

Episode 84 - Deborah Thibodeau - The Serpent's Tail - Abuse in the Park

[00:00:00] **Rod:** I want to welcome our listeners to this episode of Off The Shelf. In the message, if someone had a particular question with how the message didn't seem to mesh well with a particular scripture, ministers would often tell them to just put their question on the shelf and let it sit there until God answered the question for them.

Of course, that was just a way for the message minister to avoid answering a very hard question. After I left a message and was attending a denominational church. I was surprised to hear the pastor say that one of the absolute worst things that you can do with a scriptural question is to put it on the shelf.

This podcast is where we take your questions off the shelf. We will deal with some of the hard questions that message ministers are afraid to even talk about. And we will deal with things that message people are afraid to raise. A bit of a warning about this episode of Off The Shelf. Some may find the content quite disturbing and graphic.

Our guest today is Deborah Tibideau. Deb, welcome to Off The Shelf.

[00:01:10] **Deb:** thank you. Happy to be here.

[00:01:12] **Rod:** Deb was raised in the message. And we're specifically spent most of our early childhood with their parents and siblings in the Park. Most message followers have heard of the Park. I believe William Branham spoke two sermons there - The Oddball in May, 1964 and Leadership in October, 1965. Deb is married with two kids and lives in Arizona.

She's also a registered nurse and has worked all of her adult life as a healthcare profession. What many people don't know is that the story of the Park is a terrible story of abuse... the abuse of the children who lived in the Park.

Deb has just finished writing a book, entitled "The Serpent's Tail", which is being published by Adelaide books at the end of this month.,

The book is filled with the raw emotion of a child who cannot understand why she is being tortured physically, emotionally, and psychologically. The style of the

book is more of an epic poem than prose, but it is extremely well done. Deb has taken care not to mention any names of people in her book.

And we're going to avoid that as well on this podcast. If you happen to hear a beep, it's not to cover up bad language, but will be used to cover up any names that we might inadvertently mention. Your book must have been very difficult to write. What led you to write the book? What convinced you to do it and why?

[00:02:58] **Deb:** Okay, well, let me just say that. Um, from a very early age, I, I love the written word. I found what I needed in the written word more often than not to soothe me when I was a child. And this book has been in my head for years. But so much of it was surrounded by anger and venom. And I believe I described that at some length in my book that I built up a hardness and an anger that I just had to moor and hold onto until I wasn't writing from a place of venom. And so I have chapters that I read, I started and I read from, and I started writing when I was younger, that just sat in my folders and in papers that I would shove aside, things like that. And in 2013, over the course of several years, between 2007 and 2013, I really watched my twin sister crumble and ultimately go to her death. And what I have learned about the difference in my twin sister and myself is that we had a different kind of brain. And this is the information that I want so much to impart to people out there is that children, even twins, are individuals and we have individual spirits and, and they can be hurt beyond repair.

Although they continue to live and they continue to grow and they have children of their own, they are hurt beyond repair. And then the question that gets asked when the evidence of that hurt and that injury becomes apparent... As you're older, the question that gets asked frequently by your parents and your church family is "what is wrong with you?"

And it's not about that. It's about what happened to you. And when my sister died, I watched her death coming like a freight train. I watched her agonize about her end of time. I watched her fear of death and we shouldn't have that kind of fear, especially raised in a Christian family. Why is death something to fear?

But her fear arose from the fact that she felt like she was already unworthy, that her end would not find her in a good place. And when Esther died, I sat with her that day and, you know, twins have a pretty inconceivable bond. And Esther and I were very close as young children. Leo Mercier did try to separate us as young children and did successfully for several years.

But I, in my heart and my mind, told Esther that I would make this right. I would tell people why children from the Park, several of the children from the Park are broken, they're broken. And some of them maybe don't even realize they're broken.

They... so many of them have problems. They have illnesses, they have drug addictions, they have psychological issues. And that is when this book happened, is after Esther died. And I felt then that what I wanted to do, and perhaps you can tell me if this is how it went. But what I wanted to convey to people is the absolute beauty of the intentions of the people who went to the Park.

Their intentions were the most noble, the most pure, the most kind, The most Christian, but it did not turn out that way

And I wanted to convey the beauty of my family and the love we had for each other, our country roots. It didn't matter that we were simple. We all had that love, you know? Um, and, and that was bastardized... that was taken from us by a religious man.

So this story is... it's about breaking the silence. It's about giving other now adult children, the opportunity to say to their elderly parents, to other people. I have things to say, and I want to be heard.

