



THE AMAZING JESUS LOVE TRIP CIRCUS EXPERIENCE

Cosmic Love

© 2012 Doug Drage

FORWARD:

It is said that the Lord's Army, the Church, is the only army that shoots its own wounded. That may be true, but it hadn't oughta be.

That quote and its veracity is repugnant to me and it should be to every believer in Christ, every member of His Body – The Church.

This is a survival manual for the walking wounded of Christianity. I hope its equal parts a guide to healing and a catalyst for changing that very ugly but well-earned truth.

“Is this where you wanna be when Jesus comes back?” – Joe Dirt

ONE

How do I get a hold of your heart? How do I convey this story with any real sense of the passion that fills my heart as I attempt to share it?

I mean I could start right here and drop a big ole' "F" bomb on you – that'd get your attention, in fact it would probably get your attention so much that you'd stop right there and tell everyone you know who might read this to reconsider. That's not my intent. In fact, that's kind of what I have been doing my whole life, trying to get attention, admiration and acceptance of one variety or another by saying or doing stupid stuff, shocking stuff, opinionated stuff and/or outlandish stuff, with little if any care for those I might hurt or offend. I assure you I am well able.

That's not what I want to do. I'm not here to slap you in the face.

It's not really that bad being slapped in the face. I have experienced it a few times along my career path in saying and doing the shocking and unpopular. A really good hard open-handed slap in the face doesn't really even hurt that bad...at first. It comes almost like shell shock, a jarring impact that leaves your face numb and your ear ringing. You glide through the slow motion of time that occurs as your brain races to figure out what the crap just happened. You can feel involuntary tears begin to drip down your cheek, the burn slowly increasing to a roar as blood floods your facial capillaries. Then you can feel your heart beat in your face as the heat rises.

I've been slapped by God as well, and while it is in some ways similar, it is not the punitive slap brought on by anger or revenge. It's more like the slap a (very large and all-powerful) doctor applies to the behind of a new born baby as he encourages it to draw its first breath outside the warm, wet and cozy womb of its mother. That slap is actually a jolt that says welcome to the rest of your life, welcome to the real world! If any new born babies are reading this, I'd advise you take that message to heart and be prepared because life is full of slaps.

The slaps I have experienced from God (and I am using the term "slap" figuratively) have been intended to jolt me from one phase of my life into another. The last one happened not too long ago. I have always been a bit of an outsider; I just never seemed to fit in. I've had many friends, but my relationships with them have generally taken place outside of their *regular* circle of friends. I've never truly felt like a genuine part of any group, including my own biological family. I am, in my own heart

and mind, on the outside looking in. Turns out, this is neither a bad thing nor an uncommon thing; however arriving at that understanding would require years.

I was turning into a real lush – beer and scotch, scotch and beer...maybe a little vodka from time to time...or rum...then onto smoking pot. Every night I had to get it on real good; a “mega buzz”, a “nearly passing out in my chair and then stumbling over the dog on the way to bed” buzz. I’d sit there alone watching TV shows of guys I considered my real friends, living lives and having adventures I wanted to have. I drank and laughed and cheered them on, it was the only way to get to sleep, because it was the only way to silence the voices. Of course the voices were mostly my own – crying and whining about past hurts, guilt, failures, injustices, feelings of inadequacy, arguments with ghosts of offenders past – a litany of self-loathing run amok.

On special occasions the voices wouldn’t stop – they would amplify and turn my inward rage into a pity party deluxe. I’d become convinced that no one loved me, even people who claimed to be my friends. I’d sail into ridiculous drunken tantrums and rages, yelling, cursing and screaming – throwing and breaking things - acting like a complete and utter fool.

I know you think you’ve heard this testimony before – the thing is... this is not how I came to the Lord. This is the testimony of a guy who had been in ministry for several years, was in seminary, was serving as paid staff at a church, leading music, leading youth and occasionally even speaking from the pulpit. It’s the testimony of what I was doing when I wasn’t at church.

You see, I have lived this testimony twice in my life – the first time, as you may have suspected was when I “came to the Lord” after years of being the wild child rock n roll wannabe (pronounced idiot). For several years after that, everything seemed great, and then one day it all fell in. The second time I lived this testimony, all that litany of hurt, injustice and self-loathing was in part, due to experiences I had in church.

Did I get your attention?

Sometimes we put God in a position where the only way he can get our attention is with a good slap.

TWO

Did I mention that I've always felt like a bit of an outsider?

Some of that is just my over active imagination that makes me tend to see things a little differently than some folks do, some of it is that need for attention and some of it is pure contrarianism. Then there are those things in my life which just happen differently from everyone else. As I tell you my story, there will be moments where you'll say, "oh yeah...I get it." You'll understand and maybe even relate. At other times my life is out of order or out of sync with everything. You may find yourself a bit baffled at my ridiculousness.

For me, there are moments I still look back on and have to kind of say, "Did that really happen?" or "Did I imagine that?" or "Was that something I dreamt once?"

I think that's the reason I have always identified so strongly with Billy Pilgrim in Vonnegut's SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE. That poor guy got unstuck in time and was randomly landing along different points on the timeline of his own life, always wondering if there really was a place that he really was.

I have weird "heroes" like that. Take Howard Stern for instance. Some Christian folk would take issue with me admiring a guy like that. Howard was an awkward misfit, who turned saying shocking things into not just a career, but it made him the King of All Media. To me that's a no brainer – he's a guy I can readily identify with. I don't necessarily agree with everything he says, does or how he lives but I relate to him on a "molecular" level.

Another "hero" of mine died when I was three. He was 26. He was the son of an eminent and wealthy southern family, we're talking *old* money here," some of his ancestors loaned George Washington money to form the continental army during the American Revolution" old. He, however, was a trust fund kid who went to private school and even attended Harvard very briefly. Besides being white, I have nothing in common with this guy...I thought. When he was very young he got to go to an Elvis Presley concert and he fell in love with Elvis and Rock n Roll and music.

There is a story told in my family, and I am the subject of it. It comes from early enough in my life that I have little if any actual memory of it, I think most of what I have is the product of hearing the story. Apparently it was my habit for a period of time, to leave the dinner table, go into the bathroom and then return with the toilet plunger. I would then "suction" the business end of the plunger to the kitchen floor and use the handle as a make-believe microphone stand and then perform the Elvis hit

HOUND DOG for my family. Most estimates would put me at about three years old; Gram Parsons would have been 26 and preparing to make his exit.

I hate the way that Gram made that exit. Albeit in the most far out “live hard, die young and leave a good looking corpse” rock star fashion for that period of time where the sixties collided with the 70s, it’s also a bit more personal to me than some of the big names who went out in similar fashion at around the same time. Gram had a vision for an American music beyond style and genre, and I love that. He called it Cosmic Music, the blending of any and all styles; a place with no more walls of restriction or unneeded and artificial barriers. Gram and his vision were sometimes hated but most often just unappreciated. That lack of appreciation, affirmation and understanding led to his chronic need to medicate – I can relate to that. I hear that hurt and longing in his voice when I listen to his music. “Won’t somebody please make me feel loved?”

“Won’t somebody please love me?”

God is Love.

His love is bigger and better than anything this world tries to pawn off on us or, that we try to satisfy that longing with for ourselves. The Bible says that His (God’s) love is better than life!

Cosmic Love, man...far out!

THREE

Our ideas about love are kind of screwed up.

Our cultural dialogue sends a lot of mixed messages about what love is and it instills in us many ill-conceived expectations of what love should be like, how love should feel and what we can do to be worthy of it.

If we stumble into a church we are likely to hear a great deal about love – but more often than not, we won't encounter it outside of conversations that tends to couch love in philosophical and emotional terms and constructs. Church love by and large tends to be an experience that is either: very cerebral, or very emotional.

Churches which lean toward a more stoic traditional Christianity, tend to discount experience and emotion. They choose to interact with God's love in very cerebral, theoretical and restrained manner. The goal appears to be the elevation of the mind through cognitive digestion of theological "food". Churches which lean away from the traditional tend to emphasize an experiential and emotive interaction with God and His love. They prefer messages, which are less "high-minded" and more practical or "real". They want to interface with God. In their worship, they express openly with lifted hands and tears. The goal seems to be the elevation of mood or emotional state.

I'm not here to take a side. I have worshipped with individuals from both sides (and others), and I would not for a moment suggest that either of these views is somehow a "better" choice. I will however, say this:

Neither view is incorrect, but both are incomplete.

The theological/religious view that esteems rationality and intellect as the only legitimate bedrock of true faith, discounts the fact that God created emotions as well as intellect. It also suggests that, individuals who have been afforded less formal education are somehow incapable of full and genuine faith. It can seem to be a bit of an elitist perspective.

The theological/religious view that esteems the purely emotive experience of what it "feels" like for me to interface with God as genuine faith, misses Jesus' call for us to worship in spirit and in truth – to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind. Singing with raised hand and tears, does not – in and of itself – equal worship or necessarily express love. In the end it can be, a selfish endeavor.

My intention is not to make a blanket accusation against any group or individual, but rather, to point out the pitfalls inherent in both perspectives. By the way, if you think that you have by-passed these pitfalls or, that they don't apply to you because you are not "religious" – you're a drop-out, postmodern, gen x, cutting edge, emergent, or any of the other 2,600 flavors that Christianity has disintegrated into, let me hip you to something bro': Religion is just another word for a habit, like brushing your teeth, or making your bed. It means doing something at a regular interval – like bed time. It can mean doing something is a particular way- like wearing clothing in public. It can be positive or negative. Spiritually speaking, if religion is all you've got, you're missing out. Realistically speaking, if you think you don't have ANY, you might need to do some fact checking. However, If your far out and Avant-garde model for the expression of worship is so cutting edge that nothing you do has ever been done before, and it's never done the same way twice – then I apologize.

OK, I'm back.

What I really want to do here is share a couple of ideas the Bible expresses about God's love, so that we can investigate our understanding of what love is. Now I am not in the business of handing out earth shattering pronouncements or quazi-revelatory wisdom from on high. What I like is how simple the Bible can be if we can learn to allow it to address us, rather than coming at it with a bunch of pre-suppositions. I won't be offering any new information here – just an opportunity to revisit some tried and true concepts.

God is Love. Twice in 1 John 4 we interface with this very simple but amazingly powerful little truth. God is Love. God is characterized in so many ways throughout scripture, we learn so much about Him and how He acts in history and toward humanity. He is introduced with names like Jehovah Jireh (God our Provider), Jehovah Rapha (God our Healer), and Jehovah Shalom (God our Peace). There are lots more, but this is the point; All of these names which denote aspects of God's character are different than the little phrase "God is Love". Is not just a character trait, God doesn't just love, HE IS LOVE. It's His essence.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

All I need is a rainbow wig. This is the first Bible verse I ever memorized and one of the few that has stuck with me. What did God's love for us cause Him to do? It caused Him to give His son; to sacrifice. For who was the sacrifice made? Whoever believes, so basically, anybody who wants to believe.

He gave himself, in the form of His own begotten Son, the very best He had to offer – perfection incarnate. He did not ignore His own righteous requirements for justice, He satisfied His own requirements for justice, Himself...for whosoever.

Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

God didn't wait on us to get better or do better, He didn't hold out on us until we started attending church regularly or tithing. In fact God seems to have demonstrated His love for us in spite of our depravity. Look, He knew that we would never get our act together; we would never have come looking for Him. While we were still sinners, He dies for us. Before anyone ever tried to construct a doctrine or posit a theological principal, He loved us. God's love for us happens(ed) way out in advance of any ability we have to think, do, act or be "right."

Romans 8:38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (See also Psalm 139).

God Is Love, God is also infinite, which means God's love is infinite, it is an essential part of who He is. In this passage, we find that God's love is big enough to remain with us everywhere. If you check Psalm 139, you'll find that even if we choose Hell rather than eternal life in Heaven – God still loves us. He loved us while we were still sinners; He loves us enough to give us a way out of our sins leading to eternal life. Yet even if we refuse His offer, He still loves us. God's love is big enough for everyone, no matter their condition. You can go to Hell if you choose to, and regardless of your view of Hell (and there are several), you will be eternally separated from God, His presence and any sense of Him. Bet, He will still love you. He will love you even if you side against Him. He loves you so much that He will leave that decision in your hands. That's an enormous Love...some might say, Cosmic.

FOUR

You don't have to spend a great deal of time thinking about what the Bible teaches about God's love (and the above list is by no means exhaustive) to realize that there is quite a disconnect between the Biblical version of love, and the variety of love that we earthlings tend to discuss and exhibit. In fact before we, as individuals can ever really come in contact with God's Cosmic Love – most of us are in need of some real re-education on the topic. As with most things we attempt to conceptualize, our definitions are too small, our ideas too finite to grasp the fullness of God's love. Here's the NEW MATH again:

If God is LOVE, and
God is infinite, then
God's love is infinite.

So let's talk about love...as best we can.

I am sure you have at some point been forced to endure some or other Bible teacher's romp through the Greek language (which is just one more indicator of how incompletely our finite human language can wrap itself around God) and most likely, said romp was in regard to the use of various Greek words which are translated into the English word LOVE. Well get ready, because I'm going to do it to you again, but I hope this will give a different take on things and help us all to have a better understanding of the way we humans conceptualize love, versus God's take on it.

I want to address the same two words that normally get the lion's share of attention: Eros and Agape. Eros, which doesn't even appear in the Bible, is usually equated summarily with erotic or sexual love. However, it's not that simple. Eros was a variety of love which the Greeks preferred to apply to affection for inanimate objects; like one might love their car, or love pizza. That Eros "affection" is based in emotions or feelings.

Eros Love esteems selfish desire above the needs of others. Think about pizza. I love pizza. How do I demonstrate my love for pizza? I bite it, chew it, and digest it, removing all the nutritional benefits I can extract for my benefit – then expel whatever is left.

Eros Love is conditional. If I am hungry and I have money I love pizza. If it's convenient and suits my schedule, I love pizza. If all of those conditions aren't met – I'll probably just eat something else.

Eros Love is temporary. When the conditions are right, I love pizza. However, I'm only going to love pizza until pizza meets my need, my desire. In fact, as my desire is met, while I'm still eating, my love for pizza will gradually be in decline. Eventually, I'll be full and my love for pizza will have grown cold. Sometimes, if I eat too much pizza – I won't even want to look at it anymore and that, after having been so in love maybe 30 minutes earlier.

There is no problem feeling this way about pizza, or a car, or a new song you've just heard. In fact it's pretty natural. The problem is that we live in a culture which has taught us from birth and reinforced every single day since then, that this is an appropriate way to love other human beings.

That ain't right!

Now, Agape.

Agape Love, or as I like to call it Cosmic Love, is God's perfect expression of love. Now I know as you do that we as human beings are not prepared to deliver perfection on any level however, that should never ever hinder us from doing the very best we can, in the most excellent way we can. We as humans have many nasty habits, among them is the ability to figure out what the acceptable minimum is, and then try to fudge on that. The problem for the believer is that God makes Christ the standard. We are to be conformed to the image of Christ. Jesus makes God the standard: Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect. The New Testament talks a great deal about our being made perfect. More often than not the Greek word isn't talking about "perfection" as we think of it, the word actually means "complete." So then, the hope of understanding God's Agape or Cosmic Love is not that we will love as perfectly as He does, but in hopes that our understanding, experience and expression of His love will be as fully complete as possible.

OK – now Agape.

Agape is the perfect love of God, which God is the full and essential expression of. He intends Agape to be the ideal or model of love we express toward other human beings. However Agape is not that warm fuzzy emotional experience that we often characterize as love. That doesn't mean that Agape love never occurs along with that emotive earmark, but the emotional aspect is not – I repeat NOT, Agape Love. God's Agape Love is not an emotional response; it is an act of will. A conscious decision we make to express love to another human being. That kind of flies in the face of what we believe about the flowery penchant of romantic love – full of poetry, magic and fluttering eye lids. In fact we tend to balk at the rather mechanical/clinical characterization of love which characterizes

Agape. It seems to refute the ethereal, fatalistic ideal our culture embraces. I challenge you to think about Agape and its characteristics, and see if it doesn't seem to you that, practicing Agape love is a far nobler endeavor than being tossed to and fro upon waves of tingles, fireworks and rainbows.

Agape Love is generous. Agape love is always seeking the best for the other person. The object of Agape love is always esteemed ahead, above and beyond our self. Agape love is always looking for ways to give its self away, to sacrifice for the benefit of the other person.

Agape Love is unconditional. Agape Love is always in effect. Time, circumstances, inconvenience and condition do not change, limit or stop Agape love.

Agape Love is infinite. Since Agape love is never given in hopes of receiving some type of satisfaction or "payoff" emotional or otherwise, the giver doesn't feel let down, unappreciated or short-changed. So one doesn't get burnt or burned out practicing Agape Love. In fact, due to God's reciprocal nature – the more you give Agape Love away, the more you sense God's Agape Love working through you, and the more energized you feel to continue to love others. A dear friend of mine said it to me this way, "The hose gets wet first."

Burt Bacharach was right, what the world needs now is love sweet love, and we can tap right into the ultimate source.

So let me give you a rhetorical pop quiz:

Does it seem to you that Agape is somehow a lesser form of love compared to Eros Love?

Does it seem to you that Agape love is cold or clinical or in some way insincere?

Given the choice would you prefer that someone express Eros Love toward you, or Agape Love?

Since the choice is yours, do you believe it best to express Agape or Eros Love toward other people?

FIVE

So what does it look like, this Cosmic Love?

Well, the primary thing that sets Agape or Cosmic Love apart from the love that we tend to relate to, is that it does *look* like something, or to say it differently, it can be seen. You see a love that is primarily emotional tends to get locked down into a simple verbal expression of sentiment.

I love you, I love you so much!

Great, but so what?

Back in the Hay Day of the afternoon talk show, there came a great dysfunctional cry of despair, a longing for a more demonstrative expression male sensitivity. Individuals, not unlike myself, became despondent over our emotionally distant father figures, their unwillingness to display affection and the lack of nurturing and attention they afforded us...

“Daddy never said he loved me.”

