

I Hate Mac n Cheese!

Wounds of Abuse Heal, Yet the Scars Remain

By Doug Gilford

CORNERSTONE CHURCH

Mandeville, Louisiana

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ISBN: 978-0-578-33058-7

FIRST EDITION Nov 2021

SECOND EDITION Jan 2024

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Cornerstone Church

23051 Highway 1088

Mandeville, La 70448

985-624-8652

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FOREWORD

*“You have kept count of my tossing;
put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?”
Psalm 56:8 (ESV)*

God Knows

One day, I sat with a counselor in an Austin elementary school. He was a graduate student doing research for his doctorate and I was a troubled youth. I was an outstanding student, tiny for my age and a new kid: a formula that made me a perfect target for bullies. My daily life was a gantlet of insults, slapping, punching, and being shoved to the ground.

These were the days when social engineering was the rage in education, and teachers had labeled me as a victim. I had an active imagination, and the counselor questioned me in depth about what I would like to do to my tormentors. I was brutally honest.

This was 1966, just before Charles Whitman’s shooting spree from the tower of the University of Texas. My father was huddling in a shop below the tower during that deadly barrage. We know today that Whitman had endured decades of abuse from his father –

domestic violence that led him into the suicidal massacre. The idea of a school shooting hadn't really become a national issue yet.

A year later, in Dallas/Fort Worth, my life was more dangerous. Dozens of bullies regularly chased, trapped, and beat me on an inner-city campus. The first time I was stabbed, my mother met with the principal in desperation. He admitted he couldn't protect me; he suggested my mother send me to martial arts classes.

This was two generations before Columbine, the internet or violent first-person video games. I suppose if a grad student had interviewed me a couple of decades later, I would have set off alarms as a potential school shooter.

I have a deep understanding and empathy for bullying victims. I take their reports seriously and personally.

So, I come to Doug Gilford's testimony. I didn't know his story before; we are from different home states, and I'm a generation older. My older children are his contemporaries. My heart broke as I read his testimony, then my own memories rose from the shadows of long-ago.

Doug and I have known one another for more than two decades, and have ridden many rivers, good and bad. As my father died in an Austin hospital, he traveled to Texas to be with me. I kept him company as he traveled into the rural areas outside metro New Orleans to inform a family their son had become the first local guy killed in Iraq. When one of our kids' friends died of an overdose across our back fence, he rushed over.

This is an amazing story of a young, unchurched boy with a cruel stepdad who made his life a living hell. Doug had every reason to end up behind bars. Instead, Christ had his own plans for him, and a stranger called him out and planted the seed of ministry.

To rewrite the old cliche, brokenness is near to Godliness. From David, hounded and pursued by Saul's armies, to Paul on the road to Damascus, to today's persecuted Christians in North Korea, God knows. And suffering under the violence and abuse of others is a lonely place to be. God knows. And that is our comfort and our strength.

The second lesson, as you will see, is that forgiveness is one of the toughest things in the world. And yet Jesus requires us to forgive.

But the first lesson is that God is watching.

We do not now know - and may not know until heaven, what Christ is doing in our lives – or in the lives of our tormentors. But as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12, *“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”*

I believe you will find this testimony inspiring and worth sharing. Whether you are suffering, or someone you know, the almighty God, who was himself known as the Man of Sorrows, knows what is going on in the shadows. And it's not pointless suffering; He has a plan for us.

And as David wrote in the Psalm above, he saves our tears.

*“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit.” Psalm 34:18*

Jon Donley, November 2021

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PREFACE:

Today, I am coming clean. If you have known me for any time and invited me over for dinner, you might have noticed I skipped your mac n cheese dish. Please do not take it personally. I hate mac n cheese. This is a significant issue for me, and for a good reason. As you continue reading you will soon understand why.

It comes to no one's surprise that here in America, the pervasive abuse of children by adults has been a cancer in our society for many generations. I am speaking of the abuse committed behind the closed doors of homes across the world, hardly noticed by the next day's busy morning. The hurried preparation for school to catch the bus and sending parents off to work in the mornings hides the hurt inside just like makeup hides the bruises on the outside. Somewhere in America a child looks out the window staring at her own reflection in the glass wondering what the next evening would bring to her once quiet home.

Even now in 2023, our country has yet to significantly address the situation and move in a safer direction for our kids. Not only does physical and emotional abuse overshadow the important growth of our children, but neglect is also becoming common as well. Parents on missions to make it big in the business world work late hours while the young hearts are left at home to develop and to fend for themselves.

There are many contributing factors, but I will let the sociologists and psychologists go to work on these. From my perspective, what further adds to this problem is that oftentimes the victims of abuse in *one* generation become *future* abusers of the next. So, the cycle of violence and abuse continues. Until this cycle is dramatically interrupted, the brutality goes on until entire families have lived and died as participants and victims of abuse.

This book tells a story of a dramatic interruption in my life that entirely changed my future. The story is how a child reared in physical abuse receives deliverance by God's own hand -even as the

systems in place had failed to help. It is a story of pain, deliverance, salvation, redemption, and hope. Embodied in all of these is the pain of forgiveness and eventual freedom found in the same. This book is a story of how God transformed the lives of *future* generations by protecting, nurturing, caring, and saving *one* life.

I have a message for those who find themselves currently living through abuse and are feeling alone. I know that feeling of hopelessness and the misery you feel. There is hope. Do not give up on finding it.

I also speak to those who *have* lived through abuse and are finding it hard to live past the horrible memories and scars of it all.

One thing I hope everyone recognizes is that *there IS life after the abuse*. Your wounds *will* heal, though the scars remain.

I do not know who you are, yet I know you well. You are not alone.

Doug Gilford

CHAPTER ONE

Common Contempt

“ “

“A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.”

Proverbs 14:30–31

Common Contempt

The sun rose high over the trees in the far away distance as its reflection on the water nearly blinded me. A wonderful feeling came over me as I sipped a cup of hot coffee outside of my new travel trailer. My family and I had driven away from our busy lives as lead pastors of an amazing church in Mandeville, Louisiana. We decided it was time for some much-needed rest and relaxation.

I set out early to find a quiet moment to pray and reflect about the goodness of God and thank Him for the wonderful gifts He has provided. The problem with camping at state parks, is that you cannot really feel alone while camping. Out of the corner of my eye I see site number forty, pushing his boat out in to the water. I wondered who he was. Where he came from and what was his story in life?

My phone rings and it is one of my five children calling. Turns out my daughter Kailey is starting nursing school and she wanted to share her excitement with me. As I put the phone down, I quietly thanked the Lord for her. I remember when she was born. She was my third child, but my first girl and somehow already special. That first minute of meeting her was so dramatic as I felt that in that moment, she filled a hole in me that I did not even know existed. I was only twenty-five at the time of her birth and still feeling the effects of a terrible adolescent experience.

Growing up for me was unfortunately much different than my children's experiences. Having been physically and sexually abused by my own stepfather for a decade, it was God who taught me how to love and discipline as a father.

Like it was yesterday, I can still remember the fear come over me when I heard the door shut outside of the thin walls of our mobile home trailer. I would learn to associate that sound with dread as fear would soon engulf me because I knew that my stepfather arrived home. Jerry worked the night shift at the shipyard and from an early age I began to associate that sound with terror. If I am honest, I still jump sometimes when I hear someone outside closing their door.

Oftentimes, when I heard that sound, I would begin shaking, hoping, and praying that my stepfather would be in a good mood and go straight to bed, without stopping by my room.

I imagined how most kids should welcome a visit from their father; he could share an encouraging word or tuck his son into bed with a goodnight kiss. Not so, in our home. Jerry took out his uncontrollable anger on me at all times of the day.

One day with my own children, I had an unsettling revelation. It is normal for me to work late and come home after dark. I remember one time when all my kids came running to me, cheering me, and embracing me, hugging my legs, and torso. All for simply coming home. I had a shocking and stunning reaction to this. I became awkward and confused for a moment as I confessed that I had no understanding of why they actually “*wanted*” me home. I was always happy when Jerry was nowhere around. Even as an adult I still feel the side effects of extreme physical abuse. The scars were revealing themselves.

As a kid, I got older and started making excuses for Jerry in my thoughts; “*The abuse was because he exhausts himself from working the night shifts at the shipyard,*” I said to myself, or it was “*because our family was poor and money was tight, or because he was so unhappy.*” I would think up any reason to distract myself from the simple reality that Jerry just did not like me. Now, sitting here gazing at the sunrise and emptying my coffee cup, -I am extremely glad my children do not have to deal with making excuses for me. They most assuredly know my love for them.

As I heard his footsteps climb up the porch stairs, I felt my nervous heart race and thump against the walls of my young chest. As a routine cry of desperation, I would pray, “*God, please not again; not tonight, please protect me, please God, don't let him hit me again!*” My prayer was interrupted by the opening of my bedroom door, as it slammed against the doorstop. All I could do then is tense my eight-year-old body and brace for the attack that would only last minutes, the effects, of which have lasted for a lifetime.

Bruised, sore, and damaged inside and out, I remember sobbing, hoping not to make a noise. I knew all too well the repercussions if he heard me. One more time I prayed, "*Please God, never again.*"

I grew up in a ridiculously small back road-town called Bedico. Do not look for it on a map, you will never find it. It was, and still is a small community on the north side of Lake Ponchartrain, near the New Orleans area. My mother and I moved there when she married this man named Jerry, who became my stepfather. To a young boy, Jerry was a giant of a man, weighing in at 280 pounds and towering six feet one inch. My mother and he got together shortly after her divorce from my birth father.

Love is an awesome feeling. But it causes people to go blind sometimes. My mother fell in love with Jerry after a bad divorce. In her mind, he was a good man. A country gentleman. She idolized him in ways I cannot honestly understand. My mother was the lucky one, thankfully. To my knowledge he never hit, slapped, or even yelled at her. She was deeply in love with this country bumpkin. My mother, a city girl, was swept away with a sense of adventure, and rebellion.

