

ZORRO
and ME

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Adventures with a Masked Man Wielding a Sword

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To Those Who've Lived the Journey and
Made the Journey Worth Living:

Zorro (Mel)

Zorro Jr. (Matthew)

The Two Zorrettes (Shelly and Sherisa)



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INTRODUCTION: GOD LOVES TO LAUGH

SOME VIEW GOD as the avenger and picture him sitting on a clouded throne with a scowl on his face. As he points his finger, a lightning bolt shoots forth directed toward people to zap them with a huge electrical shock when they get out of line. When I visualize God, he is here with us, walking beside us. He empathizes when we suffer, he holds us when we cry, and he shares our joy. He weeps with us. He laughs with us.

Does God laugh? I think so. Creating the duck-billed platypus and the giraffe should merit some points on the chuckle meter. Long before animated cartoons desensitized us to talking animals he made Balaam's donkey speak.

The medical profession has come to see what the Bible told us all along: a merry heart is good medicine. Laughter improves emotional, mental, and even physical health. Laughter relieves stress, lowers blood pressure, and strengthens our immune system. Contagious laughter connects us with others. Those who laugh, live longer. God created laughter and it is good.

Of course God has standards. Unfortunately mankind has polluted humor today to something crass and crude, inappropriate, or demeaning to others. God doesn't stoop to such levels. People wouldn't have to lower themselves either, if they learned to laugh at themselves. The ability to see the comical side of everyday life helps one gain perspective and keeps events in context.

Harriet Beecher Stowe once said, "A person without a sense of humor is like a wagon without springs—jolted by every pebble in the road."

What does that mean? Well, it means those who can't see the funny side of life turn the most minor upset into a major offense. They fuss and fume over thwarted plans. They sneer at life's inconveniences. Their defensive attitudes keep them from enjoying daily life.

My ministry is built on this philosophy: God loves to laugh. And if you let him, he will laugh with you. If you don't, he'll laugh at you. I'd rather be laughing with God.

You don't have to wait for someone to tell a joke to giggle. Everyday life is full of humorous possibilities. Our family has learned that lesson through the years, and if we're ever unsure about whether or not something is laughable, we ask ourselves the following four questions:

1. Will this be funny a year from now? Five years from now?
2. Would this be funny if we saw it happening to someone else?
3. Would this be funny if we saw it on a sitcom?
4. Will this be a humorous story we will eventually share with others?

If the answer to any of these questions is "Yes," then we just save ourselves a lot of unnecessary distress and

laugh now. We might as well enjoy the ride even though the road is full of pebbles. That's what *Zorro and Me* is all about. This compilation of true stories about our family might help you lighten up and not take yourself too seriously. Remember—God is for us, not against us. And he loves to laugh.



PREFACE

MY NICKNAME FOR my husband of forty years is Zorro. I met Zorro when we were freshmen at a Christian college in Texas. My diary read, “Met Mel Dahlgren today. He’s cute but crude and boring.” In retrospect I decided he wasn’t really crude. He was just an eighteen-year-old boy which can sometimes be synonymous with crude to a seventeen-year-old girl.

By the end of our junior year, Zorro decided he wanted to marry me. I wasn’t convinced he was the one for me. I still remember a certain conversation in which he said, “I have just set up a time to counsel about us with the dean of students.”

At Christian colleges they like you to counsel about such things. Heaven forbid you marry someone without the powers that be giving their approval—especially if you hope to be used in ministry. Zorro had such a hope.

Hope is about all he had because time and time again he was discouraged from pursuing this desire. He wasn’t considered ministry material. Told his voice was too raspy,

the faculty dropped him from the public speaking class his senior year—and it didn't help that his face turned bright red every time he spoke in front of the class. He never held any prestigious positions like class president or dorm monitor. He was always the trusty treasurer, sergeant at arms, or assistant to the assistant.

When Zorro told me he was going to counsel about us I tactfully replied, "Let's get something straight. There is a *you* and there is a *me*, but there is *no us*."

Zorro counseled anyway. He was advised not to marry me because he would never be able to control me. Even though he knew it might dash his dream of being a pastor he replied, "I didn't know marriage was about control. I thought it was about love."

I was impressed and yea verily fell in love. There was more to Zorro than met the eye. Then a miracle of miracles occurred. Zorro was hired to be a ministerial trainee in Jacksonville, Florida. So we graduated from college, got married the next day on June 8, 1969, and honeymooned on the way to our first assignment.

That was forty years ago and it's been a wild ride ever since. First impressions can be deceiving because Zorro has been many things but never boring. You'll find that out in this book.

At first glance you may think these stories are intended for pastors and their families. Not true. When God passed out the guardian angel, Zorro got the one with the funny bone. It wouldn't matter if he were a plumber, baker, or candle stick maker. Bizarre things just happen to the guy. The fact that he's in ministry just makes them all the more laughable.