Now at that time, this would bring a great outpouring of support group empathy, but lately I’ve been thinking; Daddy was probably pretty tired from working 12 hours a day, 5-6 days a week to buy me food, shoes, clothes, water, electricity, a house, medical attention etc. Maybe Daddy’s commitment; hard work and provision for me (and my 4 siblings), were in fact, Daddy’s way of *proving* that he loved me – because really, in the end, talk is cheap. What does it take to say the words, “I love You”? It doesn’t require any effort, commitment, hard work or sincerity. It’s really very easy to say “I love You,” when you think about it. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t want to suggest that there is anything wrong with saying, “I Love You,” but if saying it is all you do, the value is limited to sentiment. Proving, “I Love You,” that requires something more.

Jesus said this:

John 13:35 “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Think for a minute about all the ways Christians try to demonstrate their Christianity to the world; signs, billboards, t-shirts, bumper stickers, jewelry, ornate architecture, political posturing, street preaching, handing out tracts, knocking on doors, television stations, radio stations, web sites, social media. There must be about a million ways.

Now, if we took a walk down the street and asked the first ten people we met, “What do you know Christians for?” Love (for each other or anyone else) will not be in the top ten. Hypocrisy and Judgment probably will be, but not love. Now if it makes you feel better to call yourself a Jesus Lover or Christ follower or believer – or whatever, more power to you, but syntax doesn’t change the hard facts.

The Love Christ has called us to can be (or should be) seen and recognized by others, even and especially non-Christians.

Now get this...

John 12:32 But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” 33 He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

Jesus uses the phrase “all men” in both above passages, He is eliminating restriction.

“ALL MEN” will see and recognize the genuineness of our Christ-following by the love we believers have for each other.

“ALL MEN” will be drawn to Christ when he is crucified.

Let’s talk about what it means for Christ to be crucified. Let’s put this simply by referring back to one simple passage (hold on while I get my rainbow wig on),

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Christ crucified is the embodiment of God’s perfect love for us, that love is sacrificial. He loved and so He gave His Son, notice how that expression of love is a *visible* one. Now this,

Mark 8:34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Now hear this all Christians, Christ followers, Jesus lovers, way goers, believers etc. Following Christ means denial of self and carrying a cross, the cross is an implement of death, the means by which our “self” is to be put to death (daily according to Luke’s Gospel). We, the CHURCH, (Christians, Christ followers, Jesus lovers, way goers, believers et al) are the Body of Christ and, are supposed to

be the embodiment of sacrificial love. Jesus knew “ALL MEN” wouldn’t be present to see the historic event of His crucifixion, but His plan included us living out the truth, glory, beauty and majesty of His sacrificial love in front of all mankind, until He returns.

If we show His love, ALL MEN will see it, recognize it and be drawn to it. Pretty simple, huh? We could throw out our church growth strategy handbooks, special events, outreach initiatives and whatever else, if we could just love one another sincerely and visibly. We can quit asking probing philosophic and cultural questions about why the church is in decline, and why people aren’t showing up anymore.

The truth is that demonstrating genuine love for other fallible human beings is much tougher than any and all of that “stuff” we do to try and get attention and attendance in our communities. The cross is fine as a symbol or jewelry, but actually carrying one, yuck! Crosses are rough, heavy and uncomfortable, not unlike the lives we should be touching. But, that kind of brings us to the crux of the matter doesn’t it? I mean, we will give up some time, we’ll give a little money, we might even volunteer to help out once in a while, but the one thing you better not ask me to give up, is “me.”

SIX

We are the “self” society. The “me” generation has never ended. The Bible seems to indicate that you either feed your spirit-man (or woman) and it thrives and dominates the sin-nature, or you feed the flesh and it will rule. Our culture has indulged the flesh for so long that even the things we do which seem so positive on the surface, are frequently done with selfish motives. Charitable works are done to ease my guilt or make me feel good, wars are protested because “I” don’t want to go serve, and help for the impoverished inner city is instigated on behalf of increasing property value. The church is by no means immune.

It’s difficult to understand, but that’s Cosmic Love too. In reality it’s the lack of Cosmic Love that leaves that aching void. We mostly have no understanding of what real love is all about and so we spend much of life trying to fulfill our craving with empty solutions. A long time ago, a cat named Blaise Pascal came up with the idea that each of us has a God shaped hole in our hearts – that we will, if left to our own devices, spend our lives searching to fill that hole with any and everything we can think of, however, the only thing that truly fits, satisfies and ends the quest is God coming to dwell within us. Me being me, and God being Love, I like to say we are “hardwired” with a need, I said, “NEED” for love – God’s love. We have lost touch with what real love, God’s love, is all about. Life is full of substitutes our twisted sin nature will endeavor (even and especially at those with the least likelihood) to find satisfaction in. Yet, we are hardwired for LOVE, Cosmic Love, no less.

LOOKING FOR LOVE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES should be our national and maybe our global anthem.

Did you ever think about all the energy, money, time and resources we expend in our quest to satisfy that longing we have for love?

Babies love mommies and mommies love babies. There is not a great deal of give and take in that relationship, it’s pretty one-sided. The mommy/baby relationship is difficult to surmount in this limited forum, but never the less, it is as real, genuine and as close to Cosmic as love between two humans gets. I was the baby of the family, and a momma’s boy, all the way.

When we are little children, we don’t really consider love much outside of parents but we do want friends, acceptance and affirmation, and those are all just manifestations of what love is all about, we want to belong.

I have had misfit credibility from early on. Once, in second grade, I made a robot costume out of paper grocery bags and wore it to school and it wasn't even Halloween. That's just for starters. The truth of the matter is that even though I felt like an outsider (and have in most situations throughout my life) I have a deep-seated need to be accepted and included. I wanted and genuinely believed that, my weirdness would endear me to people. My success was limited at best. Story of my life – I am an acquired taste.

We get older, and the older we get the less welcome “uniqueness” is, and the less tolerated. Some people, most people, myself included endure some sort of psychic damage. Sometimes as a catastrophic or traumatic event, sometimes the cumulative effect of life as we know it. That damage will play into and many times dictate how an individual will try to express and receive love. When I was in second grade my mother became critically ill and was hospitalized for an extended period. My mother was my entire “love” world. My dad, God bless him, was a good hearted, hard-working guy. He was, however, not the most affectionate dude. My mom's affection was everything that fed my little inner fellow, and the nurturing nutritional supply line was just cut off. For a few months I was totally detached and lost. I began to gain weight as I found a substitute emotional nutrition supply – actual food.

As I gained more weight, I learned that my new “fat kid” uniqueness was far less endearing and welcome. Kids are mean and that's no new news, but what I remember are the adults who felt free to join in the fun-making and fatty, fatty two by four singing. Today there is a great deal of concern about bullying, and probably rightly so. When I was a kid, some teachers at my school openly encouraged the other kids to make fun of me because I was different; they thought ridicule would bring me around. It did not. What it did do was cast me as more of an outsider and open me up to even crazier suggestions from my damaged innards.

Believe me I know I am not the first or the worst of the damaged by any means, and in fact, what I felt is far more common than anyone imagines in the awful loneliness of that slow ugly turn into the teen angst years. By ten years old I was a regular porn user, though there was no Internet or home video at that point, magazines like Playboy, Penthouse and Hustler were de rigueur. I entered the world of pre-teen sexual experimentation. Where food was calming and comforting, porn and sexual excitement were not unlike methamphetamine, they produced a wired, frenzied internal combustion that given enough exposure and autonomy could and did lead to some rather bizarre out playing. I don't think my parents really had any idea of what was going on in my mind, body or spirit. I mean, we always had a parent at home; there were no latchkey kids at our house. We lived in a very small,

very Mid-western town in the 1970s where nothing horrendous ever happened. No doors or windows were ever locked. We went to church every Sunday and most Wednesday nights, attended Sunday school and I even got baptized. Still something insidious was happening inside of me. Years later, I became aware of this:

“As a young boy of 12 or 13, I encountered, outside the home, in the local grocery and drug stores, softcore pornography. Young boys explore the sideways and byways of their neighborhoods, and in our neighborhood, people would dump the garbage. From time to time, we would come across books of a harder nature - more graphic. This also included detective magazines, etc., and I want to emphasize this. The most damaging kind of pornography - and I'm talking from hard, real, personal experience - is that that involves violence and sexual violence. The wedding of those two forces - as I know only too well - brings about behavior that is too terrible to describe.”

Guess who? Ted Bundy – serial killer. This guy linked his murder of as many as 50 young women to the influence and “ramp up” factor pornography introduced him to. Ted was a guy who grew up in a Christian home, think about that. I do frequently. Here’s more from Ted and this interview conducted by Dr. James Dobson just prior to Bundy’s execution.

“I'm not blaming pornography. I'm not saying it caused me to go out and do certain things. I take full responsibility for all the things that I've done. That's not the question here. The issue is how this kind of literature contributed and helped mold and shape the kinds of violent behavior. .. Once you become addicted to it, and I look at this as a kind of addiction, you look for more potent, more explicit, more graphic kinds of material. Like an addiction, you keep craving something which is harder and gives you a greater sense of excitement, until you reach the point where the pornography only goes so far - that jumping off point where you begin to think maybe actually doing it will give you that which is just beyond reading about it and looking at it.”

Had anyone realized what Ted was going through they might have helped him and saved many lives. If anyone had recognized what I was going through as more than a normal rite of passage, they might have saved me years of struggle and anguish – and saved you from having to read this.

LOOKING FOR LOVE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Look at our young people today. One small portion of moderately well-adjusted young folks will learn to achieve academically or extra-circularly through outlets like athletics, music or the arts. They will enjoy the prestige, acceptance and favor of a certain social category that esteems those values. They want to be admired, affirmed and accepted. They will go on to excel in college and experiment sexually, but usually with some sense of caution and secrecy so as not to wreck future plans. From there, they will attain mostly white-collar, mostly high paying jobs. Wealth and prestige grant them greater social mobility and acceptance. Marriages will be formed, children birthed and the accoutrements of whatever level of the social hierarchy they have attained can be purchased. The house, the car, the clothing and the toys all aimed at garnering the admiration of those around them, one more version of “looking for love” we make socially acceptable by labeling it “success.”

Another group does not excel in academics or extra-circulars to such a great degree, or if they do, they are cast in a social situation which does not hold such achievement as laudable or valuable. For a young man, his value may be found in his personal style, being a cut up or being an “outlaw.” He may strive to find acceptance and affirmation from his peer group by saying and doing things which are outside the social norms of the first group. Using, drugs, alcohol and even other people to get cheap thrills and garner respect from his peers become a norm unto themselves. Eventually the descent may come to include vandalism and petty (or not so petty) crime. Meanwhile, young girls in this group, generally hyper sexualized from a young age are clearly informed by culture and their peer group that the greatest (and sometimes only) value and power they have is found in their sexuality. They will quickly trade in sexuality for some hollow teen version of love and intimacy which is about as frail and fragile as they come; to feel affirmed, valued and loved. They will be infected, impregnated or abandoned and perhaps all three, forced to play at being a grown up, many times without the benefit of a completed education. They’ll work a series of unfulfilling jobs in manual labor or the service industry and the only solace they’ll find will be in numbing their existence through substance abuse. Many will come to resent their children or abandon them to relatives. They will spend dissatisfied lives resenting the world and those who are better off, constantly and bitterly reminded of everything they will never have.

I am painting with a broad brush and only really taking into account the group commonly known as the middle class. One could take the time to break down all the various economic classes, ethnic backgrounds or mounds of other data, but I don’t think we need to go that far because, even if we aren’t really, we all tend to imagine ourselves in some strata of middle-class.

What counts is that, if you can stand back far enough, it becomes relatively clear that almost everything we do as humans on this planet is all part of a quest to fulfill some or other varied definition of

love; computer match-making, buying the latest iPhone, lying, wearing trendy clothes, saying controversial things, chemical addictions, greed, joining a gang and a million other things are just the outward manifestations of that inward hunger for God's perfect Love, we are on the hunt for something and we don't really even know what it is. Call it acceptance, success, affirmation, belonging or whatever you want to – it all boils down to the want of Cosmic Love. However, the love we think we want bears no resemblance to the love we really need. We think our "self" and its fulfillment are supposed to be the center of our ultimate love experience.

Both of the groups above, and all the other demographics traffic in lives of love substitution. Some substitutes are more socially acceptable others, not so much but no group or demographic is immune, least of all The church.

SEVEN

That's the big ugly-monkey problem no one wants, or seems to be able or willing to tackle. Good news, I am an idiot and more than willing to jump on it and see if I can wear it out. However before we can adequately begin to deal with the issue of "self" in the lives of individual believer, follower, lover, Jesu-nistas and Christo-centrics, we need to take a journey back in time, to when the church was just a baby...

You see, back at the beginning, Christ initiated His Church, His body to be the community of all those who lived in the sincere faith of His Gospel, His Good News. What is the Gospel? Well in its simplest, and what scholars believe to be its earliest most succinct form or creed we can find it in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 15:2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

To the earliest New Testament Church, that was the pretty much the whole shooting match. Crazy, huh? That was the version of what was required to be saved according to the dudes who actually, knew and worked with Jesus, Himself. Think of everything the first century church managed to get done because they didn't have theology, doctrines and denominations to waste time arguing about! Heck, for that matter, they didn't even have Bibles. Anyway...

The New Testament deals with a great many implications of what it means to adhere to that Gospel truth, but it doesn't really add to it, luckily we came along.

As time trickled along, the Apostles passed their teaching on to others – as Jesus commanded that all His followers should do. The further we move in time away from the point of initiation, the more people realized the potential for gaining wealth and controlling other humans through religion, and the more interest there was in setting up a means of administrating, dispensing and franchising "faith." Now the "church" began to mutate into a power system, taking on all sorts of new requisite beliefs, rituals and rites. Things like the Lord's Table and baptism, which were practiced freely among early believers, were now considered the rightful domain of the "institutional" Church. Now we could go into

far too much detail discussing all of this, and that's been done – so allow me to paint in some broad strokes here:

The church essentially went from being an organic community in which individuals and groups of individuals met in homes and were at liberty to share the Gospel and its ordinances under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in relative autonomy, to an ecclesiastical power structure hierarchy, where some good men tried to do some good things and, where most other men fed their ambitions and egos by trying to dominate the church under centralized power. A church split was due at any moment. Eventually, about 1,000 years in, the struggle for power and control bore the fruit of dissention leading to the great schism. Essentially the church split in half, creating the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. Both of these groups argue to this day that they are (by virtue of several factors) the true Church of Christ. I'll not jump into all that implies or the plethora of arguments pro and con...that's just what happened. Then, luckily, we came along.

Nasty divorces tend to lead to arguing, malice, anger and hurt. Many times, it is the children of these divorces who are left holding the middle place, and it is not uncommon for those same children to have to assume the role of adult while the parents squabble and roll around on the floor pulling one another's hair. Parents sometimes part way, and kids usually take up residence with one or other parent. Martin Luther wound up on the Roman Catholic side and about 500 years into this nasty divorce, he began to notice that the church had picked up a lot of baggage along the way. Not unlike your faithful correspondent (excepting that he was far more intelligent than I), Luther got to reading the Bible and noticing these issues and took it upon himself to say something. The parent organization was less than thrilled about his insolent opinions, and through much drama and fanfare, the protestant wing of Christianity was born. Luther's intent was not to split, but to reform. He wanted to get back to a simpler more Biblically based Christianity – however that would have required a massive remodeling project on the existing power structure. Friends and brethren, times may change, but that ain't gonna happen.

Anywhoo...

The upshot is that this eventuality has helped the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church put down some of the animosity they have formerly directed at one another, by refocusing it on us, the Protestants, the true apostates.

I won't bore you with the next 500 years of in fighting amongst the Protestants, I am sure you have probably already dealt with some vestige of it. All you really have to do is look at a phone book under church and see how many denominations there are listed. If you don't have a phone book handy, I can tell you that with all Christian denominations and variants totaled it comes to something around 2,600. Then, understand that every one of those flavors is based on the fact that at some point in time, some person or group of people decided – essentially, that they knew how to do things better, or how to do them “right.”

The last big change that really affects and catalyzes where the church is today is the evangelical shift. This began in the first half of the 1700's but it really took off in our last century. It wasn't long after Luther took his hammer to the cathedral – in fact for some, no time at all, before once again tradition, ritual and hierarchy were the theme of the day. We as people love a good system, it gets rid of all the real effort and guess work. You establish a list, and then meet the requirements and bada-bing, you're all good to go. Evangelicism once again proposed the idea that the church (i.e. the individual believers who make up the organic community) should be more the active component of Christianity rather than the church (hierarchy, administration and institution). Evangelicism saw personal regeneration, holiness, and Gospel sharing as the themes of Christian life – and the Bible as the central authority, versus traditions which saw Church authority and doctrine as the central tenant of Christian life.

By the middle of the last century, the evangelical church had nearly universally adopted a system which, may have been derived from The Second Great Awakening or perhaps a Billy Graham Crusade, and it has become their functional model. I have a concern about systems and models of operation, especially within the context of something that is intended to be a living organism (The Body), or an organic community (The Church). Those two are really one in the same, but once the “crusade model” came to town, the back to basics New Testament model again began to wane.

The New Testament model of The Church, being that organic community of believers we spoke of earlier, met together to be built up, encouraged and equipped to take the Gospel into their personal private lives and share it. These people knew how to laugh and mourn together, how to share everything so no one would go without and they had Jesus own promise that if they did those things demonstrating genuine love, that the world would recognize them by their love for one another – all this despite times of persecution which are unimaginable to us now.

The crusade model took the personal responsibility from the individual believer and made it a function of the institution. Meetings of the congregation became focused on getting sinners to come to church, (which seems a little silly), rather than preparing believers to reach the lost everywhere they went. Sinners could then be addressed by the pastor directly, removing the need for sharing by the individual believers. Visitation and charitable acts also became the lot of the institutional “church” – rather than the responsibility of individual believers. This model enjoyed some limited success as, people are hungry for God. Multitudes were invited, many came and some responded to altar calls and invitations to accept Christ. My experience in “Altar Counseling” taught me what a great many studies show; that the greatest percentage of respondents to an invitation for salvation, come for emotional empathy and catharsis rather than life transformation and regeneration. That matters little because that model did produce two other side-effects;

1. It instilled an emotional payoff for the folks in the pews, who felt as if seeing someone “go forward” or inviting someone to church in hopes that they might, was their part in sharing the Gospel.
2. It validated the need for and ministry of the Institutional Church in this capacity, for both the institution and the congregation.