Like most abusive people, I would learn that Jerry, too came from an abusive home. Thus, cruelty was in his "DNA" or his blood, one could say. He may have learned that the more you abuse, the more you love. Whatever the case it must have seemed normal to him. His love language perhaps?

This kind of abusive behavior can transfer down from abusers to their children, especially if they never allow Christ to change their lives. We must acknowledge this learned behavior and swiftly deal with it for healing to begin and the cycle to be completely broken. As I was being raised, I promised myself and my Lord that I would never raise my children this way.

It sounds strange but I would wish Jerry were an alcoholic, or a drug addict. He did not get drunk, or smoke, or do drugs. He stayed clean. I desperately wanted Jerry to have a vice to blame his abusive

actions on. If he were an angry drunk or high out of his mind or something like that, I could feel sorry for him, and *understand* the cause of his physical abuse towards me. But, to my chagrin, he was just mean and evil. He could not blame alcohol for his rage, or drugs for his delusion.

The ironic thing was everyone else in our small town saw Jerry as a kind and compassionate man, who did *so* many things for others. The truth is, while others saw him as a "nice guy," he was *Mr. Hyde, of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the famous characters in Robert Louis Stevenson's book, at home toward me. Unexpectedly, he would hurl curse words and insults at me, stripping me of any confidence at all. To deal with this reality, I would often have daydreams and pretend I was in a movie. I would talk to myself as if I was playing a character in a script. This would have been your typical made for television show: "*Nice country man with a sordid private life, that even his wife did not know about.*" Rated R, of course.

CHAPTER TWO

Future of Fear

“

*“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear,
because fear has to do with punishment.*

The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” 1 John 4:18

Future of Fear

I find it amazing what a person can remember from an early age. Unfortunately, the devastating, and painful memories are the ones that show up the loudest. As I look back, I cannot recall *good* things. I cannot remember smiles, or laughter, although I know they happened. I only remember the bad.

As I write this chapter, I wanted to call it, “*Why I hate Mac and Cheese.*” But there was no rhythm to it. Still, in thirty years as an adult I have not eaten it. You will soon see why.

Reflecting on my own children growing up and when discipline was necessary, I remember a time where God himself spoke to me about my second son, Andrew.

For over a year I told my then ten-year-old to stop throwing rocks. At the time we lived on an unpaved road that had rocks. It seemed like every week I caught him throwing those darn rocks. It made me so angry that he continued to ignore me in this.

As I was sitting in my recliner watching a football game, Andrew and his mom walk into the room, and he has something to confess to me. I look at him with the dad look and ask, “Yes!?”

“*Dad, I was throwing rocks, and um...um...I hit the neighbor’s window in his truck. It’s broken now, dad, but don’t worry it was the little side window.*” He confessed.

I knew this would happen, and I was furious. I mean how many times did I tell him NOT to do this, and now here we are! Before I could utter a word, the Lord spoke to me. “*Watch how you respond to him. Because you will set in motion whether he ever comes to you again, with something more serious to you.*”

Having heard this clear command from the Lord. I sighed and fussed at him and told him that he needed to work to repay me for having to replace that \$800 window. Which he did over the next year.

The Lord directed me and like a prophecy it came true. Later in life at age seventeen he had a much more serious things he and I discussed. He was open with me because I gained his trust. When it comes to disciplining our children, there is no reason for us to needlessly cause them to not trust us. Or worse not trust our reactions. I often say to people that when we overreact for trivial things, we have no room left to react over the things that are serious.

When I was four years old, I remember sitting at the kitchen table one night having supper. Mother was not home, only Jerry and me. He had cooked some macaroni and cheese with ground meat. I was like most kids at that age, who would fuss over food they did not like or want to eat. I refused to eat it. The next memory ingrained in me will never fade away.

I will never forget how he looked when Jerry approached me from behind and growls with a harsh and frightening tone as he points his index finger in my face, "*You better eat the macaroni, you little sh*t!*"

To comply, I quickly swallowed as much mac n cheese as I could, which ignited my gag reflexes. Jerry was so incensed by this reaction that he went back behind me and slammed my little head into the wooden kitchen table, causing my plate to fly as it broke to pieces, and my food to go everywhere.

I remember how at once my face filled with blood and the panic that would soon overwhelm me. Jerry rushed me to the hospital, where I received twenty-six stitches to my little four-year-old forehead.

When I tell these stories, often the question is, "*Why?*" Why didn't I come out and tell someone? Why didn't I tell the truth about my injuries? And so on. And even more so, "*How.*" How did other family members not notice this going on?

What would seem to be a simple question has a much more complicated answer. Jerry would force me to lie about the cause of my injuries. Like the afore-mentioned head trauma, which needed twenty-six stitches, it was easy to explain away. Jerry forced me to lie and say that I was jumping on the bed, fell, and hit my head on the nightstand. I carried this lie around with me for years and every time it was spoken about at a family dinner, I had to recite that lie. I felt dishonest, sinful, and fake. His forcible dishonesty would carry on throughout my life. Jerry would reason out a story to explain my wounds or bruises away, and I would have to follow it –or else. I became a great actor, and he the great director.

For a *normal* person, this story is not that easy to understand. For a moment, consider that along with the physical abuse, were mental, emotional abuse and verbal threats as well. I remember the cruel threats on top of, and many times included along with the abuse. Threats like, "*You'd better keep your mouth shut or I'll kill you!*" Or "*I'll kill your dad and you!*" Or, "*If you say anything, you'll get it harder next time!*" These threats started right away and continued until the abuse ended at age fifteen.

Imagine if you can, a young kid beaten and threatened by a man who babysits him, who takes care of him, who lives inside the house, and who while everyone is around, shows loves and care to. Imagine the confusion, and terror, well-established in a child growing up who is powerless to control his surroundings.

Jerry taught me there were no other options for me.

I remember reading about a young elephant trained for the circus. From an incredibly early age, they tie the small elephant to a large stake in the ground. That young elephant is no match for the weight of the large stake in the ground, holding her bound by the rope. She learns that she cannot overpower the rope and stake. She gives up trying to free herself.

Later as the elephant quadruples in size and in strength, the elephant has not yet realized that she is now able to overpower the

stake and easily free herself. So even though she *can* leave her bindings, she does *not* even try.¹

When someone is abused early on, much is the same. They can convince themselves that they are no match to their situation forever.

Fear is a terrible thing. It immobilizes and steals away life. It binds and blocks people in corners and walls that they can never on their own break free from. For the rest of my childhood, I was in a prison to fear.

I once heard a person say that fear is imaginary. But not all fear is. Fear was very real to me, as it seemed justified by the trial of my surroundings. From his choking and slapping to beatings with belts, and belt buckles and bats, I went through it all. Drowned in water, beaten with the wire side of a fly swatter until my back red, like sunburn. Once, Jerry choked me so long that I passed out, only to be revived by more beatings.

Once my baby sister vomited onto the floor because she choked on a banana. Jerry was so angry with the slowness of my response to get a towel to clean it up, that he shoved my face into the vomit and dragged it back and forth until it filled up my nostrils and made its way into my mouth. Disgusting, I know.

From the age of four until fifteen, I often suffered from violent beatings. But God spared me from death! Not mentioned in this story are the few bouts of sexual abuse that Jerry experimented with.

The point of this writing is not for me to wallow in the misery of my past, nor to make you feel sorry for me. I would shudder to think that you feel sorry for me. I want to open up and share how God transformed my lifeless existence to one that is now full of life, and full of love and full of His grace! I get to break the cycle. You can too. Anyone can. God has not only intervened in my childhood in a

¹ (Hurson, 2008), *Think Better*

dramatic way, but He has also been with me as an adult as well. Keep reading and you will see how dramatic His hand has been over time.

Because of God's personal care with me, my children have known a non-abusive, peaceful, and loving parent. Ideally, they will teach their kids the same thing.

My life is not that much different from other people's. Everyone has something that God has rescued them from. Some people's abuse is far more serious than what I experienced. We all go through pain and abuse of some sort, and different calibers once in and awhile. Some abuse is self-inflicted, like substance abuse. Other forms of abuse are from other people, which we cannot avoid or control.

Rather, the point of writing this is to help you see the magnificent love of God! I wish for you to see that God's powerful presence is working in your life, even when you cannot see Him doing so. He revealed that to me in such a dramatic fashion, that I had to write about it.

By the end of this writing, you will see that my life is a love story. God loved me, even when I could not see it, or even imagine it. He has blessed me with the greatest children who are all successful adults now.

Your life is a love story too. God loves you even when you cannot understand it. You too can experience the greatness of God's amazing love.

Even more wonderful to me was the realization that God loved Jerry, too.

CHAPTER THREE

Resigned to Rejection

“

*“I desire to do your will, my God;
your law is within my heart.” Psalm 40:8*

Resigned to Rejection

To show you a morsel of God's grace and love for me, I write this testimonial of how God changed my life: I am forty-six years old. I have a wonderful family with five beautiful children (*and no, I did not abuse them*) and a fantastic wife. I would never have imagined that God would bless me so richly.

My kids are now having kids. I have become a grandfather time three. I would never have imagined I would have the blessing of my own family.

When I was in my thirties, I suffered some painful memories that oftentimes, just "*popped*" into my head. These memories serve as scars, leftover reminders from the wounds that have healed. The wounds are gone, but sometimes even the scars are painful. I will show you later how God dealt specifically, with my scars.

We know that the first years of a human's life are important to developing attitudes, and behaviors in their personalities, which will last until their death. It is not an accident that when newborn babies are born, they are placed on the bare skin of their parents to begin forming the intimate connection and develop their sense of safety with the parent.

