Praising the Lord with Mrs. Eva Mackey

By Marion Holloway

Introduction

Have you ever seen a 98-year-old lady dancing? I have, Mrs. Eva Mackey. She can dance and do all sorts of exercises, including touching her toes. That’s one I have a problem with sometimes, myself. She was the wife of the late Cliff Mackey, mother of eight, grandmother of 14, great grandmother of 32, and the great great grandmother of 13, and possibly more!
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Eva Mackey has a stable mind, a keen memory, and a remarkable sense of humor to go along with it. She had no problem recalling her life when she was a young girl. She’s in tip-top shape and very active. Believe it or not, she exercises from day to day, cooks her own meals, cleans her own home, and is not on any medication. When I look at some one of that age who is doing so well, I have high hopes for my future, knowing that it has been done.

It was on a beautiful Tuesday morning around 10:30 on January 31, 1995, when Dr. Armstrong and I hurried off to Belhaven, North Carolina, to interview Mrs. Mackey. We had no idea of what direction this interview was going to take. Finally, we arrived at Pungo Village where Mrs. Mackey resides. I was a bit tense as I approached the front door. As we entered, there stood a very excited old lady. She gave us a very warm welcome by telling us to come in and have a seat. At first, she seemed nervous, but as Dr. Armstrong explained to her in more detail what was taking place, she loosened up. Listening to Mrs. Mackey’s recollections of her life as a young girl showed us just how much life styles, the economy, and values have really changed in nearly a century. Now Dr. Armstrong and I have a different outlook on life. For one thing, I am far more appreciative of the life God has given me. For, more than anything else, Mrs. Eva Mackey is a true disciple, a believer in life itself!

Life: How was life for you when you were a young girl?

Mrs. Mackey: When I was young, life was different than when I was older. I didn’t have as good a life I have in these days. We worked too much.

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Life: What kind of work did you do?

Mrs. Mackey: All kinds! Farming, hooking peas, gathering corn, picking cotton, and shucking corn.

Life: Did you have long hours?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes, long hours. Go in at six o’clock that morning till six that evening at fifty cents a day.

Life: Was that around here? Around Belhaven?

Mrs. Mackey: Mattamuskeet. I come from Fairfield.

Life: [Mrs. Mackey told how bad it was working on the farm when she was a girl some 80 years ago.]

Mrs. Mackey: We had to hook that stuff [peas] with our arms. You pull it in like this [demonstrating] and hook it.

Life [Marion]: Oh, yeah!

Mrs. Mackey: Yes, sir!

Life: When you pick cotton, would you put it in a sack?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes.

Life: How big was the sack?
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Mrs. Mackey: It weighed about 100 pounds full; some of them weighed about 200 pounds; I reckon, because my [daughters] could pick 200 pounds of cotton a day.

Life: Did you do other kinds of work besides farm work?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes, cooked all the time.

Life: Did you like to cook?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes, I liked to can fruit; I could canned all kinds of fruit.

Life: Did you put them in jars?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes. I could can stuff like beans; I can can any kind of fruit and stuff. I can can!

Life: How old were you when you were married?

Mrs. Mackey: Eighteen.

Life: What did your husband do?

Mrs. Mackey: Farming.

Life: You helped him farm and you cooked?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes.

Life: What main crops did he raise?

Mrs. Mackey: He raised cotton, corn, stock.

Life: Did he raise tobacco?

Mrs. Mackey: No. I worked in tobacco, but I don’t know nothing about tobacco, like growing it. We had to go different places to work in tobacco.

Life: Where did you live when you were married?

Mrs. Mackey: I lived to Mattamuskeet, up to Scranton. I raised all my children up in Fairfield and Scranton.

Life: Early in your life you didn’t have electricity, did you?

Mrs. Mackey: No, sir.

Life: Electricity really improved things, didn’t it?

Mrs. Mackey: I don’t even know how to use it now [laughing]!