While this experience was very fulfilling to both “churches” – it also gave both churches quantifiable evidence that they were spreading the Gospel and winning converts to the Lord. Over time it became clear to the Altar call counselors and frequent fliers alike, that this system was not really panning out – it did not (does not) deliver. It did not reflect actual conversion, regeneration or the making of disciples.

In the late 80s and early 90s there was a boom in Youth Ministry. Youth Groups in churches with the financial wherewithal, began marketing themselves toward youth culture - adding video arcades, internet cafes, and skate parks – and what do you know the “lost” youth started showing up in droves. There was a little bickering among the older generation, but, in the institutional church, numbers talk and it didn’t take long for those Youth Ministry methodologies to appear, multiply and catch on.

Now we have “grown up” versions of the same stuff – a café, bookstore, social media, basketball courts, cafeteria and even a floorshow! That’s what weekly meetings of the “Church” have become – rather than being an opportunity for believers to be disciplined, prepared and equipped to share the Gospel out in the world, it’s become a bit like being on a cruise ship – lots of fun and engaging opportunities, activities and social functions. It’s CHURCHERTAINMENT! It’s not there to help the (Body)

church grow deeper or to become equipped. Its mission is to sustain itself. The end game is money in plates, which requires butts in seats, which requires people through doors, which requires Abercrombie and Fitch meets Starbucks with plenty of outreach events to help those with a conscience feel like they are really doing something.

There are few pastors or shepherds anymore – there is no one to feed, nurture or care for sheep. We have motivational speakers, talk show hosts and life coaches. Some are edgy and cool with controversial things to say like how our sins are like farts (true story)! Others are touchy-feely types with that Dr. Phil vibe that says they really care, at least while the camera, lights, sound and video display are turned on. They drop out of the sky once a week and deliver a message designed to make every one leave feeling better. Then disappear back to the bat cave and the comfort of a fleet of “yes” men. Is it any wonder these guys are often caught with their hands in the cookie jar and other things in far worse places? There is no real accountability, no one who can see their daily actions and call them into question without fear of retaliation on some level. They sometimes have boards of elders, mentors, accountability, but as often as not, these boards are just their ministry buddies of the same ilk, running their own shows in far off places.

The goal: to produce happy comfortable sheep, that keep coming back for more fleecing.

The means to that end, pandering to the tastes, preferences, whims, wants and creature comforts of those sheep.

Most of what is passed out in church services today is little more than spiritual junk food. We feed milk and never meat while the believer is encouraged to lay in a comfortable little box being catered to and having every selfish desire met. We are raising generation after generation of Christian veal, who come as long as they're happy and coddled, but if at any point their desires are not fulfilled, they head on down to the next place. That's what the market is predicated upon – not making new disciples, but sifting sheep from other flocks with a shinier, slicker show.

I'm painting with a broad brush again. I mean, if the theme is selfishness, it'd be pretty easy to look at a more traditional conservative congregation which functions as a waiting room for Heaven; our four and no more. Places where outsiders, especially those coming from a different social, economic or even racial background are non-entities. Change and adopting culturally relevant methods are simply not welcome.

We might consider a non-denominational congregation, specializing in the charismatic or Word of Faith movements. Places where operations of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit have long dominated manifestations of the Fruit of The Holy Spirit. God is treated as a Santa Claus figure, and Bible verses are like magic spells which if repeated frequently and fervently enough can and will come to pass. The gospel is presented in a hyped up spiritualized game of emotions aimed at giving everyone the thrills and chills required to feel as if they have genuinely been in God's presence.

We could go to a seeker sensitive congregation and find a presentation of the Gospel completely devoid of any reference to sin, hell or judgment – and in some case Jesus Himself is omitted. They may well opt to use secular music with spiritual themes, rather than overtly Christian songs. The Gospel, re-designed to embrace those who don't know or want to know "religion." A service designed to be easily digested and assimilated.

It doesn't really matter, the theme is always the same; "SELF" I want, what I want, the way I want it. It's not much of a wonder that there are around 2,600 denominations and flavor variations in Christianity today. Because in our "self" driven culture, everyone wants Burger King, "have it your way" church. We have biker church, cowboy church, comedy church, art church, metal church, country church, outdoorsman church, traditional church, non-traditional church, emergent church, ancient future church and the list just keeps growing; I have no choice but to paint with a broad brush!

I want the music I like and the carpet I like and the parking space I like and the seat I like and I don't want to be bothered, challenged or imposed upon by anyone else's wants. I don't want change or to be changed. I don't want to volunteer or be asked to help. I don't want to have to talk to anyone but the preacher. Don't ask me for an offering. Don't go over an hour. If you don't meet my list of demands, I'll take myself over to someone who will.

At this rate, in a few years, we'll each have a little phone booth sized chapel in our back yard where we can "worship" in the exact style, surroundings and comfort level we desire, with all the other Christians we love – "us."

If you really want to see how ridiculous it all is, try thinking about it this way:

Almost without exception, every church/denomination/flavor out there was started by someone or some group who basically disagreed with what was going on at their church and thought they understood better than everyone else how church should work. "I know better" is simply another self-exaltation trip. Consider the process:

When we encounter God doing something and we don't understand exactly what it is He is up to (usually because we can't – He's infinite, we're not) we tend to develop a theory as an effort to better understand God, or suggest ways in which His actions might be understood. There's no problem there, this can actually be a fun diversion. However, the offspring of that harmless theorizing is theology. Theology is what happens when some guy develops a new theory about God and tries to convince others that the theory is correct, still not necessarily harmful, but slightly more dangerous. Once people begin to believe the new theory and refuse to consider others, we now have dogma – and that's dangerous. Dogma is what happens when we become convinced that what we believe or understand about God is ABSOLUTE truth – that is equivalent to God's Truth – and of course a theory that is held in such high esteem becomes a doctrine. We can also define doctrine as; a belief which is not necessarily or specifically mentioned in scripture, but for which, scriptural evidence may be found. After a time, when these people have found a set of doctrines they really believe in, they will next, attempt to initiate or indoctrinate others. When they have managed to talk enough people into following their doctrine, this is called a denomination. Later as these groups find things to disagree about (because remember, that's how they started) like style of music or color of carpet, they will make what we call a "split". Now, I hope you realize, I am being a little silly about all of this – because frankly I find the whole thing a little silly. Isn't funny how something which started in the hopes of bringing unity has done the opposite – and the fragmentation continues.

I'm not here from the land of make-believe to tell you your church, denomination or theology is wrong and you should leave. That won't fix anything anyway. A friend of mine asked me once how all those churches can be right, my reply, they can't all be right, but they can all be equally wrong.

I am going to suggest once again, that while many godly, wise and well-meaning folks invested their time and energy into all those things – they are ultimately man-made things which were intended to be guides in our walk – but what were once guides became canes, crutches and then wheelchairs – and now we can't get by without them. We can't conceive of God outside of our entrenched doctrinal positions – another set of boxes we force our conception of God through. In the end, most of what we learn about God comes from other human beings; the things we believe more often than not have human fingerprints all over them. That doesn't mean they're incorrect, just incomplete. The only first-hand information we get comes through scripture and the Holy Spirit, everything else is a lateral move on the informational flow chart.

EIGHT

The thing is, that those people, that sea of humanity from chapter six – the great populace out groping for love in the darkness of the world, eventually some of them will see a glimmer, or accidentally grasp onto the church as a possibility. At first they may be awestruck, amused, ignored, entertained or engrossed – because, they are more than likely, entering one of the churches in chapter seven. After a while however, maybe a month, maybe a year, maybe just one visit, they will begin to recognize while it may be nice, and fun, and social, it has not delivered the goods. Change.

Because we have lost track of what it means to “BE” church, rather than just “GOING” to church or “HAVING” church, we have lost track of a simple fact: The Church is the Body of Christ on earth; we are here to represent a physically present living Christ. He still handles the supernatural; salvation, healing, miracles, running the Universe and all the “OMNI” stuff – that’s His gig. We, believer types, are supposed to be in the business of loving each other and the lost, so that HE has the opportunity to work on fixing all of our inner damage, conforming us to His own image and sending us out to love some more. The modern church wants to approach in an emotionally genuine way, the traditional church wants to approach in a cerebrally genuine way and the charismatic church wants to approach in a supernaturally genuine way. And let me make clear that I believe in their heart of hearts they are all very sincere. However there is only one directive for how we “the church” are supposed to approach any and every one – with genuine love. Instead of doing that relatively simple thing (simple, not easy), loving people and letting God fix them, we choose to invest our time and energy attracting, entertaining and indoctrinating them (and ourselves). The entire mission of the church seems to be hitching folks up to the doctrinal cart of that particular group.

If you remember our little discussion of church history, you may have noticed a pattern. The church starts off as an organic community of individuals who are genuinely committed to God and one another and genuine love is a must for that to happen. Over time the group grows and more and more organization is needed. Eventually, an administrative hierarchy is put in place and people at the top begin to realize they can profit from and control people. Over the course of this process the first values of sincere love and genuine transformation are slowly replaced by the need for keeping people returning and getting new people to join up. Shepherding with human hands is obsolete and the machinery of ministry takes over. Rather than raising, feeding and nurturing sheep, the machine gets them addicted to junk food, shears them and eventually eats them. Then somebody recognizes something has gone awry and nails something to a church door. Okay, that part doesn’t happen every time but every so often a priority enema is in order. It took 1,000 years after Christ for the first one

to happen, 500 years for the next one, about 200 for the one after that...then I lose track, but it seems we may be coming due.

Let's talk about what happens when one of those hurting people comes to church.

A boy born into religion oughta feel right at home, and as long as he was satisfied with Bible stories and flannel-graph then everything was cool. Eventually, Sunday school ended and he had to sit through adult church. He would while away the hours doodling on a bulletin while the preacher talked about sin, judgment and hell. Every service, it seemed, ended with warnings about Mack trucks coming from out of nowhere to snatch the unsuspecting and unwary off to a pitchfork eternity in flames that are never quenched. Heady stuff indeed, but what really got his attention, standing there, shifting his weight as "Just As I Am" once again rang from the ethereally and eternally out of tune piano, bouncing against the worn wooden pews, was his father staring at him, half daring, half insisting that he walk that aisle, say the prayer and get baptized. His father, being an usher who prayed in Mid-western style King James English, bore a stare of considerable weight. Eventually, the boy caved. Some classes were required before baptism, and in them something was sparked like a tiny little ember that hungered for fuel to burn. He asked questions which received in response the barest repetition of threadbare doctrinal stance, rarely ever addressing or hinting at the true nature of God. He could tell his questions were wearing thin on those around him, and he knew the cruelty these folks were capable of when "tried." He had, after all, grown up in church. He remembered business meeting arguments, church wide fallouts, and even a time when some ladies had openly spread rumors accusing his mother of adultery with the pastor. At the ripe old age of 12, church had become unfulfilling so, he did a one-man church split.

Being raised in church tends to lead mainly (not always) to one of two things; One either becomes a piece of furniture in the church, or as the boy in the story above, one loses interest and splits. One of the ships in the church's navy is discipleship. Children of all ages are curiosity engines; they are fueled by a want to know. When they grow up in church they can begin to smell a "pat" answer. When they begin to round the teenage corner, they are aware of and sensitive; not only to the answer, but to how the answer is given. An adult who seems put out by a child's inquisitive nature, will probably not have to endure many questions. An answer, given as though it's beneath that adult, or as if it's wrong to question denominational dogma, or with just the same old "pat" answer (the denominational/doctrinal stance), basically tells that child, "I don't really care about your question or you."

We do similar things to adults entering church for the first time. We are very ready to “tell” them lots of stuff about how and what to believe and do, but many times we lack patience, grace and love in fielding their questions – we just want them to concede. The church is a navy that sails on love.

Even when that boy stayed home from church, he would still watch preachers on TV, because that hunger was real – He was trying to get hooked up to that love he was hardwired for, he was trying to get healed from the damage of his little life. By the end of his sixth grade year, at the ripe old age of 12, he was already a weekend binge drinker. He had gotten good grades in school his whole life but once he entered junior high, teen angst hit hard. He became sullen and angry, spent all of his time learning to play music and dreaming of breaking out of his sad little life, his sad little un-loveable self. His anger and hurt boiled over and he started to cut himself with razor blades long before it was fashionable. He started to experiment with drugs and even witchcraft. He wanted to be loved; he wanted to feel some kind of power in a world that made him feel more and more powerless. He was full of hurt and hate.

He graduated and finally got a girl and a band and went off to chase his rock n roll dreams, they never materialized. The entire goal of life seemed to be finding ways to mitigate its circumstances, hurts, failures and disappointments by soothing the emotional grief and spiritual emptiness with anything; booze, drugs, sex or whatever came along. Eventually, many years later, he found himself in a raging standoff with the world around him and life itself. Devoid of any sense of meaning, purpose or love, he was standing on a street corner as mid-day traffic whizzed by, trying to decide which car to step in front of. It needed to be traveling fast so that the impact would cause immediate death, it also needed to have the size damage his enormous frame to a fatal extent. He didn't want to end up only injured, incapacitated or vegetative. He wanted to die.

NINE

We're all damaged. We arrive on the planet that way, the sin nature we're born with thanks to Grandpa Adam and Grandma Eve, is like a mirror made of aluminum foil that only shows a very hazy and mildly distorted reflection of who God intended us to be. Just like a sheet of aluminum foil, it's nearly impossible to handle without wrinkling or creasing; like it, we also bear the dings and distortions caused by the hurts, guilt, disappointments and injustices of life. Whether they come through traumatic catastrophic incidents or, the cumulative gleaning of a life time of experience on planet earth, we all get bent up a bit.

One of Satan's most powerful tools against us is in convincing us that the damage we have is

- a. the worst, most wicked, shameful and evil kind and
- b. that we alone have that specific experience.

That leads us quickly to the assumption that letting that "cat" out of its bag will quickly equal rejection from those we know, admire and care for. We usually have a myriad of life experiences which validate that construct. If that's not enough, that internal hard wiring for, and the misinformation we have about love will ensure that we don't spill the beans, rejection after all is really our greatest fear. When the damage is allowed to find a nice quiet corner to hide in, it slowly and quietly grows and festers, gradually infecting everything inside of us. Time does not heal all wounds, that's just one more lie to rationalize stuffing the damages back down inside where they can go from being incidents that happened to us, to being part of who we perceive ourselves to be, and eventually ruling our lives. Those damages are the very things with the greatest potential to misdirect our search for God's Love. No matter what the damages are, how they are attained or their source; Satan, other damaged people, or the fallen world we live in, the purpose is the same; to distort and hide your true self and self-image (the one God sees) from you, and send you looking for love in all the wrong places. The fear of rejection ensures our secrecy which allows the damage to incubate and grow to maturity. Once it has fully matured and manages to become part of who we perceive ourselves to be, we will spend the majority of our lives trying to figure out how to satisfy, soothe or remedy the symptoms it causes, which keeps us busy and blind to the actual causal issue, so we never manage to deal with it. Pretty tricky, huh?

So what are these things, these damages, and these symptoms? I've shown you part of my hand already. When my mother became ill and was hospitalized for a prolonged period, (and this was back in the days when children were not allowed to visit sick people in the hospital) it was not intentional nor did it mean she didn't love me, but the message – the damage my heart received was abandon-

ment; abandonment from the central figure and source for love and nurture in my little eight year old world. Once the hugs and kisses and cuddling just stopped cold, I soon began to take comfort in food. “Food” love, replaced “mom” love. Before long I was gaining weight, I became fatty fatty two-by-four, which only encouraged me to eat more and build up that blubbery wall of protection and insulation. I was learning that people were not to be trusted, that even mom and people you thought were your friends would only let you down.

I had no idea or understanding of what was going on at the time, in fact, it took me about twenty years to finally make the connection between that event and the pattern which has dogged me my entire life. It wasn't long after my mother was hospitalized that I came into contact with pornography. Anthony Bourdain always talks about food-porn, but let's understand how closely those two love surrogates are related. I used food for comfort and insulation from people, I wanted comfort at a safe distance. The use of pornography is driven by a longing to experience intimacy at a safe distance, then it gives you an adrenal kick and all those warm, fuzzy excited feelings. It's also worth noting that my introduction to pornography preceded my “understanding” of what all those pieces and parts were for by several years, but I still got the buzz, because I knew it was taboo. Then I was hooked. It was just a matter of time and a little coercing to get some of my playmates into the act(ing out).

Something in my heart knew this couldn't be right, no matter how great the fun and excitement. What did I have left? Church. The people at church had given me examples of just how ruthless they could be when they smelled blood in the water, so I certainly wasn't going to bear my soul to them. There did remain in me, the hope that perhaps they could help me find some solution or cure for these things I was doing that left me with such a guilty conscience. Church offered me only religious answers, doctrinal positions and no relief from what were by now, full-on uncontrollable urges that demanded satisfaction. It didn't take much of a leap to add church-folk to the group of people who were not to be relied upon. As I said before, even after dropping out of church, I still sought God in my own lame ways – watching TV preachers, trying to read the Bible, having conversations with friends about their beliefs, but no answers were forthcoming, just more questions.

Once any real Christian influence was out of the way, it was just attrition. I found my way into binge drinking, drug use and even dabbling in the occult. I was looking for love and some sense of power in a world where I was clearly powerless, and felt more and more, that I did not belong. Years passed and my self-image, what I saw and believed about myself, became more and more distorted from failures, guilt and injustices stacked one upon the other. They drove me to a place of self-loathing where my rage turned inward and left me standing on a street corner watching cars whiz by, in of all places, New Mexico.

TEN

Resistors, that's my collective term for the damage we take that keeps us looking for love in all the wrong places.