What if, while young, the child feels disregard or rejection? What if the parent is not around? What if the parent acts like the child is a hindrance or not loved? We help form memories, and behaviors in our children that will last into their adult life.

I had abusive memories that used to disturb me all the time. Even into my thirties. I used to have what I call, "*flashbacks*." This is not a technical term or at least I do not think so. It is something I coined to communicate to my wife what was going on in my mind. These flashbacks are memories of some of the most terrible abuse that I went through when I was young. Some are like what I described

earlier, and some are even worse. Yet, there is one specific memory that, when replayed in my mind, overrides them all.

This memory that plays in my mind as much as twice a day, given certain situations. One of the ways the Devil used this against me is in how I would respond nervously to people in basic, normal, stressful situations.

Sometimes, emptiness would flood my heart when I experienced disappointment, frustration, or rejections. Often, it is *this* flashback that made me seem or act awkward and abnormal on the inside, to normal life events. Oftentimes, I pressed through it, other times I would falter and get flustered, and want to shut down on the inside.

When I was raising young kids of my own, making memories was especially important to me. From camping, to working outside in the yard to vacations, I wanted my kids to have adult memories that were of a wonderful time growing up. These childhood memories would help them make good or bad decisions later. They help form boundaries to what they want, and what they do not want for their children. We as parents are carbon imprints of ourselves onto our children. The good, bad, and ugly.

When I was four years old my family was moving our residency from Metairie, Louisiana to an hour away into the countryside. In this site in Metairie, is where the flashback received its power.

Everything was already packed from the house, and very few items left. Jerry packed them into the truck and then came to me with this piercing countenance and pointy finger, saying, "*Your mother and I do not want you anymore! We are leaving you here!*" Then he shoved me into the garage and shut the two doors with a bang. Our garage at that time had two front doors that closed to meet in the middle. I remember at four years old the horror of it all. Alone and feeling unloved and unwanted, rejection filled my being, as I screamed for Jerry not to leave me in that frightening garage. I still remember peering through

the crack between the doors, desperately watching the truck turn right, out of our driveway.

Given that my forehead split wide open earlier that year, the colossal sensation of rejection and abandonment overcame me. It would seem, however, that Jerry was either joking or trying purposely to torment me -I will never know. But this moment changed me, something that would shape my personality and how I reacted to people. I would not realize this until God revealed it to me, years later.

For years, even into my adult life, I would look for and want the approval of people. For a long time, I would, in a weird way, "need" the approval of others, like leaders, pastors, bosses, or my wife, and other friends and relatives. I remember *THE* day when God showed me this unnatural behavior; and what a wake-up it was!

God is the only person I look to please now. You should also make this your goal. Deliverance from seeking man's approval did not happen overnight, but it did happen. I realized that there is only one person that will stand next to me on judgment day, The Lord Jesus Christ. It is His approval that matters most. What freedom I feel because of this revelation!

CHAPTER FOUR

Emotional Exercise

“

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free” Luke 4:18

Emotional Exercise

Being new to the RV life brought me a lot of things to learn. One of my most memorable moments was trying to empty out the gray and black tanks for the first time. The gray and black water is stored in separate plastic compartments that must be emptied out regularly. I was gung-ho about camping at first and honestly could not wait to prove to my kids what a masculine father they had. Now, bear in mind the gray water is the water left over from the showers and sinks. It included water used to wash dishes with. The black water tank, however, is another kind of water. It is the untreated toilet water that is designed to be safely discarded as you leave each camping area. It is human waste.

I remember running outside of the camper ready to display to my children the *Bear Grylls* side of their father. I grabbed hold of the brand-new sewer hose and attached it to the sewer connection and as I opened the valve to release the human waste when the sewer water began to spray like a pinched water hose out the sides of the valve. I did not tighten the connection and instead of Bear Grylls, I looked like *Robin Williams* in the 2006 movie, *RV*. The wastewater drenched my clothes and was all over my hands. The foul smell of that experience lasted for hours, even days.

Our emotions are like that. Something said in a moment of anger, or our harsh tongue exploding out at the seams, sprays out on the people we love, and the foul smell of those words lasts a long time.

My then eighteen-year-old son, Ethan was looking to leave the house and go to bible college. We were all proud of him for it, except I had an issue with it. I bounced for and against this idea for months. When it was time to take the steps of moving him up there, I was a basket case. Letting go of children is an emotional challenge for people with a normal spectrum of emotions. For me, because of our healthy and loving home life, I did not want Ethan to leave and disrupt it. I felt as though I were pushed back in the garage and left alone once again. I guess I did not want *him* to leave *me*.

For months, I tried talking him out of going, reckoning that the local community college or the local state university would be better for him. In fact, it was only better for me. On the day of orientation at the bible college, I lost it. I threw a child-like temper tantrum and refused to go into the building. That was a bad moment for me. After he returned to the car, my wise son, gently and maturely asked me, “*Dad, why are you getting so upset that I am going to bible college...shouldn’t you be happy for me?*” He broke me. He was the adult in this moment. He broke through the belligerent wall I had put up and went straight to my soul. When he broke me, I broke down and confessed, “*I just don’t want to lose you, son.*” We all cried on the way home. It was a powerful emotional exercise for us all.

By the time I was twelve, I had resigned myself to being a lonely, empty, and emotionally weak, person. I walked with my head up although it was down in reality. As a result of the frustrations of my life, I turned to cigarettes, alcohol, and pornography. I figured they made me feel like I had at least some control over my life, as if these were *my* choices, not something demanded of me by anyone else. They only masked my immediate need to cover up the foul smell of my life. It was as if they filled me with pleasures that would only last a moment. Despair always found a way back home inside of me.

It was then at twelve, that I had a mental and emotional breakdown. I could not manage life anymore. My mother took me to a professional counselor to whom I finally confessed my stepfather's abuse. Relieved to have this terrible burden lifted off my small frame of a body, and fragile disposition. I expected the arrest of Jerry, or at least his removal from the house. We also let my mother know all that Jerry was doing to me. That was a decent few hour for me. Relief came over me to be finally free from the horrible secret that he and I shared, or I thought.

I can still remember his blatant denial of such abuse. Instead of protecting me, my guardians of mine then shipped me off to my birth father's house for the summer, only to return three months later, to the same home and an angrier stepfather. Mom was not home when I returned. Jerry was there waiting for me with torture device in

hand. I felt damned for telling our secret. My feelings were indeed correct.

The system failed me. Those pledged to protect me as a helpless child had failed. The stench of his negative actions and words became even more prevalent to me.

My heart sunk. Broken, I felt not only afraid but abandoned all over again. I could not believe that my family would not listen to the cry of a young kid. Shock and horror filled my heart as helplessness set in, and I surrendered to my circumstances at such an early age, giving up all hope. I had given up on prayer and I had given up on any family intervention. I had completely given up on God.

Note: Please if you are reading this and your kid comes to you and says that someone is hurting them, please listen. Do something about it! Do not be a fool. Yes, investigate it. Listen with your head, not always with your heart.

My mother was a great mom. But...? You see, my mother loved Jerry, until her death. She listened to her heart, and not to her head. Her heart was in love with Jerry, and she could not bring her head to acknowledge that this wonderful man could be such a monster. She was a good mother, but lived in a distorted reality, oblivious to the horrific parts of life. Clinicians call it denial.

I used to ask myself sometimes, how could she not have known all this that went on under her nose? Trying to make some sense to my madness, I concluded that we lived in a fourteen-foot-wide mobile home trailer. If someone dropped an object on the floor on one end, another person could hear it on the other end of the trailer. One would presume she would especially hear the thump of a falling child on the floor, hurled into the air by a massive man.

She was a smart lady, but oblivious to reality at times -even when it was right in her face. Was it all those romance novels she used to read? Did she live in the fiction that she held in her hand? I do not know and will not ever know for sure. Later in life, however, I would

come to the sad conclusion that she knew it and was helpless to stop it.

By the time I was fifteen I was hopeless, felt insignificant, and doomed to a miserable life. Tragically, I had resigned myself to the words of dread and meaninglessness that emanated from Jerry's mouth and actions. The nothingness of my worthless existence caused me to believe there was not a good future ahead. Underneath the strained, and phony smiles, and cheerful disposition, lay a disturbed and frightened person who trembled in fear every time the school bus stopped at our house to drop me off. I feared going home every day because I knew the burden that lay behind the front door.

Growing up it seemed like we were always broke, so I had to wear low-priced clothes, no-named shoes, and ugly glasses. Consequently, I was not very popular in school, not good at sports, and not a good student, either. I sang in the choir but found out that I was demoted to the beginner's choir the next year. I was the only kid ever to have managed this. To top it all off, I had a bad case of acne. I was an average student with a below-average outlook on life, plus a bad complexion and not a great singer.

The way I felt inside was in direct relation to a couple of things: First, not only the constant abuse that I lived with, but there were steady put-downs and humiliation from Jerry. Things like, "*You don't have the brains that God would give a goat!*" And "*You're stupid!*" Or, my favorite, "*You won't amount to anything!*" Imagine for a moment the developmental process of a child bombarded with negative and critical words, along with violent abuse. I was not just sprayed with a sewer hose, I felt like I was living inside of it.

Second, were the normal adolescent fears and struggles of teenage life that everyone must encounter: Falling in love, and getting my heart broken several times. I once liked this girl named Tracie. She was so pretty and delicate looking. I thought she was the sweetest thing until one day she was told by a friend of mine that I liked her, and she shouted out in our speech class, "*Doug Gilford!!! He looks like he was beaten with an ugly stick!!!!*" Nobody could imagine the pure pain

that a young teenage boy feels after an experience like that. I became numb. Careless living would ignite a lonesome and ominous persona that I would soon find my deliverance from.