[00:08:28] **Rod:** The Park was something that I certainly heard about the years in the message, but it was never mentioned as being a place where a lot of abuse happened. To give us a little background... can you give us a bit of a timeline you moved there and when I'm from that, from the book, I kind of estimated it was about 62 and you left with your parents and about 1975, is that about correct.

And it was kind of running for about, or, a place occupied by a lot of message people for about 13 or 14 years.

[00:09:04] **Deb:** Yes, Esther and I were born in 1961 and we moved to Prescott in the fall of 1962. and we were there until, uh, maybe spring of 1975 when we moved to Flagstaff,

[00:09:23] **Rod:** So that's the timeframe that we're talking about in the book. Give us a bit of a background on the tape boys. It's actually very bizarre because... I don't know if you're aware that the Voice of God Recordings in their Young Foundations website has a little pin you can buy for children to put on their lapel.

And it's called "Tape boys", which seems very bizarre... even more bizarre after I read the book. The "Tape Boys" were Gene Goad and Leo Mercier. Leo was the clear villain in your book. Gene doesn't get a lot of mentioned. Was he kind of more or less an acolyte? Who were they? And maybe you can give us a little background on them.

[00:10:10] **Deb:** So, yes, the first time I saw the tape boy bling, I call it, I was completely and utterly horrified that anybody would put that on their person for someone else to see, because my entire reference for tape boys is Leo Mercier and Gene Goad. And they, Leo Mercier was the monster in my childhood. Gene Goad was, he was a nonentity from that perspective. I grew up with his children.

But yes, I had never heard of any reference to "Tape Boys" outside of those two men. So when I, when I saw this, that you could get a tie tack or the little bling pin, um, At the Voice of God as a tape boy... I was like.. how? Why would anybody, who understands the history of those two men, encourage any young man to wear this indicator

[00:11:19] **Rod:** Or why would a parent buy it for the children?

[00:11:22] **Deb:** For their child? And what do they do now?

They're they don't produce tapes and send them around the country the way Leo and Gene were doing. So it was really bizarre to me. Very hard to understand. Uh, I would like to talk to the person who conceived of it and say, "What were you thinking?"

[00:11:45] **Rod:** That's the problem. They probably weren't thinking.

So your parents were followers of William Branham. He was obviously someone they revered and it appears that his statements, which they seem to believe to be prophetic, is what caused them to make the Park their home and, thus yours. Is that the only reason they ended up the Park? Because of what William Branham said?

[00:12:13] **Deb:** I believe that. And I've described in my book, um, you know, sort of the timeframe... around the timeframe when Pentecostal preachers were kind of popping up all over the country... In a time when people were desperate for something to enhance their lives. Um, Leo Mercier and Gene Goad were part of the group that dad got involved with when he got involved with the message...

when he got involved with William Branham, Leo and Gene were of an age with a lot of my older siblings and they, from what I can see and tell, and from what I've heard.. a lot of that group of people spent time together and they all married around the same time.

But the idea was presented to Dad and it was talked about, and he didn't want initially to leave the proximity of the prophet. He wanted to stay in that area, but he was quite enchanted. And he, he told us several times when we were kids, that he was just very enchanted about the idea of going out west and picking oranges and living in the sun. And he was concerned enough about this move, that he wasn't initially ready to make it. And brother Branham, you know, he preached and hunted a lot in Tucson. And when he bought a house there that decreased some of dad's anxiety and he was ultimately then persuaded to go ahead with the vision, but he did speak with brother Branham about it... with William Branham about it.

And he asked him about this big move, because it was a big move. You're talking about an entire family of 12 siblings, and several of them were married and had children their own. And he has described to me the moment that William Branham laid his hands on his arms and said to him, "Go on ahead, brother Dalton. I see this coming out alright. We'll all be okay."

And that's what dad needed to make that move. And from there, that's how we ended up in the Park. And my experience as a child, when my mother could never reconcile to Leo Mercier, she didn't trust him. She inherently understood that he had a weakness about him that would, would be used to exploit other people and the frequent murmurings and arguments that I heard as a child, when dad would remind her that the prophet blessed this move and it would all be okay.

Frequently, this happened after one of us had been severely punished and mom would cry and she would beg and she would plead. And it all came back to that comment, that blessing that William Branham placed upon that move to the Park.

[00:15:50] **Rod:** And he really set up Leo Mercier as the leader... the pastor of this group.

[00:15:58] **Deb:** Correct. And if you have any doubt about it, just listen to Oddball or Leadership. He endorsed him as a man that he believed had a greater calling than being a tape boy... That his calling was to go and lead people and he endorsed

him as a shepherd because everyone needs a shepherd. Those two sermons that he preached in the Park solidified everyone's tenure in there.