We feel the need for love and most readily relate that need to our desire for human companionship. We establish relationships with others, some of which are healthy, others not so much. It's easy to wind up in an abusive or codependent relationship. Hurting people do hurting things and may even find it acceptable to abuse a loved one physically or emotionally when they feel "hurt." Other times, people with feelings of guilt are drawn to relationships which offer surrogate punishment; in a sense they feel they deserve it. Co-dependents offer a closed circle, a live-in rationalization for whatever damage they carry; the ultimate I'm OK, you're OK – where no one is actually OK. There are relationships which have no basis in relationship, but are merely consumerist coexistence, the man using the woman for sex, and the woman using the man for security. You don't have to spend very many hours of girl talk to hear women, even physically abused women, ask why they always seem to pick "that type" of guy over and over, or, aren't there any descent men left out there?...and yes, guys do it too. It's a result of the damage. If you ask these unhappy people in these and so many more unhappy relationships why they stick around, why they put up with it, they will answer, usually without a moment's hesitation, "I love him (or her)."

When we are pushed to the point where we are finally damaged enough at the hands of other people, we've had enough and we aren't going to take it anymore, we will still seek something to soothe that ache for love – we are after all hardwired for it. We may give ourselves over entirely to the pursuit of material goods or monetary gain, accepting the status and admiration we gain by them in lieu of love. Some will become devoted to their pets to the extreme, preferring the company of animals to that of people. Animals are not only dependable, they are essentially dependent and the relationship is clearly defined; you give them food and shelter, they give loyalty, affection and companionship. The most recent manifestation to catch the public imagination is hoarding. Hoarding is the result of a mind so overwhelmed with the "out of control" nature of life on earth, that they are attempting to establish their own private domain which they have total control over, their own little happy-safe place to shelter them from the instability of life. I've told you about my early use of food and pornography for the very same purpose; people and their love can't be trusted, so I'll build a substitute that can.

For some of us the futility becomes apparent long before any resolution does, and for some the resolution just can't make it in time. Filled with frustration, anger, confusion, disillusion, hatred, self-loathing, fear, emptiness, loneliness, purposelessness, guilt, hurt, grief, disappointment, failure, sadness

and ultimately depression – we lose all hope of a resolution or a remedy and instead place our hope and energy into finding something to numb the pain and quiet the voices enough so we can face the day and sleep through the night. Drugs and alcohol are the obvious choices here, but only because when you mention addiction, substance abuse is the first thing that leaps to mind.

The truth is, that none of the hundreds and hundreds of things we may try can ever replace God's love or fill that void. The substitutes are liars as well. The first time is usually great, and then we struggle to recapture or relive that first high, but never attain it. We ramp up, something bigger and better is always required, but even then you can never relive the first time. Diminishing returns – this is the essence of how addictive behavior operates in humankind. No one is born an addict. We were designed, meant and hardwired to seek God and His love, but that sin nature sends us down the rabbit trail and the damage and the symptoms ensure we won't be back anytime soon. We will spend most of our time, energy and resources caught in the addictive spiral, either trying to satisfy, treat, cope, deal, justify, rationalize or be delivered from them - all the while we remain generally unaware and/or unconcerned with addressing the issues that caused the hurts that drive the addictions; treating symptoms and never curing the disease.

Those addictions may even start to take on a ritualistic nature, as they offer what sense of fulfillment they can; taking away the hopelessness, purposelessness and empty boredom of life. Many times it is the loss of that "purpose" as much as the addiction itself that the "addicted" fear losing. What will the central focus, the purpose of my life be without it?

Think for a moment about all those things, one can become addicted to some are socially acceptable others, not so much. Food, sex, porn, money, gambling, work, possessions, affirmation, attention, booze, drugs, cigarettes, shopping, video games, the internet, tech gadgets, golf, running – think about that, you can become addicted to something that is actually good for you...but if you're using it to satisfy the need for God's love you're hard-wired for, it's still wrong.

Anything that moves us away from God's love is a resistor.

Does it keep you looking for love in all the wrong places?

Does it substitute for the real love you crave?

Does it numb you from the ache, the hurts and the voices in your head?

Then it's a resistor, and there's a million of 'em.

ELEVEN

One of the most difficult things, if not the most difficult thing that we human earthlings deal with, also happens to be one of, if not the biggest resistor – but I guess that only makes sense: Forgiveness. Man! Do we have issues? People are really pretty awful; they hurt, disappoint, insult and injure. People act selfishly, inconsiderately, rudely and hatefully. People can be mean, ugly, sarcastic, rotten and sometimes violent. Kind of like dealing with resistors, I could just keep going, in fact, we all could because, we have been humans and been around humans our entire life, and we have seen them at their worst. The more we care for another person, the greater the likelihood that they will inflict some kind of damage upon us, based solely on the fact that we do give a crap about them, and believe that they in turn, give a crap about us. We're really just setting ourselves up to get hurt, remember; you always hurt the one you love. It's either that, or well... I, for one, am not cut out to be a cat hoarder. It is inevitable that we both injure and become injured by the people we walk around with here. Some of the injuries are minor and go mostly un-noticed. Others sting, and depending on all the variables (the party involved, the circumstances, the duration and other mitigating factors) those injuries may leave dents and wrinkles inside us, and those are only ironed out by forgiveness.

We, as humans, struggle with forgiveness, it's difficult. We may well understand how harmful carrying un-forgiveness is, it eats at us, slowly turning us bitter and the Bible says that will rot your bones; not good. We'd love to put it down, after all it's just hurting us – that person we haven't forgiven, is rarely aware of how we feel. However, we want justice and recompense, we don't want that person to think what they did was "OK," or, permissible to do again, so we are reluctant to release forgiveness to them, despite the fact that we are actually the ones kept in bondage by it. On the flip side, if we are the offender, we tend to minimize or rationalize what we did wrong. If that doesn't work out, then we may allow ourselves to believe its "water under the bridge" or that it's all been forgotten. We, as human people, do not forgive and forget – even when we do actually manage to forgive. "Forgive and forget" is just as harmful as "Time heals all wounds." It's a big stinky lie that keeps us quiet about all the hurts, so that they can incubate in the darkness, festering and growing while they plan global domination of your life.

OK, let's say we do forgive and we're walking down life's happy highway, suddenly from out of nowhere, someone or something triggers a landslide of old memories; past insults and injuries we thought we had forgiven. There we are, sitting in the middle of all that old junk we *thought* we had gotten rid of. What gives?

Normal everyday non-believers deal with this stuff to some extent I am sure, but for the believer, it is critical stuff. Our belief in Christ, the redemption He purchased for us and our eternal lives are all tied up in forgiveness. The Good News (and I do mean Good), is that He has taken on full responsibility for all that on our behalves. The trouble is that Jesus makes it clear, that for the believer, our ability to be forgiven by Him, is tied directly to our ability to forgive other people. That stinks.

Matthew 6:14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

WOW!

Now I know each of us want to believe that our personal pet case is somehow subject to some loophole which precludes us from having to forgive, but let's understand, that if you chase down all the Bible has to say about forgiveness, the evidence will soon demonstrate that God's view on forgiveness is more stringent on the offended, than the offender. There are no caveats or exclusions to whom must be forgiven, much less limits due to the severity. There are specifics that entitle the offender to be forgiven "70 x 7" or as many as 490 times for the same offense. Is that too many for you? Well, most commentaries will explain this is a figurative representation for the infinite. It does not pay to quibble with God over technicalities.

How many resistors did you count since the beginning of the chapter?

What's the answer, I don't know but I have a thought. Much along the same lines as LOVE, we need to rethink our approach to forgiveness, or at least add a wrinkle. When we have sinned, we need forgiveness and the Bible gives us some very interesting direction in regard to that:

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

If we confess our sins to God, God forgives us. That's great!

Sin is what separates us from God, and what makes us like every other earthling. When we sin, we sin against God. David believed that we *only* sin against God:

Psalms 51:4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.

Now clearly David's sins affected a number of people and the whole of the nation of Israel. However, from a strictly technical standpoint, if sin is only an issue between us and God, then, at the point that we confess we are forgiven, the sin issue is taken care of. That's great!

OK, why is it, that when I forgive someone, I may not think about it for a while, but then, the memories keep coming back? Or, why is it, that even though I asked God to forgive me, I still have feelings of guilt sometimes? Ever find yourself having a conversation or argument with someone inside your head, maybe you're telling them off, really letting them have it for what they did or said about you? Did I really forgive that person? Did God really forgive me? Doubt and condemnation are the food-stuff of resistors and not meant for human (especially believers) consumption.

What we are dealing with here, are not issues of forgiveness of sin; if you have confessed, God has taken care of that, He is very trust-worthy. What we are dealing with now, is the flip side of forgiveness – hurt.

Hurt comes in a lot of flavors; resentment, anger, guilt and sorrow to name a few, and when sin affects more than one human party, both sides will be damaged by hurt. The flavors may vary, as will the ability to ignore or deny its presence, but that only increases the likelihood that it will remain undetected as it incubates and schemes. When we confess to God, we have addressed the sin issue, but the hurt issues remain. So how do we deal with hurt?

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

We begin to deal with hurt issues when we confess to other messed up sinners, then God can begin to heal those hurts. When we confess and ask or offer forgiveness to the human element, we are exposing those hurts to the light, just as we did to our sin when we exposed it to God through confession. Those hurts; those incubating tumors of darkness are desiccated when they are expelled from their dank safe harbors and exposed to light.

Confess to those you have hurt, confess to those who have hurt you, confess to proxies if those people are dead or for some (valid) reason not able to hear you. In doing so, we offer them and ourselves the only real hope of healing, freedom and restoration. Allow the healing light of his Love to make you complete.

Complete honesty before God or man makes us more than a little uncomfortable. Think of the many great leaders who were assassinated, because they told more truth than the “powers that be” were comfortable with. Most Christians are comfortable confessing their sins before God in a rather benign general sense, “Oh God, have mercy on me, a sinner...” Some are willing to confess a little more specifically, finding a need to address their individual failings on some regular basis. While a few denominations do still traffic in out loud, one on one confession, the duty of “hearing” falls predominantly on clergy. The idea of interpersonal confession – confessing to each other, is repugnant, to say the least, among most protestant evangelical Christians and Jesuiticians.

Anyway, it’s difficult for us – in fact it’s probably almost as difficult to hear a confession as to make one, but it is an act of love on a nearly sacrificial level. To give ourselves, our comfort, pride and dignity away, to stand in the face of the fear of rejection and be humble and honest, in front of God and everybody.

God loves that, God honors that. God called David a “man after my own heart.” Why was that? I’ve heard a lot of theories, but I really believe it was David’s amazing honesty before God. He wasn’t caught up in formal ritualized prayer, he wasn’t concerned about using the appropriate or religiously correct language, he was blatantly, painfully honest. When he felt something was wrong, he said so. When he felt something was unfair, he said so. When he felt like life just kind of sucked, he said so. He wasn’t concerned about offending God or hurting His feelings. David understood God’s love was big enough to endure his humanity, and that anything less than total honesty with God, is really dishonesty. You can’t lie to God, and our willingness to try to lie to Him by holding back, only exposes our faulty conception of His love and character. I would think that if anything could hurt God’s feelings; that does.

Jesus went into the synagogue one day. On that day there was a standard flotilla of religious types on parade, and a man with a withered hand. Jesus walks up to this guy and says, “Stick out your hand.” Without thinking or questioning, this guy sticks out his withered hand and Jesus heals him. That’s great!

You know what’s less than great? If Jesus showed up to fellowship with most of us and said, “Stick out your hand.” Most of us, would most likely, jam that withered mit into a pocket and stick out the other hand, and say, “How’re ya doing today Jesus? I’m blessed!” We prefer being “blessed” with our dignity and pride intact, than being humble, honest and healed.

TWELVE

I could probably stop right there, but for those who know me, you realize this is not likely.

Not everyone who comes to church was brought up there. There are teens that will attend a youth group or church camp just for kicks and then hear the Gospel and respond to it. Some folks will have a come to Jesus talk with a friend, relative or co-worker later in life. Others, sleepless and in desperate straits, might bump into one of my old TV preacher buddies and hear the call of God. Any of these will be entering a brand new world when they first come through the doors of a corporate worship facility, or congregational location; mere babes in the woods. Then, there are those, who started in church, but dropped out at some point, usually when first-love tickled their fancy, or they got their driver's license. Many of them, having outlived the excitement of youth, will feel the need to return to the fold as they begin to marry and start families. As for me, I got shoved back onto the path by Stephen King.

God does a funny thing to me once in a while; sometimes he'll just show up. I mean, I know He's always "there" and everywhere for that matter, but sometimes, when I least expect it, it's like I can tell he just walked by. Frequently, the experience leaves me in tears, and short of breath, because sometimes I get so caught up in the business of life that I lose track of the most important thing – Him. When He drops in on me like that and His glorious beauty just engulfs the room – I remember just what awesome means and how insignificant everything else really is. His love is better than life. Remember that boy we were talking about earlier?

That boy, well he wasn't really a boy anymore, but he had a moment like that too. He had just finished reading "The Stand", a novel by Stephen King about a sort of post-apocalyptic world where a group of nobodies take on the personification of evil in the world. It's a classic showdown in Stephen King style. Of all the weird things, to pop this guy's eyes open – a Stephen King book! As he finishes that book, this guy realizes that his life is empty and meaningless, because there is nothing in his life bigger than his "self." There was no quest, no cause, no, no higher power or purpose to give his life value, or to give his life for. He fell onto the floor right there and cried out for God to give him another shot. He admitted his attempt to run and fulfill his own life had been a shambles. "Please take me back, you're the boss, you call the shots!"

Then it happened, while that man-boy was all covered in tears and snot, God showed up. That boo-hoo boy didn't move an inch but inwardly he felt God, the Creator of the Universe, pull him up out of

the miry clay and set him on solid ground. BANG, just like that, he felt he had been thrown a hundred feet in the air and then landed like an Olympic gymnast made of feathers.

It took several years, but God kept working on that guy. He had to unlearn a lot of old bad junk. He had to learn a lot of God's good stuff. He read his Bible and prayed; he studied and listened to teachers on the TV. He got delivered from his substance issues in an instant. Other issues, like cussing took a little more time. He and the girl got married and even started going to church. It was not a church like he had grown up in, but he caught on. He played in the band at church, helped with the youth and eventually was hired to help out. After a few years he was promoted to being the worship leader. From a scruffy, nose-ringed long-hair to an associate pastor, just like that. Well sorta, but nevertheless, he was on top of the world – look out below!

THIRTEEN

My trip through the Baptist church of my youth was, in reality, a second-hand experience. It was my parent's religious trip; I was just along for the ride for the most part. I did what was expected just like my parents did, we met the expectations of those around us. We went to Sunday School, and church Sunday morning and evening and even Wednesday night prayer and business meetings. I walked the aisle and got dunked in the tank our church borrowed from another church on such occasions. It was, as I have already noted unsatisfying. This time, was my turn.

I came on hot. I was steaming to do something meaningful with my life and for God. I did not miss an opportunity to get involved. The Mrs. and I were there, literally every time they opened the door, in fact, it wasn't long before they gave me a key, because nobody wanted to hang around at church as much as we did. We got into a circle of friends who were all very sincere, and they too were the folks who stayed, played and prayed more than most folks had any inclination to. It was an independent charismatic church, which was a cultural challenge for me, but I learned and I grew.

After a year or so of proving that I wasn't going to disappear, I was asked, (after some personnel changes), to step in and help direct music, "pro bono" of course. I was there all the time anyway, so sure, why not. Another year or so and I was hired to be a part time administrative assistant, which turned out to be an earth-shattering experience. People in general have a pretty strange and idealistic idea of what "church work" is like, rarely is it accurate. Where I was, the day was not spent in all day prayer meetings, Bible readings and theological discussions. It was thankless work. I had office jobs to do, as an administrative assistant would, filing, typing, data entry, answering phones and the like. We also set up, tore down, reset, demolished and rebuilt as the volunteer roles I filled also continued. Before long, the stuff I used to love to do for free, I now resented doing for pay, weird huh? I stopped viewing God as my provider and started seeing the church administration as my source – and my feeling was, that they didn't think too much of me. Then I started seeing "behind the curtain." There was little sense of being a team, family or community; on the contrary, it was a very competitive atmosphere, where staff members seemed to regard one another with little more than contempt. There was no open hostility but there was a very obvious cold war which continued for the next year or so. My wife and I bought a house and had some babies, then (after more personnel changes), I was promoted to being Associate Pastor of Worship Arts and Media, a few months later my old administrative tasks were given back to me as well.

My hope most of the way along my journey was that I would attain the coveted worship leader position. I spent years as second in command helping to develop a highly skilled team of singers and musicians, now I would have the opportunity to polish it to a sparkling finish. God seemed to favor me, and several top notch musicians moved to the area and joined in filling roles we had not managed to fill in previous years. For the first two years, things got progressively better, the band got tighter, the overall production got smoother and we were really learning how to worship together, and not just play songs. Then things started getting weird.

Almost overnight, major changes started happening. A major falling out between the senior pastor and the staff led to major personnel changes. New staff was brought in, new directives and operational protocols and procedures were put into effect. In general it went from a pretty happy work environment to being a place where you felt you always had to watch your back.

For the time I had been there, the first several years, ministering to people's needs and getting them involved in church through various weekly outreaches had been the central vision. Winning souls was what we were about and that always soothed my conscience when we fudged numbers or engaged in mild deceit and manipulation. I'm not talking illegal activity, just things that were a touch shady ethically. In the greater scheme of things, I am sure that my desire to belong, to be affirmed, to be valued also helped me, just like it helps young men in gangs to commit drive by shootings and young women to get pregnant on prom night; just another imperfect and immediate substitute for God's perfect love. The final year, it was clear that a new and different vision was driving what we still called ministry. That vision was all about stimulating economic growth. I don't know if it was debt, flat out greed or what that lay at the root, but it was clear that the new priority system was about butts in seats and dollars in the plate. Several things began to happen that woke me up like a whiplash dream, I not only saw what was going on, I recognized that the people I had felt were my family for years had some ugly selfish motives and that I had them too. I realized that even though I wasn't that into money, I had been selling myself and doing things not for God's glory, Kingdom or love, I was doing most things to ingratiate and endear myself to people in order to gain their acceptance and affirmation. I had given myself away, but not to the Lord.

Somehow I found Andrew Murray's book "Absolute Surrender," and I began to read it and meditate on it. I spent hours weeping in prayer before God in repentance, recognizing what I had become. I was no different than my co-workers, painting my self-centered agenda with Christian-speak, stamping my plans with a cross and a dove, as if God approved. My wife and I began to fast and pray seeking God's restorative hand, begging Him to make us right, repenting for the wrong in our hearts. I

begged God at one point to show me the true source of all that hurt, way down inside, and let me see it the way you do God! I thought if I could just understand what made me this way, the root cause that would make it all better. He did what I asked, and he answered me in the basement of my house. "You don't believe anyone loves you."