So much rebellion and hatred had set into my damaged heart by the age of fifteen that I lost trust and everyone. I struggled to find hope and many times I wanted to die. I took a handful of pills one day hoping to fall asleep and not wake up. The only thing that happened to me when I awoke was a huge cramp in my stomach. I felt even more like a failure but also relieved at the same time. I dare to imagine the regret someone feels after overdosing or hanging or cutting themselves – but never living through it to say, “*Hey this is not the answer.*” I look back and see that God’s hand was at work even when I did not realize it. He spared my life, and today, I am grateful.

As a parent now myself, I tried to always be aware of the mental state of my kids. Although it is not always easy as they are not always honest, it is necessary to help them grow into emotionally healthy people.

I never wanted to say or do something that caused them to be fragile in their hearts. However, no matter how hard I tried, there were times I broke their heart.

My oldest son Cory is a very thoughtful person. He is a logical and practical person who was always serious about life. He loves God and is a pastor himself. One day I recall a time when instead of being authoritarian in the relationship, I needed correction myself.

Raising my own kids, I would often yell at them. Partly learned behavior from my mother, and partly dealing with the pressures and anxieties of my life. For this I am not at all proud.

I found Cory sobbing in his room after yelling harshly at him one day. After asking him what was wrong, he shared with me something that changed my life. At the early age of twelve his words were powerful, ‘*Dad, you always tell me and my brothers not to yell. And we*

get in trouble when we do. But you yell at us like you do not care about anything. It makes me think everything in my life is a lie,” he said between his tears.

I could not believe what I heard. I never sought out to scar any of my children, yet here I was on the verge of doing so. I did what every parent who finds themselves in the wrong should always do. I acknowledged that he was right, and I apologized for my hypocrisy. I asked him to forgive me, which he did. Why did I do that? Two reasons: first, he was right: I should not have acted like a maniac and done something that I would *not* allow him to do. And second, by asking him to forgive me, I was teaching him *how* to ask forgiveness from God later in life. We as parents must display leadership to our children, not settle for the “*Do as I say, not as I do*” philosophy so common in our culture.

Emotions are brittle at times, and we need to stand on a foundation of trust, love, and honesty. Whenever our emotions crumble at times, there will still be a solid foundation and something to stand on.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mysterious Man

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“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. ‘How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” Romans 10:13–15

Mysterious Man

Tired of life, and frustrated enough, I stood up to my stepfather. Jerry was trying to attack me once again, and I threatened to kill him. I was now his height, and had gained some muscles, and out of desperation I defended myself to him. I was going to end his life, and I was serious. I was ready to do it. I had planned it, and how to do it, and what to use. I kept a shotgun behind my door that I would sometimes go hunting with. "*That would be my way out!*" I thought. From that moment on, the physical abuse stopped, completely. It turns out what they say about bullies is true. Sometimes you need to stand up to them. Jerry the monster, became a coward in my eyes.

With this newfound freedom, I started breaking into neighboring homes, sneaking out of the house, and stealing money from my mom right out of her purse. I smoked cigarettes and when I could not afford them, I smoked the used butts I found on the street. When I would sneak out, I would go to my friend's house and play music. We started a band and thought we were good. The truth is that we were bad. But we enjoyed the strawberry wine that his father made and stored in his garage. We would drink more than we would play, but it seemed cool to be a part of something and to be outside of the house where I was terrorized.

One day after drinking and playing "music" at my friend's house, a visitor came by to visit us. He was a mysterious man. He had long black hair and a long black beard. I remember that he had many tattoos on his arms and one teardrop tattooed in the corner of his eye. These were all emblems of his past. Although a rough-looking man, there was something to what he spoke that demanded our attention.

He came to the garage where we were playing and asked if he could listen to us. He was from South Carolina and a distant relative of my friend's family. He sat there and encouraged us in our playing, even though I am sure it was hard to listen to. A while later, he approached us with a question. "*Have you ever thought about playing music for God?*"

What?! I had never heard that before. Play music for God? I did not understand the question since I had hardly ever been to church. I only went to Sunday school once or twice, but never to a church service. Jerry always wanted me to work around the house, and he hated church. Neither he, nor my mother knew God, or went to church, or even spoke about God except to use him as a curse word. We never prayed or heard a Christian song, and I do not think we even had a Bible until late in my teenage years.

This mysterious man continued to tell us about the love of God; how his love is unconditional and forever. He told us how God proved his love for us by sending Jesus to die on a cross for us. He told us how God wants to be our father and that he would adopt us into his family. My heart clung on to the last part. God wanted to be my father!?

I was overjoyed! My heart leapt inside me. I had never heard this before, but I craved the love and acceptance that this stranger spoke about. As he talked, I saw my sin, my emptiness, and I saw the answer for both was accepting the gift of salvation from Jesus. The assurance of this love also meant I would become a child of God. What joy!

All five of us prayed with this man to receive Jesus into our lives. We confessed our sin; every one of them. He explained to us that God was now going to prepare a place for us in Heaven, and we should keep growing every day in God's love by getting to know Him more. He said this was because God wanted to know *us*!

After we prayed, I felt the weight of sin lifting off my shoulders and the guilt and shame of sin being removed. I felt like a new person. A different person. Indeed, I was. Most powerful was the love I felt that I had never felt before, a love from a father- because I was his son! I found what I needed all my life.

We spent hours that night on the back of this mysterious man's pickup truck, talking about God. Immediately I felt like I was a part of God's family.

I got home that night after midnight, and my mom was waiting up for me, angry because I had snuck out and was coming home late. Soon as I walked in the front door, she asked me, "*Son, where have you been?*" I exclaimed, "Mom, I got saved tonight!!" Being a good Catholic, she looked me dead in the eyes and in a serious tone asked, "*Son, are you on drugs?*" I snickered to myself as I ran to my bedroom and fell fast asleep.

My life has not been the same again. I took my mom's unused Bible that my aunt had recently given her and read it day, after day after day. I brought it to school, and I talked about God wherever I went. I was changed instantly, in that one moment. It was so exciting to feel loved and know that I was loved.

People called me fanatical, religious, and a "holy roller." Those words from friends, and teachers, and the like, did not affect me at all. Thanks to Jerry, I familiar with the name calling, but now I enjoyed them because I was being insulted for Christ's sake.

Thinking today about how God reached me, I am still amazed. The likelihood of a teenager becoming a Christian without ever going to church, and without having any godly influences, is rare by human standards. Sometimes, teenagers follow their parents to church or their friends to church and then choose to make Christ their Lord and Savior. But for me to receive Christ in a garage full of wine is a display of God's goodness and faithfulness to us all.

Then there is the added fact that a stranger, from somewhere, came to visit this family, and we happened to be there, which is amazing. Further, given the fact that we all were ready to receive what he had to say so quickly, shows that God's timing is always right on time and that God's love is amazing. When someone explained the love of God to me -for the first time, I responded. I jumped at the chance to receive forgiveness and love!

How many others would also jump at the chance to receive God's love if we would tell them? They need to hear it, and plainly and simply. It does not need to be within church walls or according

to a religious setting. People need to know, they need to hear that God loves them, no matter what. And that God wants to forgive them. For that is the exact purpose of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection – to restore humankind to the love of God.

The love of God is amazing! All those years of abuse, and prayers that I thought were ignored by God, all vanished away in this one defining moment of my life. The fact that God reached His hand down and touched me as a young boy, in the middle of Nowhere, Louisiana, and changed me from the inside-out in a single instant, is a miracle.

God works in mysterious ways. His actions are breathtaking to say the least.

I never saw that mysterious man again, and do not even know his name. I was not even able to go back to say, "*Thanks!*" But God knows him because God sent him to us. As for the other guys in the band, I do not know if they lasted past six months, but I did. We drifted apart when I became a "fanatic" for Christ in my local high school. At once I started preaching to the students there, and with amazing results. Many teens gave their hearts to Jesus that year. Sometimes as many as eighty students would surround me in the courtyard during lunch hour while I preached inside of that circle.

One day the principal of the school came out to see what was going on. He made his way past the crowd to find me in there, preaching my heart out. That day, I was beckoned to the principal's office and asked to stop. I found out that he was a deacon in his local church, so I asked him, "*Mr. Allen, you are a deacon in your church, why would you want me to stop? Shouldn't you be excited?*" He must have been convinced or convicted, I do not know, but he relented. That bible study kept going for a long time, years after I left high school.

Now, looking back thirty years later, I can see that the Lord has always placed people in my life to guide me to the next stage of growth and development. If you are honest, you can agree. When I joined the Army in 1992, it was my supervisor, SSG Ransaw. He was

an impressive leader, but also a minister in the church I was attending. He was funny, light-hearted, and wise. God used his relationship to me and my family to get me to the next level in my Christian growth. It was because of this leader/friend in my life I developed the confidence to be a young minister that would eventually lead people in my own church.

Then, at my next military assignment the Lord placed a man by the name of Tracey in my path. He and I spent every day playing ping-pong at lunch, talking about Christ, and dreaming of a life after the Army. His life was vital to my young mind as we were free to love and laugh and be Believers who walked in God's grace. Our three years of friendship at Fort Polk have never been forgotten by me.

Who has the Lord placed into your life to help you emotionally? Or directionally? God takes a very personal role in our spiritual maturity as he sees that we are willing to follow His direction.

There have been countless people over the last thirty years who God has used to lead me where He wants me to go. Likewise, I believe that I was placed for others to follow too. This is how God's kingdom is designed. Who is impacting you? Who are you impacting? You can be someone else's mysterious man.

CHAPTER SIX

Finding Forgiveness

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“For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Matthew 6:14–15

Finding Forgiveness

My phone rang in the middle of the day, and I wondered what this call was about. *“Pastor, will you go pray for my dying friend named Joe? It is all the way in Baton Rouge,”* She asked.

From time to time, I get calls like this at the church office. People’s dying family members are special to me, as they are about to face their eternity. Baton Rouge is an hour drive from Mandeville, and I was able to use that time contemplating and preparing what I would say to this eighty-eight-year-old man who I was going to meet for the first time.

