

# *One New Book for the Preacher*

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**BLOOD DONE SIGN MY NAME: A TRUE STORY** by Timothy B. Tyson. New York: Crown Publishers, 2004. 368 pages.

Tim Tyson calls his book “A True Story.” The book is true, he says, from his point of view. With this excellent definition of truth, Tyson proceeds to teach his readers what it means to be a witness.

To be a witness is to tell the truth, from our point of view. In this book, Tyson wrestles with truth about his own family. He wrestles with truth about his own life and the lives of people he loves, admires, and respects. As Tyson wrestles with truth, he learns to live truth. A legal witness tells the truth. A faithful witness lives the truth.

When you first read the book, you might think the story is about Tim Tyson and his family as they wrestled with racism in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Tyson was a child in those years, then a teenager. His father was a Methodist pastor in three small North Carolina towns, one after another. His mother was a schoolteacher. Tyson’s father was a witness to the gospel in a time and place when racism appeared to win. Tyson’s mother was a witness as well.

However, when we read more deeply, we discover that the book is about human beings wrestling with God and wrestling with themselves, wrestling to be faithful to the gospel, to the churches they served and the communities in which they lived, and the family of which they were a part.

“Stories can have sharp edges,” writes Tyson (323). “If you don’t believe it,” he says, “read the Bible.” An Old Testament passage Tyson shares in one of his stories has sharp edges. Esau was favorite son of his father; Jacob was the favorite son of his mother. Sharp edges. Jacob cheated Esau and had to flee for his life. Laban cheated Jacob, and Jacob outsmarted Laban. Jacob left Laban, taking with him Laban’s only daughters and the grandchildren. Sharp edges. On his journey home, Jacob wrestled with God. When the wrestling was over, Jacob had a limp and Jacob had received a blessing. Jacob became a blessing.

As you read this book, you recognize that, like Jacob, Tim Tyson has also received a limp and a blessing. Tyson does not have a physical limp; he walks without a problem. Tyson’s limp comes as he both loves his family and knows his family’s history. He admires his parents as much as anyone you will ever meet does, and they clearly love him. Tyson has called this book, “a love letter to my Dad.” However, Tyson’s family history, like many family histories, like Jacob and Esau’s family history, is filled with stories that have sharp edges, stories of people who know the blessing of God, but who take advantage of other people, or look down upon others. When we take advantage of another person, or look down upon another person, we end up with a limp. Tyson’s family causes him to limp, but his family has been and continues to be a blessing.

Tyson’s parents kept diaries and journals throughout their adult lives. They have shared these memoirs with their son, who quotes freely from them. As you read the

book, you will wonder if Tyson or his family will ever be able to attend another family gathering!

*Blood Done Sign My Name* tells the story of a racially motivated murder in Oxford, North Carolina, in 1970, a murder committed by the father of a friend of Tyson's, at the time when Tyson and the friend were ten years old. The book documents the investigation and trial that followed the murder and the injustice that occurred when the murderer was set free. The book tells those things in a powerful, well-documented way.

However, this book is much more than just another story about the painful struggle for racial justice in a Southern state or our nation. This book is about a boy named Tim Tyson who becomes a man – a boy who becomes a man as he wrestles to know truth, speak truth, and to live truth.

Tyson's story of becoming a witness includes a tale about Miss Amy. In 1964, Miss Amy was about sixty years old, and Tyson was about five. His father had invited a black educator, the president of North Carolina A & T College, to speak at the church he served. Lay leaders in the congregation were furious. Tyson's father refused to withdraw the invitation. The night before Dr. Proctor was scheduled to preach, the leaders met to demand the invitation be withdrawn. Lots of wrestling was going on, until Miss Amy spoke. Miss Amy walked with a limp, a physical limp. She had been first grade teacher for many of those who came to the meeting. People had accused Tyson's father of tearing the church apart. Miss Amy spoke: "If there is going to be any tearing done, we are going to do the tearing apart ourselves." Then she hobbled to the front of the room, looked at the people gathered there and said,

There was a case up near Chapel Hill recently where a teenage boy went around a curve too fast and was killed in a car crash. So they thought. He was down there by the side of the road; they were waiting for an ambulance to come and take him to the funeral home. There wasn't any sign of life.

But then an airman from Pope Air Force Base stopped by; ... he saw the boy lying down there and he scrambled down the embankment and opened that boy's mouth. He saw the boy's tongue stuck back in his throat and he ran his finger back there and pulled out the tongue, and then he gave that boy mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. By the time the ambulance got there, the boy was walking around alive as you and me.

Now, what I haven't told you is that boy who had the wreck was white, and that airman that saved him was black. But that's the truth, and I want all of you fathers to tell me something. (77-78)

She looked searchingly around the room. "Now, which one of you fathers would have said to the airman, 'Now don't you run your black fingers down my boy's white throat?' Don't you put your black lips on my boy's mouth?"

The wrestling was over. Miss Amy limped back to her seat.

Her story has sharp edges to this day, sharp edges like a surgeon's scalpel. The sharp edge of a scalpel can hurt – and it can heal. Tyson's stories help the reader grasp the way a witness is like a surgeon, and the way truth is like a scalpel. When the truth of memory of sin forces us to limp, we pray. We confess our sins before God. When

the reality of God's forgiving grace becomes our blessing, we rejoice. As we confess our limp and rejoice in our blessing, the stories we tell and the life we live become our witness.

For any preacher who seeks also to be a witness, the book is a joy. The stories that Tyson tells will preach. However, the reason to read this book is to know the people Tyson portrays. The true stories he shares about his life, his parents' lives, and the lives of many other people impacted by racial struggle make this book a witness and a joy.