FOURTEEN

I know that probably seems like the cheesiest, teen-angst, pity-party bunch of bull pucky ever, but it was the reality of my experience, and not just mine. Many people I have spoken with in the ensuing years have also verbalized a similar experience - not the God in the basement part, but the inability to experience love.

Let's be clear, I did not doubt that people loved me, I did not doubt the sincerity of their claims to love me, nor did I think those people to be liars, but there was some kind of disconnect. I was unable to feel or experience love from others in a genuine or meaningful way. Because of that very fact, I was spending all of my time, energy and ability trying to win or purchase love, affirmation and acceptance from the people around me, with the things I said and did. Fasting and prayer brought me to a place of clarity where God could put me in touch with that information. The truth was that I was every bit as duplicitous as any of the people I was in "ministry" with. In truth, they may have been much more honest than I was, because their avarice and ambition were much closer to the surface, whereas mine was a delusion; a lie I was telling myself and trying to get everyone else to believe it too. The truth hit me hard.

I was disillusioned with myself and with ministry. My work place had become ugly and treacherous, which led me to remain in the seclusion of my office, with Jesus and Murray, trying to get my heart right and stay out of everyone else's way. Outside my door, the jockeying for power and prestige, the bald-faced efforts at self-promotion, and the onslaught of the under-handed never ceased. Even people I had known for years seemed to act differently; I no longer felt any of them could be depended upon. I spent more and more time in prayer and worship, both at work and at home with my wife. We prayed for ourselves, my co-workers and the church. The gravity of the situation mounted, something had to give.

It was me.

One night as I prayed, trying to get to sleep, a picture began to form in my head. The picture was an illustration of what the CHURCH was meant to be, how it was supposed to function, and then, within it, another image began to develop which showed what had gone wrong with our "church." The CHURCH was a green meadow filled with frolicking sheep; they played under the watchful eye of a loving shepherd. He kept danger away and watched the sheep playing, if they were hungry he fed them good food and if they were injured, he cared for their wounds. High on a hill overlooking the

meadow stood the owner of the meadow and the flock. Then, there came a rumbling from just over the next hill, the earth trembled and clouds of smoke billowed as an enormous grey-black monstrosity chugged its way toward the playing sheep who were unaware. It was a hulking contraption not unlike a combine. On the front end there were air powered cannons that shot Twinkies, cheeseburgers and other junk food out in front of the contraption, drawing the sheep directly into its path. As the sheep feasted on the goodies, they became weak and slow as the contraption moved steadily toward them. Just behind the junk-food cannons, there were two men, dressed half like shepherds and half like pirates who would grab the feeding sheep and shear them brutally with huge automated clippers. The sheep were sheared unevenly and many times left torn and bleeding. The shearers would then pass the sheep down the line to the next pirate shepherd who would break a leg on each sheep and throw them back out into the meadow. High above in the cockpit of the contraption sat a man, who looked exactly like the loving pastor, steering the machine in circles around the meadow while the workers below repeated their ritual. If a sheep was too slow or if the pirate shepherd below missed one, that sheep was simply ground up in the gears of the contraption. The blood, bones and guts of those sheep it turns out, served as fuel for the contraption.

Well, that didn't help me get to sleep.

I did what I have always been prone to do, find some way to vent my concerns over what I had seen and what it said about my church. Had we really gone from being a happy loving place that nurtured and nourished sheep, to a harmful machine which actually profited from and ate sheep? The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed.

This is the first time I have shared the "vision" version. The more I thought and prayed the more I started to become convinced that this was a message from God. Clearly the "owner on the hill" would tolerate this for only a limited time. It was late; I needed sleep, so I just wrote. Having spent years in a charismatic church, it was always safer to claim that God was behind it, and I genuinely did and do believe He was, so wince if you will non-charismatics, but I framed it as being prophetic in nature. I put it into the simplest concrete terms, doing away with the symbolism, and I stated that inaction on our part, would draw a response from God meant to get us back on track; and that said response would occur thirty days after the beginning of the New Year. If you understand the true nature of prophecy, you'll know that prophecy is mostly the preaching of truth, not so much the foretelling of the future. Anyway...good, bad or ugly...I did it, I am just being honest.

What I did not plan, was that anyone else would see it, at least not right away. My plan was to write it down, and having vented, drift off to sleep. My plan was to continue to pray and meditate on it and wait for God to direct me, as to what, if anything, I should do with it. This is where I won't bore you with all the details or various versions of how and what all happened, there are two sides to every story but what it comes down to is this; the pastor wound up with a copy of what I wrote. All I can say is, I didn't give it to him. He would agree to that much.

After availing himself of the counsel of others in various ministries, I was confronted by the pastor and the staff and put on a thirty day sabbatical. During that time my wife and I were relieved of all ministry duties, and I was asked to submit to a series of counseling sessions with various individuals in hopes of reconciliation. I did everything that was asked of me, and continued to attend to church. I was still "released" at the end of the 30 day sabbatical.

After all the years, sweat and tears, it took one letter to end essentially every relationship and tie I had built with that group of people, instantly. Is it any wonder that people are less than forthcoming, unwilling or resistant to share the real gritty details of their fallible existence in church? I know I am neither first, nor last in the line of folks who have or will experience something similar.

"Say a word out of line and find out the friends you had are gone forever." -Billy Joel

FIFTEEN

This is getting pretty heavily autobiographical, I apologize for that, but at the same time I hope you know the reason is because I am so utterly flawed, and I have made so many mistakes, and in the end, my life is the one I know best. I mean I could make up all sorts of fictitious anecdotes to illustrate the principals I am trying to share – but I figure why bother, why not just be honest.

As our friend Billy Joel pointed out years ago, honesty is such a lonely word. Why? As human people we have been created in the image of God. That has some really wonderful connotations; we are triune, we have a natural creative instinct and of course we are hardwired to hunger after God's love.

On the down side we also have a sin nature, and it loathes honesty.

We are not honest about, or to ourselves.

We gulp down gallons of political garbage and wave the flag for one or other political party, as if an animal head is some symbol of virtue. We fail to recognize that almost all politicians are millionaires no matter what animal head they are “representative” of. Politicians are mostly lawyers, and lawyers have spent years making the American legal code a nearly insurmountable tangle of convoluted language, which ensures that only lawyers and politicians will ever comprehend it, thus solidifying their position and power. Politicians will say nearly anything to garner votes in order to retain their positions and accrue wealth and power. The only people who are represented in Washington DC are the people with the money and power to buy influence, and they tell lies about each other to keep us arguing amongst ourselves while they keep taking our money to the bank. Now, don't go blaming anybody because it's our fault and it's been that way for a mighty long time. It got to be that way because we as Americans love to be lied to. We like a superficial front man who is all style and no substance. We love the cheap and superficial, that's why places like Hollywood and Las Vegas are symbolic of what America stands for – they openly traffic in lies. They aren't villains; we pay them to do it. Advertisers know us better than we know ourselves. They market everything from beer to body spray on the idea that it will make us more popular, it will bring us love. We can't wait to buy some! Our culture thrives on lies.

As individual human beings, we communicate in lies, motivated by fear and insecurity. We aggrandize ourselves by exaggerating our exploits and skills. We minimize our mistakes and misdeeds. In an argument, we might refer to ill-founded or nonexistent data to support our position. In a heated lovers-spat, we might range into hyperbolic language insisting that we will leave. The truth is that we

don't want to leave, we want to be begged to stay. But being as we are, we attempt to use a manipulative trick rather than be honest with the one we love." We have expectations of our mate that go unmet, because we refuse to articulate them, our rationale; if we have to tell them, then their response is not genuine. We even lie about our lies.

Honesty will only drive people to fear, dread or avoid us if the level of honesty becomes too uncomfortable. In cases like Jesus, Tyndale, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr and Malcom X, truth can actually motivate people to kill you. I guess it could be worse, you could be like Wycliff.

The national past-time of the United States may be baseball, but the national past-time of Christianity is rationalizing why the things we do are OK, and the things that others do are "sin." That's just another brand of dishonesty. We're all supposed to be equal in God's family but as I came to find out, some of us are more equal than others. Titles like Pope, Pastor, Bishop, Elder, Father and so forth are highly prized.

Mark 10:42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

On the less formal tip, terms like "anointed" are applied to individuals who are gifted in certain respects. Now Christ being the anointed one who indwells us, my guess would be that we are all "anointed" too. I'll tell on myself, when I moved into a ministry position with a title, I did feel I was a little farther up the ladder – maybe not "better" than anyone else, but a little more "special." I was running in a religious circle that said, "Well, we don't give to get something, but we do expect and believe by faith that God will bless us in return." At the time reasoning like that seemed completely legitimate – but the truth I came to see, in myself at least, was that just as I had done things to "buy" love and acceptance from other people, much of my giving and serving was motivated not by God's love working in me, as much as my own selfish desire to get love and blessings, financial and otherwise from God.

The people I was surrounded by; the ones I worked with and ministered to, amounted to a web of codependent support. They fed me and filled me with religious speak, faulty reasoning and shoddy theology to support the idea that God was a kind of slot machine and if I kept pumping in quarters and repeating the right Bible verses like mantras or magic spells, eventually the pay-off was inevita-

ble; if I could just have faith and believe *real* hard. That's not a finger pointing at anyone but me. In my heart, I knew better and as time went by, my heart was telling on me. I saw the inconsistencies between the things I was saying and doing, and the real motivations in my heart. I could abide it for a while, but in the end the duplicitousness was more than I could bear. I needed my heart and my actions to be on the same trajectory, I couldn't lie to myself any longer, I needed truth – real, head-on and no holds barred.

SIXTEEN

Well, it was not the best feeling thing I've ever gone through; I mean the repetition of the abandonment theme was not something I was hoping for, to be sure. I suppose most believers, at some point, find it in ourselves to repeat David's request and ask God to examine our heart and show us what He finds. I don't think we as humans have any inkling of what we are asking for in making that request, and in the spirit of honesty, I don't think most of us are honest in making it, I was no different. I am certain I was also not the first person to regret it almost instantly when truth started hitting the ground like bombs and shaking my little world, tearing off chunks of land that I was standing on. The truth is that there was a great deal of peace in not having to face that embittered and treacherous work atmosphere daily. The worship, prayer and fasting that sustained my wife and I through those first 30 days, became a big part of our lives and spiritually speaking we thrived over that first year. God met our needs and we found a whole other group of Christians, some of them outcasts as well, who were more than willing to support, love and accept us as we were.

Then the wheels started coming off. There were many precipitating causes; my mom had a massive stroke, our debt was growing, work was difficult to find, ministry work was impossible to come by, I started college in hopes that a degree would make finding work easier, I was rejected for weight loss surgery and finally my wife had a second miscarriage – that, probably more than anything else, devastated us. I honestly started to carry a grudge toward God, I mean, couldn't one thing have gone right? Everything, it seemed, was set to fail. The bible didn't help, prayer didn't help, church didn't help, advice from others didn't help, in fact, I soon realized that many of my contemporaries were experiencing a similar dynamic in their lives. It wasn't long and it just seemed as though God had packed up and moved out.

Getting out of bed became more and more difficult; my emotions began to roller coaster. I tried to pull myself up by the bootstraps. I went to a doctor and got treated for high blood-pressure, weight loss and depression. I was also began self-medicating with a little alcohol which quickly turned into a lot of alcohol. I found out I was a border-line diabetic and started getting treated for that. I got up on weight loss pills, got down on booze and got zombified with anti-depressants. Then we lost our medical insurance. If it ain't one thing it's another.

I had thought that maybe school would help. I was pursuing a degree in religion, and I thought that maybe if I got into and around some real deep thinkers, teachers, philosophers and theologians, that at some point, I would find the answer to what was going wrong inside me and in my life, maybe even

how to fix it. Perhaps somewhere, someone would be able to tell me where God had snuck off to, and tell me how to get Him to come back.

So much for that.

SEVETEEN

So what's the big deal about honesty, I mean, aside from the moral, ethical and legal issues?

Well, despite the fact that non-Christian people tend to view God as "The Big Party-pooper on high," they think God is the God of "Don't," "Stop," and "No." Christians, on the other hand, tend to view God as Father, and savior and little else – we are dropped off here to fend and provide for ourselves, while God is an ethereal ubber being, far removed from our little lives. We may believe that God cares for us, we might pray and read the Bible, but most of the time if something goes amiss, we quickly assume the role of responsible party, and go to work trying to figure out a contingency plan. How many times have I heard something to the effect of, "Well, all we can do now is pray."?

I've come to believe that God's top priority for us, after eternal salvation, is healing.

Now wait!

I'm not talking about physical healing. I mean if you want to talk about physical healing there are lots of people with lots of views, but the simple truth is that, on this earth, God is going to heal you every time but once. It may be a miracle, it may be medical or it may be something other, but one of these days (barring Jesus' return) something is going to kill you, me and everyone else. The upshot is, that then we go to Heaven to be healed forever.

The thing is, our temporal, physical nature and our strong desire for comfort leads us to focus on temporal physical healing, which to us, is the biggest thing; easing suffering, treating illness and prolonging life. The problem is that our view of God seems to assume that His values and priorities are the same as ours. God's perspective, unlike ours, is eternal, His purpose and plan are focused on what's best for us, most expedient for us eternally. What will serve most efficaciously in instilling Christ-like character in us, is a far higher priority to God than what will make us feel better or more comfortable. The healing God wants to deal out first and foremost, is the internal healing of the life time of damage and hurt we pack around and the resistors that grow out of that damage. The journey toward that healing starts with honesty – complete, total, 100%, no-holds barred transparency. Like when David danced before the ark and got in hot water with his wife; naked honest. We are far more like another famous Biblical example; Adam and Eve. We hide from God and try to cover our shame, but rather than fig leaves; we use excuses and rationalizations about our shameful attitudes and behaviors to avoid facing the truth. God hasn't changed; He won't force us to face ourselves, he just waits.

Remember? We talked about David's honesty before God, and how God said He was a man after His (God's) own heart. We talked about the man with the withered hand and his willingness to expose his "shame." Most of us are unwilling to view ourselves as we really are, to look at ourselves through God's eyes. We want to accentuate the positive, confess and claim the good and never deal with the bad, "Life and death are in the power of the tongue, brother!" Right you are, but life and death aren't a matter of positives and negatives, they are a matter of what is true and what is not.

John 14:6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Isaiah 28:15 You boast, "We have entered into a covenant with death, with the grave we have made an agreement. When an overwhelming scourge sweeps by, it cannot touch us, for we have made a lie our refuge and falsehood our hiding place.

Life and death are about a willingness to face and speak truth to ourselves, rather than hide our heads in lies; it's got nothing to do with positive confession, or "claiming" anything.

Still, we hide there with Adam and Eve clutching our excuses, safe in comfortable surroundings, safe in secluded places we have built where we know exactly who we are; the addict, the abused, the unwanted. Those are the lies that lead to death. Even worse, the lies that say we're OK, when we are not – the ones that refuse to allow us to even consider the possibility that something might be out of whack, they're the most dangerous of all. "Oh, I'm blessed brother!" We can't even peek through our fingers most of the time, let alone, crawl outside the safety of our encapsulated life to make sure the hull hasn't been breached by the meteorites that smash into us. We are generally content to defend ourselves with a force field of "positive confession" and denial, ignoring truth.

What's the option? A narrow gate and a wide gate, a way that is difficult and a way that is broad and easy. Most of us try to live on an imaginary fence that separates those two gates, but if you like funny home video shows like I do, then you know what's about to happen when you see someone balancing precariously as they walk along the top of a fence...it's just a matter of time. We can't live this new life in Christ with that old heart and those old hurts, it'll tear you apart. That's exactly what Jesus means when he talks about putting new wine into old wine skins.

There's a famous picture of Jesus knocking on a cottage door, preachers love to point out how the door has no knob on the outside; Jesus is knocking waiting for us to respond and let him in. It's a pic-

ture of salvation. What that picture doesn't show is that Jesus isn't just dropping by for dinner and TV. He expects to move in, sit in the good chair and hold the remote. He will not take it by force, but He is very persistent. You see, Jesus is not content to come in the front door and wait patiently (in many cases indefinitely) in the foyer. Jesus is going to start asking for permission to use the john, or get something to eat in the kitchen. He's going to want to go lie on your bed and check out the garage and the attic. Look around your home, is there just one door? No. Our lives have at least as many doors as our homes, they are compartments where we store things, things we don't want the world to see in here, things I don't want my family to see, over here. We even have places to put things we choose not to see about ourselves. Jesus will not stop until we allow His complete unhindered access to what lies behind every last door.

Before we surrender to Christ, God seems like the end of the party, the beginning of no more fun. Once we surrender we seem to face a barrage of rigor. We must overcome temptation, our flesh, be disciplined, not sin, keep the commandments, read the Bible, pray and go to church. Even that may not be enough. We may have to do good works, give offerings, be nice to people and forgive others. That's all before you get into all the denominational whosie-whatsits. I mean, that's a lot of stuff just to remember, let alone get done; it's a lot of plates to keep spinning.

Here's the really good part, one of the first things that sparked my search for an answer to the problem of "me" and my duplicitous nature, Andrew Murray showed me this in the Bible and it hit me like a ball bat, ready?

Philippians 2:13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Wait a minute. Did you get that?

God is working in me , not to just to get me to do the right thing, but to change my will so that I want to do the right thing. No commandments, no more plates to spin, no more arduous attempts at self-discipline which are bound to fail. God is working to make me want to do the right thing!

Jeremiah says:

Jeremiah 31:33 "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. 34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his

brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Ezekiel says:

Ezekiel 36:26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

This was no longer about my ability, in fact it never was, but that is what I lost sight of, that's what many of us have lost sight of. He wants to give us a new heart, a healed heart that is so in tune with Him, that we do His will like its second nature. That's what He wants for us, to heal us with His Cosmic Love, to bring our weary hearts back to life and make them one with His. He wants to heal us, but in order for that process to begin, we must first be brutally honest about our condition; naked and transparent before Him. What have we learned from the man with the withered hand? God will not heal, what we will not reveal.