While praying and thinking to myself, it occurred to me that *if I were him* the only thing I would want to know is, how I can align myself, and my life to the Words of Christ to receive salvation. What does the Bible say about this, I asked myself?

My thought pattern was like this: Whatever I am going to say to this gentleman, I must say it quickly and clearly, because he is more than likely in and out of coherency. Further, I do not have time to play games with him and bother with small talk, ice breakers, or “get to know you” kind of language. Driving to Baton Rouge I thought about this important conversation, and I reminded myself again *NOT* to do like I had done with Uncle English.

My mind wandered to that incident as a young man. When I was in the Army studying to eventually become a minister of the Gospel, I received a call from a family member that Uncle English was dying, and I should go see him. I remember being humbled, yet proud to go and pray as a minister for the first time for someone about to cross over.

As I rushed into the elevator and finally on the floor where Uncle English was laying, I was met by throngs of people whisking me in, escorting me to the side of his bed. Someone whispered in my ear, *“He is not going to make it through the night.”*

I turned and stared at this grim sight. Uncle English had lost fifty pounds, and he looked like a hint of his former self. Admittedly, I had not seen him in five years while traveling with the Army. I was shocked by the gaunt figure lying there before me, barely able to open his eyes.

Someone shook him and he smiled as he heard that I was there. Another person nudged me to say something, anything. They wanted a scripture verse, or an encouraging word or something. But I could not utter a word as I was in total shock myself. Frankly, I should have just stayed quiet.

I could feel everyone's eyes on me as I shook my head and looked down into his desperate eyes. Then I spoke the much-anticipated words from this young minister, "*I sure am going to miss you Uncle English.*"

Gasps filled the room as people were shocked by what I had said! Immediately you could feel the tension in the air. Everyone started muttering amongst themselves and I quickly had to "fix" what I just said. "*Uh...Um...I mean I am really going to miss you when I go back to the Army tomorrow.*" And just like that the pressure left the room. Everything was back to normal. I quickly let myself out of the room and flew out of the hospital. My youthful arrogance almost got me killed that day.

How dare I tell someone they were dying, I chuckled as I focused back on my driving. Either way, it was ten years later, and I was not going to make that mistake again.

The confidence I had going to this appointment was that he had originally asked for someone to come. His family had relayed the message to me, so there was a search in his soul for answers in his heart.

I decided that I would go in, and tell him about the amazing love of God, and how Christ had sought his soul since the day of his birth. I would tell him that Jesus offers forgiveness for our lifetime of

sins if he were willing to accept the offer. Lastly, I would tell him that if he wanted, I would pray for him, and Christ would prepare him a place in Heaven.

Having the one-hour drive time for preparation helped me tremendously. I did exactly as I had planned. Except, once again I was not ready for this man's reaction.

After telling him all this in a quick but straightforward way he raised his hand to speak to me. This was not in my preparation. What he told me was life changing.

"My office has been in the same place for fifty years. On one side of the office is a bakery, and on the other is a church. I know all there is in the bakery. I have tasted all their cupcakes, cookies and cakes. I know the owner of the bakery and we are friends. But in fifty years, I have never heard from anyone at the church. None of the various priests, nor anyone else. And what you have told me young man is the first time I had heard it about the love of God like you explained it." he said with tears flowing.

I stood there speechless. I was embarrassed by this.

I said, "Mr. Joe, I am so glad I came to bring you this news then." We sat and spoke about Christ and about the radiant love of God. He was most interested in the fact that he was finally able to receive forgiveness from a lifetime of guilt. He was able to see from the plain text of Scripture: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."²*

Forgiveness from Christ is freeing! As I drove home his friend called me to thank me for coming and said he has been smiling from ear to ear since we prayed. He passed away two days later.

At sixteen, I was reading my mother's bible, when I came across the verse that says, *"If you do not forgive men when they sin, how can*

² 1 John 1:9

your Heavenly Father forgive you when you sin.¹⁶ Through this verse I could hear God telling me to do the impossible -forgive my stepfather.

Offended, I said, "*Lord, how can I forgive my stepfather for what he did all those years to me?*" I was wrestling with the thought of this. Years would go by with me wrestling with this command from God's Word.

One day the peace of God came over me and I knew that I could not, in *my* strength. But with God's help, I could. That day, with gallons of tears I surrendered the pain and the attacks to the Lord and set out on a path to forgive Jerry. I knew I had to because I had needed God to forgive me. I cried to the Lord, "*Please help me forgive this man!*"

Forgiveness is not easy to do. It often depends on the severity of offenses. It is easy to forgive the mail carrier for delivering your mail to the neighbor's mailbox. It is easy to forgive someone for cutting you off on a busy highway. But, when things affect us over extended periods of time, especially if it involves injustices or crimes against us, we tend to hold on to unforgiveness like a baby holding on to a pacifier. I have learned and am guilty of this. It has a way of comforting us and gives us an illusion of power; the power to make excuses and to pity ourselves. Another negative consequence to long term pain is that we tend to blame all our problems past, present and future on the pain -that somehow, we still carry.

For some, pain sometimes gives us this false impression that God understands our "not forgiving" someone, because of what we went through. This is so far from the truth. God knows that unforgiveness kills *us* even the more.

When the Devil causes someone to cause us pain, he then causes us more pain by convincing us that there is no *need* to move past the terror and to harbor resentment. This creates for us an everlasting pain-cycle as we are constantly replaying the offenses, day after day, minute after minute with no end in sight. The wounds stay open and stay fresh, they never actually heal.

¹⁶ Matthew 6:14-15

That is the cruelty of unforgiveness and is a tool of the Devil to keep us tied down to ourselves and our pain. The Devil seeks to destroy us, and with what better weapon to use, other than one that will also keep us from experiencing true freedom in Christ? Forgiveness is not easy, and it is impossible without the power of God working and helping us.

Wounds do heal, but scars remain, and they hurt. The abuse had ended, but the evidence of abuse was still in me. Although Christ changed my life, for years I remained angry at Jerry for what he put me through. Yet, God wanted me to forgive him, and I set out to do just that. I realized that I needed to love him first and that seemed even more difficult to do.

How can you forgive a person you did not first love? And likewise, how do you love a person whom you cannot forgive? See the cycle? Additionally, how can a person love his/her abuser? These are the questions that ran through my mind for an awfully long time, and I knew that God would have to miraculously change me, to love him.

There are a couple of things I learned about forgiveness. One, forgiveness does not mean that the pain I suffered did not hurt or did not affect me negatively. Rather, forgiving Jerry began a treatment of my physical and emotional wounds. It was as if I had said, *“These will no longer hurt me every day.”*

Second, forgiving Jerry did not mean that we needed to be close together as a son and father are. It is not like I could just forget the Hell I was put through. Forgiving Jerry however gave me what I needed to develop my intimacy with Christ. My act of obedience to God’s Word made me free to be close to God.

Lastly, forgiving Jerry did not mean he was *worth* forgiving. I forgave Jerry because I wanted Christ to forgive me. I knew that forgiving him meant that I would choose to be the better man -in Christ. Christ calls us to live at a greater level of faith and obedience than everyone else.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Winning the Wretch

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*“Be merciful to those who doubt;
save others by snatching them from the fire;
to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the
clothing stained by corrupted flesh.” Jude 22–23*

Winning the Wretch

What is the cost for one single soul? In other words, how important are you and me to God?

Jesus said in the Bible, ‘*No one takes my life, I willingly lay it down.*’⁴ The power in the Lord’s statement cannot be overstated. Here is the Lord over all creation speaking as a human, and in human terms saying that He is going to choose to lay His life down.

Now, if I had created anything (*other than headaches for people,*) let alone if I had created *everything*, I would want to sit back and enjoy the sweet comforts of my riches and good fortune. But not so with our Lord. He did not sit back and let His creation suffer with addiction, pain, depression, and sin. He rose from His throne and laid down His life to destroy those things.

There is no other story of a little g-o-d that has the amount of love and compassion for its creation. The love of the Father is spelled out through the sacrificial work that we see Jesus living out on Earth. ‘*For God so loved...*’⁵ Remember?

What is the cost for a single soul? It cost Christs’ life. Because of His love, His life was willingly laid down to give even the most brazen hardened sinner a chance to have salvation. Considering the cost already paid, who are we to not do our part in participating in expanding the Heavenly base?

I knew Jerry was dear to God’s heart. He had challenged me to forgive him, and I knew next was giving him the great reward of salvation. No, he did not deserve it, but nor did I.

I spent the next eight years intentionally reaching out to my stepfather. Sharing with him Bible verses and saying the words, “*I love*

⁴ John 10:18

⁵ John 3:16

you, Jerry." (*Although, I do not know how much I meant it at first*). It was the hardest thing for me to do, especially, with that familiar snarl on his face that he would sometimes shoot back at me. But things inside of him began to change. I noticed, and so did others.

Shortly after my high school graduation, I was shipped off by the Army and got married and travelled with my new family all over the world on Uncle Sam's dime. Every chance I would get, I came home on leave, went to my home church (*where I started going at the age of sixteen*), and visited family. Jerry was always someone I tried reaching for the Lord. I knew if Jerry could be saved, then anyone could be saved. As Jerry watched me grow up into a godly man, he began to take notice.

When I started having children, my old fearful feelings came back into my life. Dreadful feelings would reignite inside of me.

I would not let Jerry care for my children alone (*who would, right?*), and that caused controversy in my family. But I made a stand, and Jerry would not dare test me. Jerry and I had a secret, and neither of us would let it out, *again*.

But something strange began to happen in my relationship with him. I really and earnestly began to love him. Ironically, I believe that when you pray for someone, you begin to love them. This must be why Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies. Not only do I love my abuser, but I also began to even *like* Jerry. I saw that because of God's love inside of me, I could love him. Freedom flooded my soul!