They stayed because of that. And I feel like I've described in my book, how their personal discernment was overridden by their loyalty and their absolute faith in William Branham, not in Leo Mercier.

[00:16:48] **Rod:** In your book, you refer to a statement made by William Branham, which you called “the Promise” and I think maybe you capitalized it. I want to play it for our listeners, just so that I'm I hope this works. If it doesn't, pretend you heard it... but I do think I've got it ready to play. So here goes:

Ed Daulton, Baptist sitting here, from down in Kentucky, sitting right here. How many children you got, Ed? Twelve children. Standing right here, he asked for his children. I walked out of the building. Ed come to me again; I said, “Ed.” The Holy Spirit was on me, said, “Give it to him. Give him.” 241 I said, “I give you your children.” Every one of them, saved and baptized. There was his teen-ager sitting at home, waiting, crying, has been saved since he was up here.” (61-0827 - The Message Of Grace)

So how does hearing William Branham just voice makes you feel?

[00:17:41] **Deb:** Well, it's, it's so much a part of my life. It's just a part of my life. I've heard that voice since I was old enough to hear words. Um, you know, when I was little, dad had those reel to reel tapes, there was a tape room in the Park and everyone in the Park donated their tapes to that tape room until it was complete.

And I heard that voice almost every night while I was falling asleep, and dad listened to tapes endlessly. And so it's just part of my childhood, but it's also the part that makes for all of us, all of the children who were raised there, that's the part that makes it difficult to step away and to say... let's go and scrutinized what he preached.

Let's go and investigate what he said. Let's look and see if these are the truths.

So it doesn't, it doesn't bother me. It's just part of my life. And what I can't do any longer is give him credit as the voice of God. I do not believe that. I believe that he was one of the Pentecostal revivalist to sprout sprouted up in the sixties and, and found an audience.

[00:19:10] **Rod:** So what about the Promise? I mean, it's an obvious question that people would say, oh, did it come to pass or not?

[00:19:18] **Deb:** Well, the promise is also something I have lived with every moment of my life. And what I understood as a child is, that gave us this special endorsement from the prophet of God that everyone, all of the children and all of the grandchildren would be saved and sealed and sanctified. And they have an eternal home.

I can't say when that began to rub me the wrong way, because, you know, I don't feel, especially when I read my Bible, I don't feel like God says to anyone, your special, you're the one who gets a special endorsement for heaven, God says to all... "I am your way. I am your light for any of you who choose it."

And I feel that in watching the cognitive dissonance that I see in so many of my family members, that they hold this endorsement as a reason why they don't need to worry about the way they're living or the things they're doing. They believe it.

And even if they can't live it, they're already sealed and sanctified based on the word of a man... a man, a man, a man. And I feel like this is something that I have seen that disturbs me. It's that people I love can so willingly hand their entire life into the hands of a man. They haven't given their lives into the hands of Jesus Christ. They've given their lives into the hands of William Branham and they are resting on the words that came out of his mouth as an eternal promise. And I can't buy it. I couldn't buy it even as a young person. And as I experienced more in the world and in life, and I saw real people from bums on the streets to ambassadors, having heart attacks... dying after an auto accident... those people were not any different than us. They were humans, flesh, and blood.

They had every right to ask God for their desires. The same way we did. I often heard as I was growing up that almost well, everybody outside of the Park was atomic fodder

[00:22:08] **Rod:** Yeah.

[00:22:09] **Deb:** Food for the bombs. So when I began to read to really meet And feel what real people feel, I couldn't own that as something that belonged only to me and my family. So I feel like I have spent a lot of my life trying to say, "I will

not ride that promise into eternal life. I will find my own way under my own blessings and my, the gifts I receive.”

[00:22:50] **Rod:** What we're told in the Bible.

[00:22:51] **Deb:** Absolutely, one person cannot be greater than another. And this is why I don't like the pedestal that William Branham has been placed on.

He's a man equally able to fail like any other human.

[00:23:09] **Rod:** And he kind of put himself on that pedestal himself.

[00:23:15] **Deb:** Well, I feel like his statements say, “If you believe, if you are going to believe, well, then you just believe me. I am the prophet of God and the prophet always has Thus Saith The Lord.

[00:23:30] **Rod:** yeah, Deb, you were serially abused. There was physical abuse. Your book is filled with words like whippings, beatings, strappings. Leo was a monster. He was clearly the ringleader in the abuse, but there appear to be a lot of others that participated as well. In I think it was chapter 29, you wrote in your book, every morning before school, a different brother showed up to administer a beating. How many people participated in this?