EIGHTEEN

Those two gates are a big problem for most of us. Even if we refuse to make a choice, we still choose because Jesus told us we are either for Him or against Him. To not choose the narrow gate is to choose the wide gate by default. There is no parking lot to procrastinate in, no fence to totter upon. Jesus has done everything to make it as easy as possible for us. He took the beating, the cross, the grave, hell. He came back and ascended to the throne. He has sent His Spirit to guide us and help us. He is trying to heal us and fix our hearts, so that we can genuinely see His Kingdom come on earth through our lives. All that and still we resist.

Why does it seem so difficult, so uncomfortable and painful? This might help to explain:

Matthew 11:29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Well that doesn't sound so bad, in fact a nice plate and some polyurethane; you could decoupage that right up into a nice bit of wall décor for Granny's dining room. Let's glance over at the dictionary, shall we?

Definition of YOKE

1

a : a wooden bar or frame by which two draft animals (as oxen) are joined at the heads or necks for working together
b : an arched device formerly laid on the neck of a defeated person **c** : a frame fitted to a person's shoulders to carry a load in two equal portions

Now, just off the top of your head, does that definition seem to fit the description of any item with which Jesus is closely associated? If you said a cross, you just won the grand prize!

A cross, here's Jesus saying something very similar:

Mark 8:34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

That one doesn't sound nearly so benign and pleasant, does it?

A cross is not just the passive symbol of our faith; it is in reality, an implement of death. Jesus says if we really want to come after Him, it will require, denial of our “self” followed by the carrying of a cross. Why do you suppose he would want us to do that? It's so that when we're out walking around the world, and we find some part of our “self” that slipped past the denial phase, we can nail it to that

cross and kill it. The cross has no other purpose – it kills, it is an implement of death. You see, we can't take up the cross, until we deny our "self." We have to lay aside our old life, attitudes and activities – everyone knows that. But then, we have to lay down all the plans, agendas, ideas and desires we have built up, and automatically assumed or rationalized are God ordained. We have to have a "me" going out of business sale; prices have been slashed to the bone, everything must go! Not us. We don't give up self easily.

I have a friend who is a gun enthusiast, and he has a hat that says:
"You can have my gun when you pry it from my cold dead hands."

Many of us approach the cross with a very similar attitude. We lock our white knuckled grip, dig in our heels and say, essentially: "Jesus, you can save me from hell, but this stuff over here is mine – you can have it when you pry it from my cold dead hands."

You know why this process is so painful for us? Because our grip is so tight, that everything has to be torn from our grasp, while we kick and scream. It's not the Lord, who forces it out of our bloodied mits, it's just the way things are; its new wine into old wine skins, it's trying to live with one foot in each gate. It simply will not work.

New Math, Lesson Two:

The path of least resistance is

When we least resist.

NINETEEN

So, what can I say now? I guess it had better be honest, huh?

I'd better condense it too, or I may send you off to sleepy town.

I'd like to tell you that my bootstrap technique; getting my head out of my butt and my life back together, getting squared away, was a success. It was not. That didn't stop me from trying nor did it prevent my feeling more and more guilty every time I failed. And believe me, every time; I failed. I kept zigzagging between thinking I had either totally lost my salvation, taken my hand from the plow and returned to my own vomit, -or- thinking this was all part of some bizarre lesson plan God had developed to get me to grow up and quit being such a baby. I kept hoping and waiting for the light at the end of the tunnel. None came.

I'd like to tell you that mentors, pastors, spiritual advisors and theologians were able to offer me some succinct advice and direction regarding what I was going through, and when it would end. They did not.

I'd like to tell you that I remained faithful and obedient like Joseph in the land of Egypt, always choosing the right despite being in uncertain surroundings. I did not, I only got worse. I drank almost daily. It was the only way to still the shrieking voices in my head that constantly chanted reminders to me of hurts, injustices, failures and guilt – a life time of disappointment with myself and with others. Eventually I made it back down into the gutter of illicit drugs and even dabbling in pornography. There was no bottom it seemed. The more I hurt, the harder I chased after anything that might offer solace or even diversion. Subconsciously, or maybe not, I imagined I was somehow getting even with God, in essence saying, if you won't rescue me, I will find relief for myself. Honestly in retrospect, it was closer to being relieved upon, if you get my meaning.

I'd like to say that the knowledge I gained through college studies and earning two degrees helped me to see my error and find an answer or a way out. In truth the world of religion left me high and dry. The truths they know still mostly amounted to denominational positions, trite clichés and platitudes. Nothing was meaningful; none of it seemed to recognize my situation or circumstances, where I was, how I got there or a map to get out. No one could relate to my situation in any productive way, or in any way at all other than, to acknowledge that it was shameful and sinful.

I continued my downhill race of self-loathing, now almost possessed of the thought that if there was a rock bottom, reaching it would, at least that would put an end to my descent. My moods were erratic, one moment I'd be fine, and then without warning, I'd veer off into a rage over some minor issue. About that time, the breaks would squeal and I'd head off into tears and regret. I was gradually losing my ability to exhibit any degree of control over my emotions. My wife and dear daughters endured more from me over the course of those years, than any one should ever have to in the presence of someone called father. Then I saw the damage I inflicted on them begin to affect their lives, attitudes and behaviors. That didn't instigate change; it just compounded the guilt and hopelessness inside of me. Hurting people do hurting things, and here I was hurting the ones I love. Down, down, down in a burnin' ring of stupid!

I'd like to tell you how friends and family came to my rescue and loved me and supported me, but the truth is that more and more I sensed that the people I most cared about were gradually becoming inclined to avoid contact with me. I don't know if that was real, or just my screwed up perception, but it seemed very real to me. In time, many of our friends moved away to lead, what seemed, meaningful purpose filled lives. They seemed to enjoy financial and emotional comfort and stability; they had good jobs, nice cars, new clothes, the latest gadgets, vacations, decent homes, savings accounts, health insurance and retirement funds. I had none of that and by extension, neither did my family. Other friends who remained nearby, just never had time for me or us anymore. It may have all been coincidental and unintentional; One by one it seemed, we were being cut out of the lives of the few friends we had retained. One by one, they were going on and we were being left behind.

The toughest moments personally, were times, maybe just seconds when I would bump into some reminder or memory of the life and relationship I used to have with God when He still lived here. I'd like to tell you how I found a small, but amazing congregation of believers, who believed in a pure and Biblical Gospel. I'd like to tell you how I found a group of people who, didn't traffic in the manipulative games. People who modeled what Christian love and community really mean. I'd like to tell you how I found a Christian family that restored my faith in what the CHURCH is all about, and that because of their hearts full of love and grace, I was able to reconnect with God and be healed. I'd like to say that, but that wouldn't be honest. The truth is, they found me.

TWENTY

It was a cold December night, maybe a week before Christmas. We were on a family Christmas shopping excursion and I took up my position on the bench nearest the door at Wal-Mart and began to hope that I would not see anyone I knew. I also hoped that if I did, a nod would suffice, conversation would not be necessary. That whole scenario just seems preposterous. I mean if you want to avoid human interaction – Wal-Mart the week before Christmas in a small mid-western town is not the place you go, but I did for the sake of my family.

My focus was in the distance and I didn't even see him walk right up to me. My friend, the Doctor. Not unlike myself, he is a one of a kind guy; usually he was brief at least, so I wasn't too concerned. Then he started asking me about worship leaders. The church plant he was involved in was in desperate need, their regular guy was moving away, and they had students filling in, but they were looking for something more stable.

Stable?

Me?

I didn't take the hint. Instead I told him I was pretty heavily involved in my current church, so I wasn't available, but I'd keep him in mind if I thought of anyone who might fit their needs. We exchanged goodbyes. End of story? Not quite. The following Sunday, he showed up in my Sunday school class. Now mind you, the Dr. doesn't live in this town and when he is here (on-call at the hospital), he doesn't go to *this* church. I am being stalked. He asked if he could take me and my family to lunch. Now, that's not fair, of course he knows I won't turn down free food, and of course I know I am being courted or recruited or something of the like. Yep, lunch is another attempt to get me to consider becoming the worship leader at this church plant. I decided to say the most ridiculous thing I could think of, something that would throw him off the scent.

"What would it take?" he asks,

I reply,

"The only way I could do it, is if you changed your worship schedule to work around my current schedule." That should do it.

Nope.

"I'll talk to the pastor," he says.

Two weeks later, I am leading music in their church (an old house) on a new schedule built around me. Now my life basically consists of; school on week days, then, leading music at their church on Saturday night, then a 45 minute return trip home. On Sunday morning, we then served in the band at our home church. As soon as the musical portion of that service concluded, we returned the 45 minutes to church number two and led music there. That continued for the next 6 months.

Eventually we gave up church number one. That's pretty much it, there I was a guy who had been in ministry for several years, was in seminary, serving as paid staff at a church, leading music, leading youth and occasionally even speaking from the pulpit. It's the testimony of a debauched infidel, the testimony of what I was doing when I wasn't at church. It's where this whole story started.

TWENTY-ONE

We've talked about a mountain of things we humans use to avoid and resist the Love of God; the love He wants to flood and heal our hearts with. Those things are infinite in number, form and possible combinations, though I have done my best to share a general idea of how they operate and to let you know the specifics of my own. Those resistors are only half of the story though.

Imagine if we went into my back yard to water the lawn and I asked you to turn on the water while I hold the business end of the hose. You turn the knob and as soon as the water begins to flow, I put a kink in the hose, and the water stops – or maybe it just dribbles a bit.

The fears and insecurities of our “self” cause us to treat most things in life this way, and especially love. The root cause for every relationship issue from jealousy, smothering and obsession, to mental and physical abuse and even stalking are found in the self-centered fear and insecurity that causes one person to try to maintain control over another. We fear rejection and abandonment, we fear being and feeling alone not to mention the hurt that accompanies loneliness; we fear being unloved. We grasp at love and try to hold and hoard it for ourselves.

When faced with God's love we are no different, but He is.

A kinked hose has a limited capacity; it can only hold a very finite amount of water. When God tries to fill us and heal us with His love and our “hose” is kinked, we can only receive a limited amount of His love, and so, the potential for the good it can do, and the change it can make in us, is very limited. For many folks who have a spiritual life consisting mainly of, going to church on Sunday, and then going home, this experience - tasting just a tiny amount of the potential God has for them, is common. They've got just enough of God and His love to meet their own need, or at least that's what the many years of religious experience have convinced them of.

If we release the hose and straighten the kink a bit, we start to see a tiny dribble water come through the opposite end. As we expend some of the love God is trying to send through us, it makes room for more of His love to come in. This is the experience of one who begins to become involved in the Christian Community; to serve, to engage, to put roots down and establish relationships with others in a congregation. As we learn to extend ourselves a little, it empties a space God can refill with fresh love.

If we release the hose completely, the exchange becomes constant. We pour out God's love to everyone we contact, whoever they are and God continually replenishes the supply, refilling us as we pour out. It's even possible for the exchange to happen with such force that it begins to propel us. Not unlike a fire hose, when it's released by the fireman's restraining hands. The hose will arch and flex through the sky, seemingly come to life under the pressure of the streams emitting from it.

Limiters are the mechanisms we learn, grow and manifest, which allow us to "kink our hoses." Kinking the hose allows us to set limits on to whom and what extent we will share God's love. We may gain limiters through the experience of life, education and even our denominational and theological beliefs. We begin to limit who we are willing to share God's love with, even though it cost us nothing, can never be taken away, is unlimited in supply and doesn't actually belong to us in the first place.

The Bible indicates that God's love, demonstrated in the crucifixion of Christ, was given without any good we could do to earn or deserve it. It came to us while we were yet sinners, and nothing can separate us from it, God's love is UNCONDITIONAL yet, we endeavor with great persistence, energy and sincerity to exclude others from what we have received so freely and easily.

Life teaches us not to trust people, they are certain to disappoint us, fail us and let us down. Some of the meaner ones will even hurt us intentionally. So we excuse ourselves in the name of common sense or wisdom, from putting ourselves in situations of vulnerability where we might share God's love with acquaintances and strangers alike.

We learn in school to believe we are cousins to monkeys and by virtue, really just animals ourselves. That excuses any need to be empathetic or selfless, because it's just a dog eat dog world and I'm gonna get me, mine. We are victims of our own biology, the instinct for self-preservation, the imperative to mate and the survival of the fittest. We excuse ourselves from extending love when it is inconvenient to our own selfish animalistic wants, wills and agendas.

Well-meaning, church-going Christians are many times so married to their denominational and doctrinal positions that they mistake what it means to love entirely when faced with a heathen, a heretic, a homosexual or a human-being in any other state of disrepair. Some seem to feel that, insisting on people coming to "our" church and getting hitched up to the same religious cart we pull, should be prerequisite to sharing God's love.

Theologians, academics and religious scholars tend to esteem the rational and cognitive while dismissing the emotional and experiential. Theologians do not want to recognize that those aspects of

human life and being are God created and therefore also valid. So love, to the theologian, becomes almost purely cerebral in expression. We love verbally without ever feeling inclined to extend God's love through any means but mental ascent. Theology, many times attempts to substitute walking and living as Christ, for thinking and talking about Christ. But, is a mental ascent to God's love, more valid and valuable than living as an expression of God's love?

Yep, I've got my broad brush out again, but you get the idea. Much like resistors, limiters come in many flavors, and we all have them. It may come as racism, classism, sexism, mistrust of other individuals in general, discounting other denominations as a whole or just not wanting to interact with other human beings across the board. Doesn't matter what your flavor is or how you rationalize your excuse, it still boils down to one thing; refusing to extend God's Love to others – the same love Christ died to extend to us.

The truth is that God is sending people across your path, all day every day, and not just yours, mine too and every believer. The test is, can we put our limiters aside and extend God's perfect agape love to them? Some just need a kind word or someone to talk to; others may require financial assistance or someone to do actual physical labor. They represent God's call on our lives; they are opportunities to show that we are His Body in the flesh. I'm too busy, I've got to be somewhere and I don't know what they'll use it for, are all limiters that allow us to skip out on someone who is probably in need of a little love and encouragement just outside of our comfort and convenience zone.

We like to imagine our good activities, our prayer and Bible reading, our time at "church" listening to the preacher or standing to sing covered in goose bumps and tears demonstrate our love for the Lord. They very well may to some extent, but the standard he set is a little bit different:

Matthew 25:40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Jesus wants us to love him, by loving others. That's how we get the kink out of our hose. Anytime an item on our agenda, or an appointment in our day planner outranks meeting a human need, we may be missing the point; not to mention throwing away an opportunity to love the Lord by serving and sharing His love with the least of these.

The funny thing is, that all this talk about; how much Jesus loves us no matter who we are or where we are and in spite of anything we can do to deserve it, how God's love is UNLIMITED and UNCON-

DITIONAL, and how His aim is to love us and heal us, actually constitutes “fightin’ words” to some believers. They are uncomfortable with the easy yoke; they want to tell you about how God’s love is sometimes difficult, or disciplinary. I have no argument with God’s discipline; the Bible is clear that discipline is a characteristic of God’s love, and without it, we are illegitimate children (Heb. 12). The Bible, and God’s character should also indicate to us, that the purpose of His discipline is corrective and not punitive. Sadly, the folks who embrace this rather rigorous view of God and His love tend to embrace that perspective because of the unhealed hurts they walk around with. They want others to have difficulty because they have, or they like to see others in difficulty because it validates what they have endured. Either way, what it’s really about, is their desire to set the criteria for who is and who is not eligible to receive God’s love – and by extension, mitigate their responsibility to be vessels of that love to those they deem ineligible. More limits.

In the end, discipline should rely more on Him than us, the directives He gave us were “GO” and “LOVE.”

When God’s love seems difficult to us, it is far more frequently indicative of the attitude of our hearts, the stiffness of our necks and the hardness of our heads, than it is indicative of any hardness on the part of God. Pain and difficulty once again, usually indicate a reluctance to leave the old life and self behind, and cling to the cross.

New Math, Lesson Two (one more time):

The path of least resistance is

When we least resist.

TWENTY-TWO

OK, my criticism of theology and theologians may seem a bit broad, or a smidgen harsh. I don't hate theologians or theology, in fact, to be honest, what I am proposing in this book is a sort of new-ish theology, or if not totally new, then at least an offering that might assist others on a similar journey. As I said before, my search for answers from the theological crowd (including pastors, teachers, and professors) was pretty unfruitful. At the same time, when I began to share my existential funk with my friends, I found many of them were in similar predicaments – though the variables in each case were as individual my friends, there was a common thread or theme, and no answers. How could this be? I don't think theologians are the spawn of Satan or anything. In fact I have a lot of respect for many theologians and their work. In terms of foundational doctrine they have certainly enriched our understanding, and helped to buttress our faith and apologetics. So cheers!

I do however have a few issues with the world of theology at large.

The theological world suffers from the affliction of self-importance, and theologians, scholars and academics tend to come off as elitist, by and large. Theologians and Theological scholars seem to regard themselves as the “brain” in the Body of Christ, and, while they *may* not regard their expression of rational, intellectual faith, as the *only* valid one, they clearly view it as the *best* one.

Consider these quotes:

“Theology is simply that part of religion that requires brains,” - G.K. Chesterton

**“Consequently, if you do not listen to Theology, that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones — bad, muddled, out-of-date ideas.”
– CS Lewis**

Theological language and terminology appear to be designed to befuddle and exclude non-academic outsiders from high-minded theological discussions, ensuring their lofty perch goes undisturbed. I have been a worship leader, singer, and musician for years and I have known many of the same. I also understand that many individuals in those “sets” suffer at times, from a similar notion. A sense that the function we/they perform in the Body of Christ is a sort of, “end-all, be-all,” but it's not; a bit of an ivory tower mentality can form.

More troubling is how our theology fails us, not when it increases our understanding, but when it attempts to dumb us down. We recognize that we have trouble conforming to the image of Christ, so we build theologies that excuse our weakness – rather than learning to rely on His strength. We don't

see supernatural events (and are reluctant to admit it if we do), so we build theologies that claim the supernatural no longer occurs, or in some cases, never did. We don't feel comfortable or "led" to share the Gospel personally, so we theologically excuse ourselves by rationalizing that our giving to, or praying for evangelistic and missions work, fulfills our responsibility - rather than being an active participant in the work of the Great Commission. There is a theology out there to support almost any view, and get you out of anything you don't want to mess with. On the other hand, theology is also a great means by which to find loopholes to excuse behaviors which might best be avoided.