Jerry had always had a bad heart. Not only was it cold and black, but it also did not work properly. His aortic valves were blocked, and he was to undergo open-heart surgery. I remember the day when he was about to go in for that procedure. The family all stood by his bedside when the hospital staff came to wheel him through the double doors of the hospital surgery center. My shy uncle looked at me and asked, "*Have you ever told Jerry about Christ?*" "*Not, really, did you?*" I replied. "*No... he's always been tough to share with.*" My saddened uncle said softly.

I shouted at the top of my lungs to the hospital attendants, "*Stop!!*" The guys in blue hospital scrubs looked at me as if I were crazy. I ran over to Jerry, placing my hands on his chest, and pleaded, "*Jerry, if you do not wake up from this surgery and you die you are going straight to Hell!!*"

Jerry looked back at me with desperation in his eyes. "*I do not want you to go to Hell, so let me pray for you so that God will forgive your sins,*" I continued.

Without waiting for his response, I prayed the hardest prayer I have ever had to pray, "*God please accept my stepfather as your son, and forgive him of his sins. Thank you, in Jesus's name I pray. Amen.*"

I will never forget this moment for the rest of my life. Others, who were there, will never forget it either. People have reminded me of this many times as the moment that Christ changed my stepfather.

Jerry woke from the surgery doing fine. But the doctors told my mother that his heart was bad, and he needed a new heart. Over the next year, Jerry would go in, and out of the hospital. But during that year, he was baptized and began a Bible study in his home. He was a different person. His frightful countenance was gone. He was truly a good man, not just pretending to be one. He had a sincere desire to know Christ. Daily, he would drink up the Word of God; constantly listening to sermon tapes, and videos. He especially loved when the minister from the Church of Christ would come over and have Bible Studies with him, week after week.

After eight years, I left the Army and went into full-time ministry at my father-in-law's church. Jerry was in the hospital getting ready for a heart transplant when he called me and asked for a favor. "*Doug, would you come to the hospital and read the Bible to me?*" I, of course, agreed. So, I left and traveled across Lake Ponchartrain to the hospital where Jerry was lying in a bed, nervous about the heart transplant, soon to come.

For two solid hours, I read the Bible to him. The book of Psalms, then the book of John, and then Jerry suddenly interrupted me and asked, "*Doug, now would you explain what you just read to me.*" I was shocked, "*Uh, okay.*" For another hour I sat and explained the Bible to the man who caused me so much misery and pain, for so long. This was Jerry's way of saying that he was sorry for the years of abuse he had put me through. God's love truly is amazing!

I say again, God's love for humans is amazing. In Zephaniah 3:17 the bible beautifully says, "*The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.*" God sings over us!

God loved my stepfather, and he eventually loved God back! God revealed his love to me as well. This passage shows the pure love and excitement that God has towards us. If we respond to it, how can we even think he would turn us away?

It is true when Jesus says that He came to "*Seek and save that which is lost.*"⁶ For He certainly sought after my life, and without a doubt sought after Jerry's. He is looking for yours too.

When Jerry went into the surgical room for his heart transplant, it was his last time. He did not wake up on Earth. Sadly, his physical body gave up and died, but his spirit woke up in Heaven! I thank God for allowing me to be a part of winning over this hard-hearted, mean, and angry man, and watch God turn him into a soft-hearted and hungry follower of Jesus! Now, he is in Heaven, awaiting us all.

The cost of a single soul on our part is like Jesus, "*Laying our life down.*" No, this does not mean let us all go die for someone. But in a more modern and practical view, it does mean laying "aside" our self, our pride, our rights or even to go out of our way for someone. It is the least we can do considering the price already paid.

⁶ Luke 19:10

CHAPTER EIGHT

Supernatural Surgery

“
*‘Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there.
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.’*”

Psalm 139:7–8

Supernatural Surgery

A couple of years ago I went into the hospital to have a surgical procedure on my right foot. For a decade, I had suffered with terrible aching and throbbing pain. Over time, my foot developed a bunion and I needed to have it fixed.

As it turns out the surgery would involve cutting open my foot, sawing my big toe bone in half, cutting it a half inch shorter, and sewing it all back together. Then another six months of painful recovery and physical therapy to walk again.

The anticipation for this surgery was excruciating. I began to compare my current freedom and mobility with losing it for a long time. The thought of six long months of relying on crutches and the help from people was mentally draining to say the least.

As hard as the surgery and recovery was, it was necessary. It made me better and I am glad I went through it. Likewise, God helps us with surgical precision to heal our hearts. Scripture tells us that “*God corrects those He loves.*”⁷ And another place Jesus likens God to a Gardner who prunes the branches so that it can bear more fruit.⁸ Correction and pruning are never fun, but necessary to the future growth and development of us all. It is like a spiritual surgery going on inside of us.

I said earlier that your wounds heal, but scars remain, and they can be painful. I used to pray as a kid for God to protect me from the abuse, and for God to make the abuse stop. But the abuse did not stop, it only continued. During that time, I developed a disregard for God altogether.

⁷ Hebrews 12:6

⁸ John 15:2

I reasoned to myself, as a child, "*How could a God who is supposed to love us all, allow this abuse to continue and ignore me?" "What kind of God is this?*" My resentment for God was deep.

I also mentioned the flashbacks -those awful and painful memories of abuse that sometimes would last for days. In these flashbacks, I clearly remember the garage incident; I have a vivid memory of the doors shutting and me peeking through the cracks and to my despair watching the yellow truck turn right, leaving me alone. I have awful memories of slaps, punches and being chased through the house while kicked. I remember being choked and passing out I remember the weather the day I was outside in the back yard, standing looking out over our garden in the Spring. I remember the clear, sunny sky as Jerry, who was standing next to me, suddenly waylays me in the face with his fist, knocking me to the ground. Likewise, I remember being in the bathtub and Jerry barging in angrily and pushing my head under the water by my neck -nearly drowning me. I remember the utter desperation I felt to get air into my lungs. I remember going to bed, late at night whimpering after a severe beating and specifically calling out to God to save me from this terrible ordeal, at the same time wondering why He would not.

These memories -these scars, haunted me for decades after the abuse, even after Jerry's salvation and death. Scars too, are painful at times.

Until one day, later in my life, I was at a church conference with other preachers. We were in a church in West Monroe, Louisiana, worshipping together, when out of nowhere, I began to have those flashbacks of abuse again. I thought I was going insane.

My normal reaction to these flashbacks is to "dump" them out of my mind as quickly as they come in. It is Satan who brings them to me -*though possibly* it is just the way my brain is. However, I see them as a tool of Satan; therefore, I just dump them out. Over the years I have learned that this "*dumping*" is an effective way to NOT dwell on the negativity of my past.

While worshipping along with other pastors there in West Monroe, this flashback came to me, and I started the dumping process. But this time it is *different*. This time, Jesus is the one bringing these painful memories back to me. I was distraught by this.

As I stood there completely confused as to why God would do this, all the sudden, as in a vision, I am taken *back* to the places of my memories, these incidents of abuse. I cannot fully explain it, but I will try to portray the scenes the best that I can:

I am standing in the church - this I know for sure. Jesus brings the memories back to me, and I am suddenly taken in my mind back to the scenes of abuse, One by one, scene by awful scene. So, I sit down in the church as I realize that Jesus is at work in me, and I began to weep uncontrollably.

The first scene is the most disturbing of them all. It is the dreaded garage scene. I am once again peering out the cracks between the doors. Again, I see the truck pulling off. Again, I feel absolute horror come over me as I imagine that I am being abandoned, but this time, as if through the lens of a cinematic camera, the lens pans to the right. In thirty years of this memory, it is suddenly different. Now I see the camera turning as if I am there looking to see behind me, and as I do – JESUS IS STANDING THERE WITH HIS ARMS OUT TOWARD ME! He is in the garage with me!

I could not believe what was going on. God was showing me scene after scene, abusive situation after abusive situation. The scenes that once terrified me and stunted my emotional growth. Now God takes me to that place and shows me where He was in that room. He takes me to my bedroom where I laid in a fetal position whimpering and begging God to stop the abuse. He shows me that he is lying there, next to me with His arm around me comforting me. He takes me to the bathtub

when my head was being held underwater and as I gasped for air, He shows me where He stood –by the door looking down at me, He is weeping. He took me to every place that my memories would remind me of and specifically revealed to me where He was in that room with me.

For thirty minutes as I sat in that church, Christ came to me in a vision and took me to my past. Every horrible moment was instantaneously transformed into moments of love, care, and protection for me. They no longer stayed horrible memories but were made into loving ones, thus, removing the dreadful feelings assigned to them.

I suddenly ran out of the church sobbing, trying to keep my dignity around my peers. I fumbled to find my keys and opened the car door and as I fell to the seat, tears erupted even more. It was as if my insides had exploded with water on my steering wheel.

I asked the Lord in a panic, "Why would you show me this? Am I going crazy? I thought I was ok. I have dealt with it; I have placed these memories at your feet; why all the sudden would you show yourself to me in this way? What is going on?"

Christ did not speak back to me, but as I pulled the car out of the parking lot, I sensed in my heart that Jesus and I had "unfinished business."

Driving on the interstate to my hotel, the Lord reminded me that as a kid, I was angry at Him for not being there, and for allowing these awful occurrences to continue. It was as if, well...Christ was correcting the record. He was there, all the time. Protecting me and keeping me alive.

With this vision, God was taking the memories that used to inflict pain on me and He made them *good memories that poured out love to me*. He made them good memories by showing me the very place in which He stood with me during my trials. Oh, the magnificent love of Christ!

I learned that every horrible thing that you and I go through, Jesus is there for us! Every wonderful thing, Jesus is there! Every painful, or awful, or happy or glorious thing that His children go through, Jesus is there!