Life: [Mrs. Mackey told us that before electricity, life in her home centered around the fireplace and chimney, made of mud plaster bricks with straw in them.]

Mrs. Mackey: We had them old chimneys, with an old pot hanging inside to catch the [rain] water. I know all about the chimneys.

Life: You would use that for heat?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes.
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Life: I guess you cooked in it?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes.

Life: So the fireplace and the chimney were real important?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes!

Life: What did you use for light to see?

Mrs. Mackey: Kerosene lanterns and lamps.

Life: How did you keep food like milk cool in the summer?

Mrs. Mackey: We had milk houses little milk houses, but we would take a jug and put it down in the well. We had milk cows.

Life: Did you milk the cows?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes, all my children milked cows.

Life: Did you make butter?

Mrs. Mackey: My oldest boy used to sit down with a gallon jar, and he sat on a block. And I would give him a jar, and he’d shake it. Then it come to buttermilk; you take buttermilk out of there. And then you watch it and put it in jars. Sometime you would have a whole pound of butter.

Life: All your son would do is shake it up?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes. You shake it until it changed, or either it would churn to butter.

Life: Was the butter back then better than what we have now? And what about cream?

Mrs. Mackey: We don’t get no good butter now. It don’t even look like butter. We had to milk these cows. We had a milk house, you know, a clean place with shelves. We put milk in the bowls. So we let it stand over till the next evening, and we would skim that cream off it. We’d skim it right off and put it in jars. We’d shake it, some of them would churn it and beat it, or you could sit down and shake it and make a big pretty bowl of butter. When that butter is churned, the butter will float right on top of the milk; that milk will pop right from it.

Life: Did you make cornbread from that buttermilk?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes. I buy buttermilk now, but it’s not [real] buttermilk.

Life: It’s not what it used to be, huh?

Mrs. Mackey: No. Them people over there who cook dinner, they say, “What do you do to your cornbread?” I say, “Cook it in the oven.” “You bake the best cornbread I ever ate.” I say, “You don’t have to put no water in it to make cornbread.” They say, “How do you make it?” I say, “With my hands!”

Life [Marion]: All right! Did you raise anything like hogs to eat?
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Mrs. Mackey: Yes.

Life: Did you slaughter your own hogs?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes, cows too.

Life: Where did you store the meat?

Mrs. Mackey: We used barrels.

Life: You put it in barrels?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes, in barrels and put it in them houses.

Life: Did your husband slaughter the animals?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes.

Life: Would other people in the neighborhood help?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes. We helped each other.

Life: Would you cure the hams?

Mrs. Mackey: We smoked them in the smoke house with them little hickory barks.

Life: I bet that was good to eat!

Mrs. Mackey: I made sausage too. I made all that old country stuff! We had to dry sausage then on the porch or in the meat house on a corn stalk. We would have four or five yards hanging on the stalks. We dried them out two weeks, you know, waiting in the shade to dry. That’s the way everybody dried them, not just one person. We didn’t have no ice.

Life: Did you have a wagon come by with ice?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes. You had to buy it by the pound. We didn’t have much ice. We didn’t buy no ice, didn’t many people buy ice. They just did without it.

Life: [Mrs. Mackey told us that she often use herbs and roots for medicines.]

Mrs. Mackey: We used Sampson snake root. Sampson’s snake root is a little root, pancy, moon sac, and sassafras too.

Life: These are roots?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes.

Life: You used these when you got sick?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes. The herbs was like a molasses, and Sampson’s snake root you rubbed in.

Life: Did it work?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes. I reckon it worked on all of us in my age. I know it worked on crazy folks. But they take anything for pains!

Life: Were there any midwives back in those days?
Mrs. Mackey: Yes.

Life: They would help deliver babies?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes.

Life: Would most people have the babies at home?

Mrs. Mackey: All of them near about. It wasn’t no hospitals for nobody to go to but a few, you know. They had to have money.

Life: You had your children at home?