This leads to my main long term concern with theology; the need scholars, academics and theologians have to synthesize, present and indoctrinate others with what are, essentially, theories. Theories which many times regard questionable things, for which scripture offers incomplete or seemingly conflicting data.

Rather than accept the distinct possibility, that our infinite God knows, plans and understands things that our finite human brains simply cannot deal with or contain; rather than concede that issues which seem uncertain, unsure or paradoxical might have been left that way to prevent us from injuring our fragile human consciousness with things which might just be out of our league, they trifle. Theologians offer theories, concepts and other guess work, (which may be well thought out and supported), in the guise of something akin to "fact." They may be highly intelligent and well intentioned, but an opinion is not a truth. Most theologians began with the best intentions, many provided us with unique, valid and valuable insight and God bless them for it. The bad part is that somewhere along the line, the theories, the doctrines and the like, became mistaken as TRUTH, and in some cases the only TRUTH. So now, that field of endeavor which had, as its goal, strengthening Christian unity by studying and arriving at a unified understanding of who the almighty is in relationship to human beings, has actually managed to do something quite the opposite.

Consider this:

We serve an infinite God, yet, we are finite beings; in our flesh, living in a finite world. We have finite minds and communicate with finite language. Still, many times we fail to recognize that infinite God simply cannot be contained or defined with our finite comprehension, language or definitions. God is plenty big – it's our definitions that aren't big enough. It's part of the pride and arrogance that haunts us in these earthly tents. How many times have you heard a preacher chase some word or concept back to a Greek or Hebrew root word to try and convey the full meaning of a Biblical passage. Even the language of the Bible is ultimately finite – the concepts are infinite – we just don't have the means to fully comprehend or convey them. That doesn't mean that the Bible is in error or not inspired, it simply means that it exists in its written form, in finite human language

Where does that lead us?

When you really think about it, with the exception of what we get directly from the Bible and the Holy Spirit, almost everything we know, believe or think we understand about God, comes from other human beings. We as Christians live in a world of constructs and concepts designed by theologians and academics, who trained the pastors and teachers, who pass them along in things called doctrines, to the people called the church. They have built every box we have ever tried to force God into or view God through and the whole thing, from stem to stern, is covered in human finger prints. No matter how we try to convince one another of the validity or possibility, God cannot, does not, and should not fit into tiny man-made definitions, those definitions are simply too small.

New Math – Lesson Three:

Infinite beings cannot fit inside...

Finite containers (human words, minds, concepts, ideas etc.)

God wants to heal our hearts with His Cosmic Love, and in that atmosphere of first hand contact, He wants the opportunity to set His own definitions – the man-made ones we know are too small. In order for that to happen, we have to be able to set aside our denominational and theological presuppositions, just for a minute, and allow Him to speak directly to our hearts.

Romans 7:24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

For my pal Andrew Murray, the answer to this was an easy one;

Philippians 2:13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Just like we get caught in spirals of addiction and symptoms that can keep us from ever dealing with the root cause of our resistance to God's perfect Love, Limiters have cyclones of inward spiraling, convoluted and circular thinking, which essentially accomplish the same purpose – that is; camouflage the real issues. It's very difficult and maybe impossible to get to the point where one can deal with the central causal issue, when one is running to and fro, physically or mentally, trying to keep all the plates spinning. You've seen a person who spins plates atop long slender sticks, right? That was often the way I characterized my spiritual journey.

One may refuse the invitation of Christ; that knock on the door of our heart. To not choose Christ, is to choose Satan and the World, and then life is spent spinning the plates they throw at you; finances, career, relationships and the lot remain in flux while the slings and arrows of life fly. No foundation; no peace.

One may accept the invitation of Christ, laced with additive components representative of a denominational position which may be well intended, but which may also have the effect of making our spiritual journey a mere religious experience, primarily focused on fulfilling the man-made obligations and requirements with which we have been indoctrinated. We gain religion but not relationship.

Others may still feel called to a deeper walk and find themselves stumbling over and arguing with, the various views derived from the aforementioned theological intelligentsia. In attempting to satisfy that inner hunger we may subjugating our own ability to think, hear and know God; to that of seemingly more qualified scholars. We gain knowledge but no assurance.

In each of these, whether we choose to do our thing, the religious thing or someone else's thing, we will eventually wear down, burn out and most likely give up. We spin in the centrifugal power of our own strength jousting with windmills and wrestling with boogey-men. Then we find this:

Philippians 1:6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Again, the whole thing is dependent upon God, but what we learn here is abhorrent to our humanity, that the work is ongoing in God's time, even if that takes until Christ returns. We, as human people, hate the process. We want the results, but we have no patience for the process. That inner motivation of our species has spawned the whole of technological advance in the last and the beginning of this century – how do we eliminate the wait? There is no app for God, or what He wants to accomplish in us. Our frustrations and defeats are most often the result of our failed attempts to find a way around the process.

That's what makes us as Christians so good at following religious protocols, rites, and rituals; and so awful at maintaining a relationship with our creator. That's what makes us so good at "*going*" to church, and so lacking in "*being*" the Church. We have a human understanding that knows systematic mechanics are far more efficient and ultimately less demanding than organic community.

I sometimes think of how we resemble God's chosen people, wandering in the wilderness, eleven miles to go, and forty years to get there. How frustrating! But, it is precisely that forty mile route that makes us who God wants us to be. Whether we like it or not, the destiny God has for us, this side of Heaven, has little to do with the temporal/geographic locations, destinations and goals we imagine, and much more to do with the internal and eternal place He is trying to bring us to, which is found in the geography of the heart.

However we as humans don't do well with non-absolutes, unknowns, variables or sliding scales – we like things tidily quantified and qualified.

One of the great time honored theological hot button issues, has always been the ongoing battle of Calvinism versus Arminianism; or, sovereignty versus free-will; or eternal security versus not-necessarily. It can be stated in dozens of ways, and really has to be, because there are so many facets to each view, and so many versions and variations of what people mean when they talk about it. It's gotten to the point where the guys each view is named for, would be unlikely to support the view which is named for them. One side characterizes and defines terms for the other side, putting them in the worst light, often misrepresenting their view entirely; and then, the other side returns the favor. It's an ongoing battle and for what?

One of my best friends was a pretty hardcore Calvinist and I was from the other side, though until we first discussed it, I didn't even realize the other side had a name. I was an Arminian it turns out. He didn't agree with my views, most of which he misunderstood. I certainly did not agree with his or Calvin's. We argued. In fact, for several years, every time we got together, it would eventually come down to a Calvin versus Arminius Texas cage match. Over the years, we became slightly wiser and much older and we just didn't bring it up, but then one day we did. What we realized, is what the theological world is gradually coming to; much of what each of us believed, was not that much different. Scripture says a lot of things which are used as proof texts for the issue and neither side has a five-fingered death-blow, capable of annihilating or even temporarily incapacitating the opponent. The Dogma with which this battle has raged is completely unfounded, because there is just not enough information to say with any degree of certainty, that either side is the "right" side. What we both believe now, is that both sides have valid beliefs and that the real absolute truth, lies somewhere in the middle – somewhere we can't understand it fully.

This is a problem, not just for theologians, but for humans in general. It is untidy, uncertain and outside of our ability to effect. Grrrr! So for years, believers have gone after each other with arguments and disdain, carrying someone else's battle flag into the fray. I ask again, for what?

What if the answer to the Calvinism versus Arminianism battle is both?

Matthew 11:12 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.

That kind of makes it look like the answer is both. Yet another sliding scale. The answer lies somewhere along the line in-between God's sovereignty and man's free-will, but I'll be honest and tell you, I do not know where that spot or span is. It's a sliding scale, an uncertain thing and we hate that, because that robs us of our Christian spiritual elitism, we lose that thing which, in our minds, makes us a little closer to God, than everyone else. That's the unstated purpose of many denominations, to add a doctrinal wrinkle or practice (most often without any stable scriptural basis) that establishes its adherents as the "real" Christians. You have to baptize like we do, sing like we do, manifest spiritual gifts like we do, pray like we do, dress like we do or just generally look, think, act and feel like we do. If you don't then you can be perceived as anything from saved, but in the cheap seats to eternally damned. Ever meet a five-pointer who wasn't one of the chosen? I rest my case.

TWENTY-FOUR

O wretched man that I am, the chief of sinners; probably not but, in my younger years, I was certainly trying to get an honorable mention or a “Sinner of the Month” plaque in Hell. I thought that entire episode of life lay well behind me. I had after all, been transformed and regenerated. Everyone who had known me during that time seemed to recognize that my life and personality had clearly undergone a radical change. I couldn’t have been faking it all those years...or could I?

Understanding sin is a difficult undertaking to be sure. The Bible says so much about it. The Old Testament idea of sin and the New Testament idea of sin seem to agree sometimes, and be almost unrelated at others, I mean food laws and ceremonial uncleanness, what are we to do with that stuff? The Gospels and the Epistles have moments where they seem to have different conceptions of what amounts to sin. Jesus seems feel we can fulfill what is required with love while Paul at times seems to have a never ending string of guidelines if not rules by which we should live. Just within the Book of 1st John we are assured that we all sin, but that in Christ we should not sin. It’s tough to get a clear view of how to digest it all. Sounds like a perfect place for me to stick my nose in. I’m not suggesting that I have this sin issue all figured out, this is just how I have learned to understand what sin is and how to deal with it.

So we’re all sinners, we have all sinned and even if you manage to not “commit” a sin, we as humans have inherited a sin nature, which pretty much guarantees that you will. So hopefully we can all concede to that much. I have a lot of friends from lots of different Christian backgrounds, and I am always interested in the different conceptions they have as to what constitutes sin. What’s maybe even more interesting is how their view of the Old Testament informs their concept of sin. I have friends who view the Old Testament as totally unnecessary to our Christian life and understanding, other’s view the Old Testament as a strictly historic resource, people with those views generally have pretty liberal views in regard to sin. What’s more interesting and valid to me, are the people I know who live under regulations they believe are brought forward into the New Covenant. I have friends who observe certain codes of diet, dress and worship, because they believe those practices to be intended for us by, and pleasing to God. I have no issues with a anyone living out those convictions, I mention them only as information and not as any type of judgment on those individuals. Here’s the thing for me, in my journey the greatest source of tension or unrest many times came from not knowing or understanding where to draw the line as to what in the Old Testament was intended to be informative, and what was intended to be brought forward as part of my Christian life and understanding; what was supposed to be “practiced.”

When I went to College and later Seminary, that line, well, what there was of it, became so fuzzy and blurred that it, in itself, began to be a primary driving force in my doubts and confusion about my own spiritual state. Was I really saved, had I ever really been or was I just lying to myself and everyone else?

I have come to believe the Old Testament in greatly a historical resource but in a very unique way, because it is part of the Holy Spirit inspired living Word of God, it is not merely a dead history, it is highly relatable and full of wisdom God has given us in order to live in, deal with and understand our complicated world. It presents the foundation of our faith, poetry, narrative and warnings; much of which is still very meaningful today. Great! but, what does it have to do with me and sin?

The Ten Commandments were the first installment and inception of the law. God said to Moses come up here, I am going to give you the rules; Bada-bing! Ten simple rules written in stone. To my mind, that's what those rules still are, they are the basic, seminal form of all the other rules and regulations that God gave men to follow. I guess God had hoped that we would see his handwriting, understand how important these ten things were and then out of awe, reverence, love and respect for Him simply follow the rules. The whole truth is that even though God may have hoped for us to be that supple, He probably knew better, and we "humans" proved him right. We started looking for ways to fudge the rules, trying to get over. So God expanded the rules into the Mosaic Law. Did I say expanded? Ten Commandments turned into 613 Commandments. You think that would be enough, right? Well over the ensuing centuries and millennia, the Hebrew people kept coming up with new ways to get around all those rules and regulations so, the religious folk attempted to compile an vast encyclopedic directory to prescribe a directive for every possible variable. These are known as the Talmud and Mishna. They are traditional teachings which attempt to establish precedent for all those innumerable possibilities.

God just wanted us to "get" Him, and look what we went and did. Remember Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 31:33 "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. 34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

When I hear people discuss the disparity between Old Testament God and New Testament God, I'm a little taken aback. God isn't any different, the difference is in our perspective, and bubba, perspective is everything! God wrote down what he wanted for us and we turned into a monstrosity, we couldn't handle the text, so next He tried an illustration, He put His own Son on the cross, so we could "see" how much He loved us.

You think the Ten Commandments aren't the work of a loving Father? Think again.

1. You shall have no other gods before me.

Why? Because God doesn't want to share us and more importantly, because other gods aren't real and are only going to disappoint us. Who benefits? We do.

2. You shall not make for yourself a carved image.

Why? Because God doesn't want us to fool ourselves into thinking that He exists in a material form, especially one fashioned by our hands. Who benefits? We do

3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

I don't want to get into the minutia here, but let's try and understand that what God is doing is making clear to us the way in which he expects to be prioritized, worshipped and revered by us His people. When you encounter pagan gods, oft times you'll find that they are viewed as mischievous beings, which at times, will use trickery and deceit against the very people who worship them. Our God is upfront, a straight shooter. Who benefits? We do.

4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

Why? God expects us to work, but he made it a requirement that we rest. Mark 2:27 Then he (Jesus) said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Who benefits? We do.

5. Honor your father and your mother.

Why? Ephesians 6:2 "Honor your father and mother" which is the first commandment with a promise 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Who benefits? We do.

6. You shall not murder

7. You shall not commit adultery

8. You shall not steal

9. You shall not bear false witness (lie)

Why? Because they are wrong and in violating them we violate the Golden Rule - Luke 6:31
Do to others as you would have them do to you, and because committing these acts violates and defiles our consciences. Who benefits? We (all humanity) do.

10. You shall not covet

Why? Well if you look at words like covet, envy and jealousy in a dictionary, what you'll find is that they aren't exactly synonymous, but they can be understood as stages in a progressive disease, and coveting is the first stage. In coveting we like or desire something someone else has. Envy is the feeling that that person is undeserving or that we have been unfairly disadvantaged. Finally, jealousy is the stage where we are ready to take action perhaps stealing from that person or attempting to harm them in some way. Covetousness will simply make our lives miserable. When we get into the cycle of always comparing ourselves with others or what they have, the destination will be bitterness, anger and hurt. Who benefits? We do.

So there it is; a list of things most of us have probably always taken as an enormous prohibition against our freedom and good times. Then again, it might be the biggest favor God has done for us besides sending His Son to die in our place.

In my opinion, as much as we may derive great wisdom and poetry, insight and truth from the Old Testament, it's the Ten Commandments that really inform us about what God considers sin. They are immutable, unchangeable, they are not effected by circumstance, situation or context. As far as I can figure, every other sin can be categorized under one of these ten headings.

Idolatry isn't just the construction of images to worship. Idolatry also includes the idea of allowing other activities, things or people replace God in our hearts. That probably speaks to us now more than any carved image or representation of God. Anything we give ourselves to, or derive who we are from, in front or in place of God, is an idol. Ever heard someone say, "Well, the God I believe in..."? That's idolatry too.

Lying is just about one of the most insidious things that we do. We, as human beings, lie so easily, we even lie to ourselves – remember chapter eleven. Inevitably, when I discuss the act of lying with other Christians, someone always wants to suggest a situation or circumstance where lying may be "appropriate." It never is, there is no such thing as a little white lie, I don't care how ugly the dress, obese the person or disgusting the food (all scenarios I have heard). Presenting the truth in love is what we're called to do and an honest response given in love is far more indicative of Christian

character than a lie, no matter how it may save face and feelings. Proverbs 27:6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

Adultery doesn't just apply to sex outside of marriage, do not commit adultery is actually a standard in the form of a charge. The command takes every form of sexual expression, except for sex between a married man and woman, off the table. It covers pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, homosexuality and all the perversions that shouldn't be named. It is a command which simply states that the only time it's OK to express our sexual nature is within the bounds of heterosexual marriage with the person we are married to.

The Big Ten establish what is written in stone and that's critical because everything else is not. That's right, another sliding-scale where nothing is certain, everything is in flux. The upshot is that God has provided His Holy Spirit to live inside of us to act as an onboard warning system. In this way, He has written His law on our hearts. The only time we need more than that is when we have allowed our fellowship with God to falter or when we are trying to find loopholes and shortcuts to excuse the sin we want to commit. So what is the deciding factor in all the cases where we are unsure? We might well answer faith. Based on Hebrews 11:6 we know that faith pleases God and Romans 14:23 tells us that everything not done in faith is sin. Some might take issue with that contextually, that's not my issue so much as what I think is once again an issue of perspective.

TWENTY-FIVE

Faith, not unlike worship, has a broad variety of definitions. Some people refer to their religious experience as their faith, others think faith and belief are the same thing. In truth, faith is really just another word for trust. The only legitimate object of our (Christian) faith or trust, is (or should be) God. Some denominations seem to view faith as a type of spiritual money we can accrue and bank until we have enough saved up to “believe” for something. People become very frustrated when they can’t seem to cash in on that account, I know I was. Repeating Bible verse mantras, sowing seed, believing, claiming and making presumptuous and poorly founded demands upon our benevolent Father; are not faith. It’s not my ability to believe in the Word of God or to believe in my own ability to believe. It’s simply this – trusting God, no matter the circumstance or His response.

You know how many times I have heard:

Mark 11:23 “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.

Probably hundreds, it’s a central proof text for those who view faith as spiritual “mad money.” It’s also major source of frustration for those who attempt to “believe away” the mountains they face in life. That frustration may eventually leave those individuals feeling as though they have somehow failed; that their faith is inadequate or insufficient.

You know how many times I heard:

Mark 11:22 “Have faith in God,” Jesus answered.

ZERO.

That however is how the “mountain” passage starts. We are not commended to believe in Bible verses, to believe in faith, to believe in belief or to believe in our own ability to affect things by force of will. We are told to have faith in God. Trust God. The issue is not the “amount” of faith you have, Jesus makes it clear in the other Gospels, that faith “as a mustard seed” is more than adequate. The issue is putting our faith in the correct object which is God alone. Whether the mountain moves, our trip

gets re-routed around it or He carries us through it, we trust God. Faith invested in anything or anyone other than God really faith at all.

