inside and outside everything was falling apart. I was getting sick, but the doctors couldn't find anything wrong and told my parents in effect, "There's nothing we can do. There's nothing physically wrong with her that we can find. This must be something psychological." I couldn't hold on to this secret any longer. It was killing me and changing me into a person I didn't want to be.

I decided to make a visit to some dear friends who'd had a significant spiritual impact in my life, but had moved a few hours away. They knew me. They loved me. I knew this to be true. Seeking out people who can pray for me and have spiritual wisdom to share has been a life pattern and discipline of mine. It took me a little longer with this situation, but I knew it had to be done! Although the result wasn't anything that either of us expected, I know that they were right to have me unload this secret and share it with my family. I know that this was God working in me. He was teaching me to be totally open with Him and others. He was working on me, and I was learning to trust Him in the process of a lengthy journey. Without going into all the details, I will say this: Being open and vulnerable can come with a cost. It is painful, but with the pain comes healing if we allow it.

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I told my family. I told one of my closest friends. What I got in response to my truth was blame. I think the question was, “What did you do to make this happen? This doesn’t happen to good, Christian girls, and Christian men don’t just do this.” In this moment, all the lessons and sermons that I had been taught on forgiveness were challenging my obedience. It is very easy to forgive when you don’t have to, when there is nothing yet to forgive. But real forgiveness is a process. It was a choice I had made before that day and have made over and over since then, concerning this situation and many others.

I had to forgive my abuser. I had to forgive my family. I knew they loved me, and I know they still do. Hurt people hurt people, and humans are not always good at handling disappointment. If Jesus could forgive from the cross, I had to forgive. There was no other passage to freedom, healing, or right relationship with God, and I wasn’t willing to give that up!

And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors... For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.
(Matthew 6:12, 14-15)

I had to forgive me. I had to forgive myself for not being stronger. I had to forgive myself for allowing it to go on so long. I had to forgive myself for having head knowledge, but not the boldness to do what I knew to be right. I had to forgive God. Strange to have to forgive God since He and His ways are perfect, yet as much as I loved God, I was angry and disappointed that He let all of this happen. How could He be so good and not stop this? How could He be so good and allow my family to blame me? How could He be so good and allow me to finally share my secret, only to regret doing it? I heard it once said somewhere

that we don't look to our circumstances to answer the question of whether God is good; we need only look to the cross when there is doubt. The cross automatically answers that question. So I cried, prayed, and praised at the foot of the cross.

I found God again. He is so good. He brought forgiveness to my life and healing to my heart.

BIO

Shireen Spencer is a gifted preacher and motivational speaker who loves to share her story of what God has done through her struggles to encourage and bring healing to others suffering the same challenges and heartaches. She is a pastor, an associate with Family Life Canada, an elementary school teacher, and a Mary Kay business owner. She is also a fully trained, equipped, and licensed officiant and life celebration professional. She's been described as friendly, gregarious, and passionate about bringing out the best in people. She is married to the love of her life, Che Spencer, and together they have two wonderful boys. They currently reside in the Greater Toronto Area.