Mrs. Mackey: Eight.

Life: Did you have a midwife?

Mrs. Mackey: Oh, yes! My aunt was one. My aunt delivered four of my children. Then there was somebody else did the other four.

Life: Life certainly changed today. Everybody goes to the hospital to have children.

Mrs. Mackey: Oh, Lord, yes!

Life: What church did you go to?

Mrs. Mackey: I go to any church, but my membership is a disciple.

Life: Is that where you’ve always been a member?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes.

Life: Was church important to you?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes. I’ll go to any church.

Life: I heard about several other older people say that they think that one of the things that is wrong today is that people don’t go to church. Do you feel that way?

Mrs. Mackey: No, I don’t feel that away because everybody got they own belief. Don’t you know one thing: that thing [church building] ain’t nothing but wood. I can go to any church just as good as I can this wood [building]. Disciple church is wood. It can be burned down, but the best part is that the church is in your heart. Now, that’s what I tell them. Now, of course, that church got to go back to dirt.

Life: So the church is really in your heart?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes! In your heart! Yes, it is! When you clean [your heart] up, you don’t feel guilty. You’ll go anywhere; you’ll be the same. It’s not your clothes. It’s not the way you look. It’s not the way you act, but when you get your heart clean, love comes in there. And you want to love everybody. I tell them when God made this world, he made the blood of every people. Oh [jumping up], I’m just preaching near ’bout, in my way!

Life: That’s all right!
Mrs. Mackey: I say when God made my blood, he made your blood. I don’t care how ugly you is, or how white they is; your blood is just like my blood. It’s red.

Life: That’s a very impressive way to look at things.

Mrs. Mackey: Yes. That’s the way I try to live. I tell you about a month ago, I couldn’t even move. I just give clean out. But now I can twist any kind of way [physically demonstrating]! Yes, you got to be true to God. Look ahere: I can step from here to here, and it don’t bother me. [Mrs. Mackey danced around the room.] It don’t bother me! When you promise the Lord you’ll do a thing, I don’t care what it is. I’m 98 years old, and nobody had to do nothing for me. I can put my knee way up there [demonstrating], do any kind of way. I was down for five long years. Not the doctor, but God brought me through, and here I am. I’m no better than a lot of people, but this soul is clean. This is what’s clean. I can clean this old raggedy body. When somebody talks bad or mistreats me, I say that’s okay. They say I’m going to shoot this one, get that one, but I say that’s all right. Thank the Lord!

Life: What kind of illness was that you had, that time when you were down for five years?

Mrs. Mackey: Oh, yes. I was down for five long years. Look like this [demonstrating]. That was bent, every bone that was in me. I even took shots in the bones for five years. I came down from 150 pounds to 80 pounds. Did you know when that bare-footed prophet came through here? Did you here talk of him?

Life: I don’t remember that.
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backed up side the house. I could throw my feet anywhere side the house I wanted to, with all them there bones showing.

Life: So what happened after that prayer? After he prayed, what did you do? Did you straightened right out?

Mrs. Mackey: Yes, I just straightened right out and been that way ever since. Thank the Lord!

Life [Marion]: I know what you’re saying. That was a miracle.

Conclusion

This interview captured my attention from start to finish, as I sat quietly listening to Mrs. Eva Mackey as she reminisced about her past, recalling both good and bad times. Considering what she’s been through in life and is still facing today, Mrs. Mackey has a strong mind and soul. The thing that impressed me the most during the interview was that she never considers that she is old. She always used the term “young.” This explains how she stays so active and in high spirits. Her faith in her Lord is the force in her life that keeps her young. She said, “The church is in your heart.” I never really looked at it that way. Obviously, Mrs. Mackey has lived a life filled with the spirit of her Lord. And, consequently, she is an inspiration to me; I am honored to have been given an opportunity to do this interview with this wonderful lady.

[Mrs. Mackey passed away before the publication of this interview.]
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