I am certain that God is there for you and me at every nanosecond of our lives the good times and the terrible times, alike. He has proven that to me. God is no respecter of persons. He does not do for one, what he would not do for another.

If God could save Jerry, then He can save your abuser, or your loved ones and even you. If he can transform my life, he can do the same for yours.

If we can learn to see past the pain and look beyond the questions, we will see the hands of God at work in us. His love is amazing! Surrender to Him. Surrender your pain and your past to Him. Surrender your thoughts and memories to Him. He cares for you!

Do it now, do not wait. Place your trust in God today. If you have painful memories, begin to recognize that Christ was there all the time, helping you through it. Holding you, loving you, and caring for you.

CHAPTER NINE

Confident Control

“

*“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;
I have come that they may have life, and have it to
the full.”*

John 10:10

Confident Control

Years have gone by since this amazing change took place in my life. Please do not assume from this writing that everything has been perfect for me. It has taken me more than ten years to write this book for you. God is still showing me things that I desperately need.

For years after this magnificent encounter, I look back and see how I tried controlling people and circumstances in my life. Subconsciously, I was trying to control outcomes and avoid disappointment. I lived to keep people happy. I would become devastated if it were not the results I wished for.

If you are reading this, let this be a caution to you not to go here. We cannot change what we do not control. Yet we sometimes try to control what we cannot change.

My dog, *Luna*, loves to play in our church pond. She loves chasing the ducks more, I believe. Sometimes I get so annoyed because she flies out of my grasp as soon as I open the door, before I can even tell her no. The first time she did this, she was scared to go into the water. She just ran around the pond, over and over. Later she put her front paws in the water and would jump back out. By the end of the day, she had convinced herself that it was okay to just play in the shallow part of the water. She did this for a couple of days, until she graduated to swimming across the pond. I felt so proud of her.

Now, she loves the pond so much, I can barely restrain her. She broke through chains and chewed her leashes just to be free to play in the water. It is too funny to watch sometimes. She will spend hours playing in the pond as the ducks just swim around her. She splashes the water with her front legs and tries to catch the splashes with her mouth, over and over. She is in doggy heaven, I suppose.

One time she broke her chain and was running around and swimming in the pond with part of her chain still attached. It was one

hilarious picture. This is freedom, and we all desire it on the inside of us.

The freedom Luna found playing in the pond, is like how I felt after Christ healed me from the anguish of my memories.

I cannot help but smile at Luna as she cheerfully and playfully frolics around the pond trying to catch the water splashes with her mouth. She plays for so long that sometimes I worry about her. She likes to swim behind the trees that border the pond. One day when I looked out the window, I could not find her and thought she may have drowned or something. As I kept searching, I was comforted when I saw the moving water under the trees because it acts as a sign of life for me.

What a picture and spiritual lesson for all of us! We are called to live in freedom in Christ, not subjected to abuse or tyranny, or chains from others.

Long ago, I noticed that after placing trust in people, whether friends or foes. I wanted everything to go perfectly and avoid relationship disruptions. I tried controlling the outcomes of life. Unknowingly, I was chaining myself to desired outcomes and I lost some freedom. God must be Lord over all our outcomes.

This is an extremely unhealthy and impractical way of living. It is not living freely. People are humans and as a result, imperfection is our way of life. With relationships that are meaningful we must accept the *good* as well as the *bad* in people. This is freedom to love. This is what the best definition of grace is. We accept meaningful relationships and people into our lives by God's leadership and love them, the good and bad, having zero expectation of a perfect outcome.

God is still working on me, just like He is still working in you.

Behaviors developed over time in me, which caused me to look for approval and the incessant need to be liked. The old saying,

“*you cannot make everyone happy*,” was something I believed, yet my lifestyle seemed to please all. I would compromise my beliefs and surrender my joy to make those around me laugh or feel comforted. This turned me into a laughingstock for others. Not everyone will respect this in you, worse it is another chain tied around your heart.

It is never okay to allow others to take advantage of you because you are the non-confrontational one. It is easy for victims of abuse to become victims once again from other people. This must change in all of us.

To understand this freedom in Christ, and from my emotional drama I learned something vital to my growth. One of the greatest things that I had to learn is that I *owe* no one anything, short of the love for my family, and love for my Lord. What we *all* “owe” to this world is dignity, honesty, and genuineness. There is nothing else, whether physically or emotionally, we owe to anyone. This world needs *real* people who have had real problems healed by a real God to tell others about how they became free to live. No longer do we need counterfeit people carrying around counterfeit smiles trying to cover real pain. It is time to swim in the pond of life again and catch the splashes of water with our mouths; and break the chains that have held us back.

Because of this realization and actions that followed, I began to have more respect for myself. This was a first for me. I stood up for myself after someone tried to use me, once again, as the butt of a joke. It seems trivial now, but it began a journey toward earning my own respect. It was true freedom in a human and emotional sense. I was swimming! It was as if I learned, the world is not going to fall apart because another person is dissatisfied with my present performance.

I began to say “no” to things that did not please me, instead of the opposite of trying to gain a feeling of being liked or accepted. We who are wounded usually cave to situations that might cause our wounds to hurt once again. These are the scars of wounds from the past that still cause pain. It feels like our lives are out of our control.

Do not get me wrong, my whole life is surrendered to Christ for His use. However, that does not mean it is for others to use and abuse.

Our confidence and self-esteem are what I am specifically speaking about. It is normal to be without both after years of beatings and abuse by a “loved one.” There are millions of people who are struggling with self-esteem right now. Instead of hearing these words, they have drowned away their sorrows with chemicals and alcohol. Such things take them further down a rabbit hole, where it is impossible to escape without God’s help. Whatever the cause, one thing they should know is, it is okay to not be okay.

I tried disguising away the pain, the guilt, and the lack of confidence. My acting skills developed at an early age which in turn helped me pass through events later in my life. But there was this lack of genuineness that I always detested, swallowing away my soul. It disturbed me. Although I was well as a person, I was not happy with who I was. Likewise, that is why people are still searching to find themselves.

I grew tired of explaining why I said “*I am sorry*” too much. Or apologizing for why I always looked down, or unsure. I also grew tired of doing everyone else’s calendars and not making my own. I was not free, nor was there movement in the water of my life. I terribly lacked confidence and I learned that it is a step-by-step experience to gain it.

Once, while in Army Basic Training I was being yelled at by one of the dreadful drill sergeants. I had fallen to the rear of a platoon full of running soldiers. I could not keep up with their pace and he thought yelling at me would motivate me to find the inner strength that I had left at mile marker four. His words were, “*Soldier, don’t you have pride in yourself? Catch up to the platoon or you’ll get it when you get back to the barracks!*”

“*Drill Sergeant, the Bible says we should not be prideful because it can cause us to fall!*” I foolishly shot back. My confidence at five in the morning was surprisingly high but foolishly applied. But it was this

experience that I would remember as a gauge to guide when I step out of line of confidence.

“Gilford! You will spend the morning doing pushups in my office when we get back!” He hurled back. After one thousand pushups or so, the message was clear.

One day in my thirties, I woke up to this and thought, *“I am someone special in the eyes of God. He chose to give me salvation, and a new life. He chose to heal me...not to waste my life away. I am called to live in Him, not in others. Today marks a change for me.”* I thought, *“If Jesus thought I was worth dying for. I should think enough of myself to live life for Him.”*

I began to swim in my pond, figuratively. Even as I began to swim, I would discard the chain that still connected me to my past bindings.

This expression was the most freedom I have ever felt. To this day, more than ten years later, I still live out this mantra in my life.

I set out to live my own life -*submitted to Christ*. No longer would I alternate between trying to make people happy all the time to faking excitement at a one-year-old’s birthday party. (*I mean what is the point?*) I hope I do not sound like a jerk.

What it amounts to is this: *having the confidence to say, it is okay to be myself and it is okay if no one else likes it.* Can you say this? It is freeing when you can.

Abusers abuse to cause pain. They do this to meet their urgent emotional need in that moment. It is not right. It is deplorable. But that is what is happening. Then the victims of abuse give over their control to pacify the abusers, hoping to never experience that again. Thus, this cycle never ends inside and will extend to every relationship until there is a change, a gain of confident control. It has taken many years, but I am thankful to say that I have learned this through the nurturing and leadership of Christ.

In His Word, Jesus said, “*The meek shall inherit the earth.*”⁹ Sadly, meekness is often viewed as weakness. As a result, many have not strived for it. Rather, meekness is just the opposite. It is often represented in original definition form as “*power under control.*” Jesus in His beautiful Sermon on the Mount lays a sincere foundation for taking back a life once dominated by violence and sin, by saying... “*You have power just place it under control.*”

Are you swimming? Is your water moving? Are you living your life? Are you free?

Once, victims of abuse *were* powerless because of our chains. Now, Christ says you can have your freedom back, but place it in His hands to control. No other opinion matters but God’s since He is our Eternal judge. That statement in proper practice will cause you to gain control over your life as it did for me.

My fifth and youngest child Connor, has a problem. As much as I hate mac n cheese, he loves it. I have seen this young man come home from high school and boil the noodles and water, drain them, add the cheese and milk, stir it up and eat the entire pan in one sitting. He can do this every day and not grow tired of this filthy food. As I watch him doing this I am irked on the inside. For years his love for mac n cheese has equally matched my hatred for it.