Mel was born in Rhode Island; I in Missouri. We met at college in Texas and have lived in Florida, West Virginia, Kentucky, Washington, Michigan, and California. We even

PREFACE

spent ten years in Appalachia. We have three great kids (Shelly, Sherisa, and Matthew) who are all grown and out of the house. Praise God! I love them all dearly, but I think the agony associated with empty nest syndrome was somewhat exaggerated. I now have room for a home office.

Together we have ridden the bumpy road of life. And if you don't think God has a sense of humor and loves to laugh, hold onto your hat and ride along with Zorro and me.

Chapter 1

HOW ZORRO GOT HIS NAME

“But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched...”

—Matthew 24:43 (KJV)

WHEN PEOPLE ASK me why I call my husband Zorro I always say, “Well, he looks good in black and carries a sword!” Although that is a fair assessment, I’m going to share with you the true story of how Zorro got his name.

We were working in London at the time. I always love saying that. People “oooooh” and “ahhhhhh.” Then I say, “London, Kentucky” and they just stare at me blankly. They would really “oooooh” and “ahhhhhh” if they realized how much we loved the ten years we spent in Appalachia. Our three-church circuit, which took up at least a third of Kentucky, decided to have a costume party for our winter social.

Our dear friends and we made arrangements to leave our young children with a couple who had volunteered to babysit. They lived just off a curvy highway as did almost everyone in the mountainous region. We met our friends there and imagine our surprise when both the guys showed up dressed as Zorro. The costume party was great fun, and after cleanup we headed back to pick up the kiddos. We eased into their long, winding driveway about one in the morning. Because of the cold weather, we left our car running so the kids could get into a warm car. We had just scooped up the children and gone out the door when we noticed our car drifting back down the driveway. Our first thought was, “Oh, no! We forgot to put the emergency brake on.”

We braced ourselves for the inevitable crash into a tree but the car seemed to stay on the curving driveway. Suddenly we realized someone was stealing our car. Without hesitation the guys handed us the children, hopped into the other car, and started in hot pursuit of the culprit. Meanwhile, I called the police.

In those days the church leased cars for the ministry and someone had gotten a good deal on these French Peugeots. No one in Kentucky, including us, had ever heard of a Peugeot. You couldn't understand where the lights, wipers, heater, or anything was on the thing without the manual in your hand. Ours, naturally, was a lemon. We took the car to the shop so many times the mechanics started cursing and tried to hide the minute my husband walked through the door.

The car got great gas mileage, though, but you felt like you had to push it up every incline. No matter how many times we had work done on the car, it still made this annoying, clinking clanking sound. To make matters worse we had spilled a gallon, fresh from the cow, of whole

milk in it so the smell was a bit overwhelming. Some in the church had affectionately nicknamed it a trashcan on wheels. This poor thief had definitely picked the wrong car to steal.

The conversation with the police started off poorly and went downhill from there.

Me: "Someone has just stolen our Peugeot."

Police: "Your what?"

Me: "Our Peugeot!"

Police: "Your poodle?"

Me: "No, no! Our Peugeot! It's our car. It just happened on Highway 190." I just about had them convinced when I blurted out, "And two men dressed up like Zorro are chasing it."

Police: "Sure lady. Call us back when you sober up!"
Click.

Meanwhile the two Zorros had chased the Peugeot off the road. When they caught up with the teenage bandit, the windshield wipers were going and the lights were blinking. The poor kid couldn't figure out how anything worked. He hung his head out the window in the below freezing weather and gasped for air because of the smell. I can only imagine what he thought when two masked men in black capes hopped out of the car following him, waved their plastic swords and said, "Unhand that car, you cad!" He was so shocked he stumbled out of the car, tripped, and tumbled down a hill, slamming into the side of a big doghouse. Then he quickly got up and vanished in the moonlight.

The guys had just reached the driveway when they heard the police sirens. As they stopped, the police pulled their guns and shouted into a bullhorn, "Step out of that car!"

Evidently someone at police headquarters had taken me seriously. The two Zorros got out of their cars. After the

police stopped laughing, the Zorros gave them a description of the teen, then it was off to the police station to fill out a report. Quite a sight they were, all dressed in black, little plastic swords on their sides, and tiny fake mustaches painted on their upper lips. Things got even funnier when my Zorro had to list his profession as pastor.

We've been to hundreds of church socials over the years but I think this was the most memorable. The teen was caught and, ironically, he was the son of a preacher. When the dad found out Zorro was a minister, he called. "You know how it is in ministry," he said. "You don't have time to spend with your kids."

Yes, we knew. Being in ministry ourselves, we observed how many neglected their families in the name of serving God. The philosophy that if we serve God, he will automatically take care of our families doesn't work. God gave us our families and expects us to nurture and care for them. This incident was a wake-up call for us.

That pastor vowed to spend more time with his son. We promised ourselves we'd spend more time with our children, too. After all, we wouldn't want them to be chased on some moonlit night by two Zorros on mountainous roads in the middle of winter.

HOW ZORRO GOT HIS NAME



*Zorro and me at the costume party in Kentucky:
With sword in hand, Zorro is primed and ready to catch the thief.*