One day, I decided to take control over this hang up of mine. (*No, I did not eat it...that is just crazy!*) After Connor was finished eating his food, I got up from the table and began to clean up his messy pots and dishes. I saw this as a therapeutic exercise. Not too different then facing a fear. I literally had to scoop the leftover noodles out from the bottom of the pan with a deep plastic spoon. The noodles seemed as if they had been melted to the bottom of the pan. Spoonful after spoonful I dug deep to remove all the noodles as my stomach turned. I quickly shoveled them down the drain and ran gallons of water on top to flush them. I could sense the mac n cheese mocking me this entire time. Suddenly, the mocking stopped as I turned on the garbage

⁹ Matthew 5:5

disposal and yelled, “*Take that, sucker!*” Connor dropped his fork in disbelief as I said to him, “*I’m okay...I’m okay.*”

This humorous description of cleaning mac n cheese is an analogy to our lives, taking control over fear and finding freedom in Christ. In Jesus you can have a healthy and productive life. You are free to swim for hours in your happy pond if that is your desire. You can laugh at your reminders of pain because they are so far removed you.

Give your life to the Lord’s care. If He can change my outcome, He will change yours.

CHAPTER TEN

LEARNING TO LOVE

“

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

1 John 4:7-11

Learning to Love

One of the major life struggles for abused people of all types, is the ability to love and trust again. Abuse, whether physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, bullying or human trafficking, has at its core the tearing away of anything that remotely looks like trust. When the abuser is a guardian, there is the added dichotomy of wanting to be loved, yet the inability to trust this person. It becomes an emotional and mental conflict.

Ironically, when I look back, the whole time Jerry beat me with a belt buckle or beat me with his words, I yearned for his affection and approval. Inside of me, I desperately wanted Jerry to love me, or at least like me. The trust was broken, yet the love was desired.

Growing up, I noticed an internal voice would hound me to do things that drew attention to myself. This behavior manifested in many ways. For example, I would go “out of my way” to be good. I would compulsively stress over doing things ever so perfectly. The need for approval and “love” from an early age took over my whole life. It also grew up within me as well.

I think that I learned the wrong definition of love, and affection during those years. The things that I was seeking after, I would never receive from Jerry. We cannot receive something from another that they are incapable of giving.

The need for attention and trying to be perfect drove me mad on the inside. Think about it. No one is perfect. Yet we try to be. We try to draw ourselves some attention, and if we fail, we resign ourselves to failure. Instead of just living life in the moment, we instead live for an outcome that is pleasing.

Ridiculously I learned that love was earned by doing things to avoid negative results. Consequently, I learned that love was conditional. So, I would reason out ‘*My girlfriend should love me since I have been a good boyfriend to her*’. Or ‘*Jerry should not beat me because today was a good day. I got a good grade today, so maybe that can earn me some grace.*’ But things would never work out like I planned.

This false definition of love and affection I formed in my mind was in itself an additional torture to my life. And it will be to yours too if not stopped in its tracks immediately.

The truest love of all is a love that you experience *not* because of what you do, but because of *who* you are. This love is an unconditional love that pours out grace, mercy, and forgiveness to the person even when they do not deserve it. This is love is rooted and founded in the reality and fullness of God. It was demonstrated to all of humanity by the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross. “*God so loved the world, that He gave His Son.*”¹⁰ Jesus said Himself that, “*Greater love has no man than this, that He would lay down His life for His friends.*”¹¹ Both these statements are found in the Gospel of John, chapters three and fifteen respectively. John’s writings are really focused on the love of

¹⁰ John 3:16

¹¹ John 15:3

God towards man. He did not just draft this book, but three others that bear his name, and the last book of the Bible, called Revelation.

John must have truly encountered this wonderful love in a tangible way to write so much about it. Consider that he was close to Christ, he was leaning against Jesus one time in Scripture. In another place, John calls himself the “*The disciple that Jesus loved.*”¹² And, as Christ hung on the cross dying, He entrusted John to take care of the His mother, Mary.¹³

The reality of God’s love changed John so much that his life’s work was intensely focused on telling the world about it.

Now, any love that says, “*I will show you love as long as you do this or do that...*” is not love at all. It is a transaction. This terrible transaction is like a clerk at a store. You give her your cash and she give you a product. This is not love at all. This is a business transaction and a perverted view of love that many people are buying into. Many of us face this every day. We try and try and try, never filling or meeting the affection levels that we seek. As a result, we privately conclude that, “*We must not be good enough.*” And we further conclude how cruel this world must be, and we stop trying.

This kind of thinking causes false views in every aspect of our lives. In our professional lives, we may assume that because we have a good education, we *deserve* a decent job. Or a man in sales may determine that he deserves the sale because he had a polite conversation with a potential customer that lasted a long time. How disappointed is he when we he finds out that he did not make the

¹² John 20:2

¹³ John 19:26

sale? The reinforcement of the negative cycle inside continues because of this.

The world does not react to our incorrectly perceived notions of what is fair, what is acceptable or what the right priorities are. The world outside just rolls on. Whether we are together or falling apart, it just keeps moving. It stops for no-one. Business is business with no feelings or emotions tied to them. Yet inside of us is the silent voice clamoring, “*I must be successful so I can be loved, admired, or accepted.*” Or “*I have to get perfect grades to feel good.*” Or worse, “*I must give my body to someone in their lust so that they will stay with me.*” These are not warranted, nor consistent in a real love scenario. This imaginary scale of balance must one day even out in our distorted minds, so we run this race not realizing deep in our souls that unconditional love is what we are really looking for. Love is out there. It is worth opening your heart up to it once again.

Twelve years ago, I remember waking up from a vivid dream that shook me to my core. In this dream I was preaching in the church in which I am currently serving. It was just a normal Sunday morning, nothing special about it. I was looking at myself preaching and standing next to me was Christ. We were standing on the right-side of the room in the doorway. To me this was the best dream ever!

As we looked over the audience and I saw myself preaching. Jesus asked me, “*If this was your last sermon to ever deliver, what do you think I would want you to say?*” At that moment, in the dream, I saw myself close my prepared sermon notes and begin to extemporaneously

speak “from the hip.” What I set out to say was profound at many levels (*remember I was dreaming.*)

The message I delivered in this dream took a story from every book in the Bible showing the congregation how God poured out His love on all humanity. Every book was quoted from as I expounded on the glorious love of God. As I delivered this message inside the dream, people were clinging on to every word because they, too needed this kind of love from God. I showed that in Genesis God showed His love by covering Adam and Eves nakedness with animal skins. He did not have to, but He chose to out of love. I preached out of Exodus that God showed love by delivering Israel out of four hundred years of slavery. In Leviticus God displays love by calling the family of Levites to work in the ministry by serving in the temples. In Numbers He showed all of humanity His love by taking multiple censuses to tell us that everyone matters to Him. In Deuteronomy God showed love by giving us the Ten Commandments. Because you cannot hold someone accountable for what they do not know, and He loved us so much He gave us the guidelines for living. In Joshua, God pours out His love by raising up Joshua to continue leading Israel to the Promised Land. He helped them win the battles that they fought and helped them get established finally. In this dream I went through the entire Bible, all sixty-six books declaring the love of God to the congregation.

The rest of the Bible is replete with story after story of God’s unconditional and amazing love. We can see it if we look for it. We only see what we are looking for many times in life. If we look for the bad, it will always be

there but if we look for the good -that is all we see.

This dream affected me so strongly that I did not go to work the next day. What a powerful revelation to us that the main point of our Biblical text is to show us true love from our Divine Father. Not a conditional love that the world in which we live touts. Not the horrible kind of “love” we experience from our abusers, but an unconditional love that cries out, “*Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened...and you will find rest for your soul.*”¹⁴

True love is out there. Accepting it is the battle. Yet Christ stands with His arms out ready to share it with you if you will surrender to Him.

¹⁴ Matthew 11:28,29b

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Life Lessons

“

“...I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” Philippians 4:12–13

Life Lessons

An old friend and colleague from our early years in ministry, once said *“Doug, I would rather learn from other people’s mistakes- than my own.”*

Honestly, it took me a long time to understand the scale of this slightly selfish statement. But after wise consideration over the years, I reasoned that it is a great philosophy! If God does not waste anything, He does not even waste our failures, then I can certainly learn from other people’s mistakes.

I have remembered that statement for more than twenty years.

This writing has many purposes. It is part autobiography, part testimony, part teaching, and part a resource to help people navigate inside the heart of someone once abused.

I wish this concluding chapter to be a summary of the lessons that God has taught me that are scattered throughout this writing:

1. Children that you may think are bad, probably are just hurting from something deep inside of them. Exercise grace and mercy as you discover their truth.
2. If a child tells you that someone is hurting them, believe them. Investigate it, please never ignore it.
3. No matter how terrible the abuse or pain of life is, know that God has been with you the entire time. You are not ever alone.
4. Forgiveness is the beginning of total healing of all our wounds, yet the hardest to accomplish.
5. Only in Christ can we find the power to forgive.

6. Life is too important and too short for us to be immobilized by harboring resentment.
7. Our past does not define us. Change can happen immediately when we decide to make it. We will be defined by how we bounce back into the future.
8. Fear is a tool of our spiritual enemy and will be exasperated by our circumstances. Recognize it early.
9. In dealing with people you love, do not overreact to the trivial matters, nor under react to the serious ones.
10. We are copy machines onto our children, choose carefully what you impress on them.
11. You cannot control the outcomes of every relationship. Be yourself and trust the Lord with the outcome. People come and people go.
12. We are called to live in freedom. This involves all areas of our lives, emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual. Christ is the source of this. But we must strive to keep our freedom.
13. Recognize the people God has placed in your life to help you to the next level in maturity. And become someone who does it in return.
14. Sometimes our kids have wise words to help us. Do not turn them away without consideration.
15. Letting go of your children as they grow is a necessary part of adult life.
16. As we age in life, the scars of our wounds will still hurt sometimes. It is normal.
17. God has an amazing way of teaching us life lessons. Look for them and submit to them.

18. Your life is a story that can help people. Talk about it, share it, and even write about it.
19. Face your fear head on. And then flush it down the drain of your mind.
20. Truest of all loves is found in sincere faith in Christ.
21. It is okay to hate Mac n Cheese.