If we understand what Paul is saying when he tells us, that faith pleases God (Heb. 11:6) and that everything not done in faith is sin (Rom. 14:23) in light of what we just said about the nature of faith, we get much closer to understanding the essential nature of sin; that is, what makes sin, "sin." Sin begins when a heart says to God, "I do not trust YOU." Imagine the audacity required to claim, on one hand, that we are believers and followers of God, that we believe we are saved through the sacrifice of Christ and then on the other hand to say to God through our actions and attitudes, "but, I don't trust you."

Understood in that context; engaging in worry, fear, anxiety, self-sufficiency, self-importance and impatience, all constitute sin, because they are all ways in which we say, "God I don't trust you to take care of this." BOO! Scary, huh?

Many times in those dark days prior to the lights coming back on, I had a running conversation with God about something I took issue with. Like most, if not all of my conversations with God during this period, there was no response, but I had to ask. Why God? Why would you, knowing what a pitiful inability I have to judge rightly and how weak my character and ability to stave off my own appetites leave me in charge of all those things? The issue of what sin "really" is seemed insurmountable and even if one could formulate a reasonable construct, living up to it seemed highly unlikely. What then was the point of this exercise in futility?

Then something began to dawn on me, that really goes right along with Paul's take on faith and sin. Sin, (not unlike worship) is not a matter of the particular activity; it's a matter of the heart condition. The Ten Commandments, as we've already said, are always in effect, they never change or take a day off, but all those "sliding-scale" issues, the uncertain things; they are qualified by the intention of one's heart. That may well be exactly what Paul intended when he was talking about doing things in faith in Romans 14.

Consider this:

1 Samuel 16:7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

Jeremiah 17:10 “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.”

Matthew 5:27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

1 John 3:15 Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

The Bible is clear, in God’s eyes, sin is not simply the matter of a physical act, sin is an issue of the heart. Clearly, with the Ten Commandments and issues like adultery and murder, they are always wrong, it just turns that we are guilty far earlier than we may realize. What about doubtful issues? What about, drinking alcohol, smoking, overeating, hoarding or all those dozens and dozens of other resistors which draw us into addictive behavior? Are those things sin, how can we tell? Here’s how: Do you know what makes those things sin; what makes them hurtful to our God and loving Father? When we need to find peace in booze or pills, or we need to build walls of protection by overeating, greed or hoarding, when we require some worldly means of feeling satisfaction, peace and purpose in our hearts and lives; we are telling God, “You are not enough, you cannot satisfy me.”

Wounded aching hearts are bound to lock on to some thing or some way of bringing peace to the storm and emptiness within. There is no Biblical instruction against alcohol, but a hurting heart can quickly learn to seek solace in a bottle, and end up trampling through life in drunkenness. We need to eat to live, but when food becomes our source of comfort, we may find it impossible to resist. When God provides the genuine satisfaction our hearts crave, when His perfect Love fills us and heals our heart, then our heart no longer needs all the substitutes. We may find ourselves simply walking away from bondages we have known for a lifetime. Once we no longer use those things improperly, we may find we don’t need or even want them at all.

It’s not an issue of discipline, will power or inner-strength so much as an issue of total reliance on God and full transparency before God and total surrender to God. He does all the heavy lifting. It’s not an issue of getting rid of our sin in order to get closer to Him, so much as an issue of getting closer to Him, in order to get rid of our sin.

The real issue is maintaining relational proximity with God, that keeps your heart tuned into the still small voice of His Spirit. Then when we are confronted by one of these sliding scale issues, we will

know what response to make and what option to take, because our faith is in God, not in our ability to reason and rationalize.

TWENTY SIX

I've referenced this a couple of times, but I should probably take a moment to explain what I mean when I say, what makes worship, worship, is the same thing that makes sin, sin.

Much as we've done elsewhere in discussing, love, faith and sin, I think we need to consider what we mean when we say worship, because perspective is everything. Some congregations view their church services as worship, others view the musical/artistic portion of their service as worship and yet others think worship is represented by only the slow songs. There are "worship collectives" who claim that art is sacred. I'm not exactly sure what is meant by that, and I am not here to discount any of those views, rather, I'd like to suggest that we recognize that all those things have the potential to be worship. However, none of those things, are necessarily "sacred" or "worship" in and of themselves. Let's look at some terms:

Definition of WORSHIP

- 1, chiefly British : a person of importance —used as a title for various officials (as magistrates and some mayors)
- 2: reverence offered a divine being or supernatural power; also: an act of expressing such reverence
- 3: a form of religious practice with its creed and ritual
- 4: extravagant respect or admiration for or devotion to an object of esteem <worship of the dollar>

Definition of SACRED

- 1, a : dedicated or set apart for the service or worship of a deity <a tree sacred to the gods>b : devoted exclusively to one service or use (as of a person or purpose) <a fund sacred to charity>
- 2, a : worthy of religious veneration : holy b : entitled to reverence and respect
- 3: of or relating to religion : not secular or profane <sacred music>

The Old and New Testaments both have more than one word for worship, but both have a predominant term they favor. In the Hebrew (shachah), and Greek (proskuneo), both basically denote a posture; that of being bowed down, submitted or surrendered. Contextually, in the Greek, the idea is similar to that of a dog licking its master's hand. This posture is not just one of body, but also a posture of heart. A posture which demonstrates God's total authority in our lives, we can then follow that reasoning Paul's statement:

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Everything we do then, which does not fall under the “sin” headings established by the Ten Commandments, has the potential to be sacred, and to be worship, if the posture of our heart is correct. That posture, being one that surrenders self to and recognizes God as: absolute authority, provider, source and King. There is nothing any more sacred about singing a song or painting a picture than there is about digging a ditch or taking a walk. Anything we do that is not sin, has the potential to be worship if the posture of our heart is set on the glory of our God and King in acknowledgement and surrender. Without the correct heart posture, nothing, no matter how spiritual it may seem, can be “sacred” or “worship.”

God is looking for those who worship in spirit and in truth the Bible tells us. We might suggest that to worship in Truth is to worship in correct ways (not “sin” – i.e. you can’t lie or practice idolatry in a God honoring way). Then we could suggest that to worship in spirit is worship with correct posture of heart.

Should I go further with this? In some sense, we view these things that we call worship as an essential part of how we express our admiration and love for God. We bow down in worship. I’ve got no issue with that at all. I’m all for that! What I am not “all for” is the way in which we limit and fail to recognize the potential for all things (which are not sin) to be done to God’s glory, and therefore constitute worship. I am also not “all for” the way we tend to ignore God’s call for us to express love to Him by sharing ourselves with others, His brothers, the least of these.

Matthew 25:40 “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

And here’s the thing, the reason I have included this little diatribe. Just like “full-time” sins all fall into one of the categories listed in the Ten Commandments, Everything we do in our Christian life falls into one of three main categories;

1. Worship – the stuff we do with God
2. Fellowship – the stuff we do with other believers
3. Discipleship – the stuff we do to help us and others become more like Jesus

There are things that cross the lines and fit into more than one category. Something like serving could potentially fit into all three at the same time, but the purpose of any or all of these things is not found in itself. Worshipping is not the point or purpose of worship; when worship becomes its own end, it’s a

dead end. When the only purpose of Christian art is found in experiencing and expressing, it's pointless. The purpose behind everything we do should be:

1. Glorify God and acknowledge His absolute authority and supremacy
2. Conform us to the image of Christ, leaving "self" behind so that we can embrace the cross and live out its message of sacrificial love.

TWENTY-SEVEN

It's kind of amazing to think that so many of the issues we face in life, and for that matter, much of what we may think of as "life," could actually just be rings in the bathtub of existence. We as believers have been washed in the blood, baptized in the water, filled with the Spirit – the water is drained out but we're still lying there, surrounded by lime scale and soap scum, unable to make the final break free from the residue of a life we no longer have to live.

It's also kind of amazing to think that all of these things: the resistors, the limiters, the internal warfare, the addictions, the sin issues and the real understanding of what it means to be a Christian and how we should live this life to which we have been called find their answer, their hope and their cure in the healing love, of God our Father.

What may seem even more amazing and incredible is that almost every concern, problem, dilemma and issue in life finds real resolution in the very same place. It is our loving Father who waits to embrace us, the arms of His Son, flung wide upon the cross to say, "I love you this much." It is in His Spirit urging us, drawing us day after day to seek Him while He may be found.

But, how? How do we throw ourselves into that glorious, radiant space?

I don't know.

I don't have a Bible study, life strategy, 12-step program, battle plan, formula prayer or a list of Bible verses you should write on three by five cards and attach to every surface in your home. I do not have a road map to offer or a GPS to sell. All I can do is to tell you that God is no respecter of persons, and if He did it for me, He will do it for you. If you are hungry for Him and willing to pay the fare and take the ride, He will make it worth your while. I can share my story and hold out hope that there is something beyond what you have known so far.

It was a Wednesday evening, not unlike a hundred before. My wife and I were in the kitchen and I was making supper, because that's what I do. Something came up in conversation and I can't, for the life of me, remember what it was. I am pretty certain it had something to do with some of the people from the church that had "released" me; even though the incident itself was years past, my life still seemed pretty much on hold. My relationship with God was dry and barren; it didn't seem to be a place where either He or I wanted to hang out. Sometimes news of our "former" Christian friends and

their lives passed almost undetected, other times it had a nasty sting as I pondered things like “why them” and “why not me.” On this occasion the latter seemed to be in effect and I felt that tiny little ember of bitterness trying its best to ignite something, but I kept choking it down.

It kept flashing back up, so I thought let’s be sensible, let’s not melt down. I thought maybe I’ll vent for a few minutes to my wife and express my feelings thereby diffusing it.

Wrong.

I don’t remember much about the wind up, the main thing I remember is that it seemed I was suddenly on the other side of the kitchen, and she was sitting in the chair I had been in. My shirt was off and I was ranting at the top of my lungs, and intermittently smashing the bathroom door with my fist and forearm, when the emotions got too big for words. Words, was I saying something, yep I was, but I am not sure I could give you any coherent sense of what it was, but here’s the gist:

I was angry, hurt and frustrated that people who claimed to be our friends had willingly gone along with and continued to support and be a part of a ministry that had treated myself and my family so unjustly, so injuriously and in such an unscriptural way – all the while maintaining the spiritual “high ground” by manipulating the details of what had actually happened. I was overwrought by the memories of how we had been lied to and lied about, and how no one seemed to care. I was raging that these people lived lives that seemed so blessed and prosperous while our finances and prospects had been wrecked. I wanted to go to their houses, where inspirational Bible passages hung in every room, and grab them by their collars and ask, “How could you do this to me?” “How could you do this to my family?” “How can you sleep at night, after being a party to my unjustifiable assassination?”

“How can you call yourself a Christian?”

I think that about covers it.

There is a feeling I know I remember it from my earliest childhood. It feels like a ball in my throat and a knot in my stomach. It burns down there and forces its way out through my tear ducts. It’s a feeling I get when I sense myself or those I care about, are being treated unjustly, and most of all when I feel I am not being heard. It is frustration. It says nobody wants to hear your whining and complaining, nobody cares about your pain or problems. You have no right to speak or to expect to be heard. Sit down, shut up!

Only that Wednesday night the “ball” in my throat popped loose, when my mouth opened to speak the air hit those embers glowing hot in my belly and exploded into flames.

What I realized in that moment, from somewhere just outside of myself, just inches away; I was not yelling at my wife, I wasn't even yelling at the people I was yelling about. I was yelling at God.

1 Samuel 7:8, Psalm 3:4, 34:17, 57:2, 88:1, Matt 14:30, 15:22, Luke 18:7, James 5:4

What do all those have in common; each one of those verses indicates that crying out to the Lord is a means of getting heard. Much like our very cerebral concept of love, we usually take “crying out” to God as a figurative statement. If you have children or ever have, you know there is a big difference between your child asking you for something, and your child screaming. You may even begin, after some time, to be able to distinguish between the slowly developing whine of discomfort, and the shrill, blood-curdling cry that indicates injury or genuine danger. Without a word, just the tone informs you of the severity of the need, and dictates your response time. When you hear crying slowly approaching you may wait reticently until the problem, and the story arrive, to be dealt with. A cry that stems from a severe injury carries the power to send you down the hall, before you really even know what's hit you.

God is our Father, and I am not the first by any means to suggest that we should cry out to Him. I have heard sermons on this topic, seen books in the stores and articles on the internet, but I had never really tried it until that Wednesday. It wasn't a conscious choice or thought, like, “OK, I'll give this a shot.” It was a genuine cry from the middle of my human heart which could not bear any more hurt, or try any longer to figure out how all this could have happened, or how people justified what they did. I just wanted out. Something deep inside me believed there was only one last ditch effort for rescue, cry for help.

And boy did I.

Eventually, I caught my breath and began to regain composure. I went immediately to the living room where my daughters sat. I apologized and reassured them that I wasn't fighting with mommy, I was yelling at God, though I don't know how reassuring that was for them.

The next day, I felt miserable. I felt like I had the flu and I was depressed and sad. I actually threw up a couple of times. I couldn't eat or think about food, and I could barely stop crying. At some point I

found my way to my computer and sent a request for prayer to my pastor, this was something I never did, but I just felt like I needed help. In all the times I have suffered from or dealt with depression this was easily the worst day ever.

Friday I was starting to feel better. The girls were at school and my wife had the day off work and we spent the day talking and crying, as I tried to explain what was going on inside of me, even though I didn't really get it. I was trying to talk it out, get a grip and break out of the funk I was in. I didn't know how I would be able to make it through weekend church services.

Saturday was better still. I had a really wonderful conversation with my daughters about faith; in fact a lot of that conversation is in chapter twenty-five. Then I went upstairs to take a shower, and as I was walking out of the bathroom, the strangest thing happened.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Over the last month or two before that particular Saturday afternoon, a few odd things happened. Things that aren't necessarily relevant in their particulars, but they are important in a broad brush stroke sense.

The first happened the same weekend as the giant tornado went through Joplin, Missouri. It didn't have anything to do with that tornado as far as I can tell, it just happened to coincide with it. One morning at church, I was overwhelmed by tears, as I sat getting ready to begin our early worship service. I don't know what the cause was, but it took all I had to finish the song service and get out of the building. I wept in the privacy of our van and asked God, with little hope of a reply, "What is this about."

Trying to make sense of it, I grabbed a Bible and randomly opened it to Isaiah chapter 1 and read about the first 20 verses. Well, in my already emotional state, it only seemed to compound my condition. It began to appear to have a meaning to me that I shared with the pastor. He disagreed with me, but in a very loving and gentle way. So I felt a trick had been played on me, thanks God! I mean I really believed for an instant He was communicating to me, and then when I stuck my neck out, He left me hanging.

Not long after, the pastor, his wife and I, went out of town to do a funeral. On the trip they told me about an experience their son had on a recent camping trip. He had gone into the woods to get away with God, and seek God in regard to some personal situations he was facing. Walking down a trail the last day, he saw a bear. When I heard this, it was like something switched on inside me. I wanted him to chase down that bear. Once again my pastor lovingly and patiently endured my zeal about that bear.

Later that same day, at lunch, my pastor shared a dream with me at his wife's behest. Now understand, that this guy NEVER remembers his dreams, but he had one recently which he remembered vividly. When he shared it with me, it was instantly plain to me what the meaning was, and I was only too glad and excited to share my thoughts. My pastor, who is far less charismatic than myself (not at all, to be clear), was clearly uncomfortable and unsure about my take; however he was no less gracious than he had been previously.

So what does any of that mean?

I'm way ahead of you, in fact, on that particular Saturday, freshly showered and getting dressed in the bathroom, I started just such a conversation in my head with God, again not expecting an answer. Why would you put me through this series of guffaws with this poor guy (my pastor) who has zero comfort with all these types of things, call them charismatic gifts or whatever you will. You gave me what I thought was a word, that went over like a fart in church. You showed me a sign which was met with almost equal enthusiasm, and then to cap it all off the dream interpretation which seemed so right to me, but failed to make the slightest impression with him beyond extreme discomfort. Are you trying to get me canned, God?

Then the reply came...

"The first incident was for **you** to know that **you** can hear me, sharing it was your mistake. The second incident was to let his wife know that you can hear me, that's why she asked him to tell you about his dream. The third incident was to let him know that you can hear me, he may not be able to receive it immediately, but he listened and even though he was uncomfortable, he still loves you and he won't hurt you. In time he'll be able to tell you some things too."

No, it was not an audible voice, and no, I didn't write it down, this is not a direct quote but it is an accurate and literal account of what God revealed to me in response to my question. Then it hit me:

HOLY CRAP, GOD JUST SPOKE TO ME!

The reply CAME!

After five years of radio silence, those three incidents were God getting me tuned back in to Him. I started to cry, then I walked out of the bathroom and the show began in earnest.

Step right this way...

TWENTY-NINE

Here's the part where I wish I could offer you a step-by-step plan or some kind of formula or how-to manual. It might make it easier for me to explain and it would certainly be easier for you to follow, especially if it's in your heart to follow more than just the narrative. This part is just a bit hazy and difficult to describe, but I guess things of a spiritual nature shouldn't be too easily grasped by your brain. As I stepped through that bathroom door, and the full gravity of what was going on hit me, it felt as though something quite large and heavy had just landed on top of me. Now, as I've told you, I've been charismatic at least once before, and I have seen prayer lines, laying on of hands and falling down but, in all that time, I never fell down. Even on occasions when the person praying was inclined to, "stack the deck", with a little manipulation or force. That day the force pressing down on me caused me to nearly stumble as I did all I could do to make it to a chair down the hall, rather than splaying face-first in the hallway.

I made it to the chair just as it hit me. A Sensation something like a warm blanket enveloped me, not only warm but bright, glowing, if you can imagine. It was not unlike lying on the shimmering warm sand at a beach. It wasn't the least bit scary or oppressive, it was soft and inviting – I remember cold winter mornings when mom would cycle my clothes in the dryer for a few minutes, before waking me to get dressed, that feeling. Then tears, big sorrowful sobbing tears came in waves, every time I tried to stop they broke harder accompanied by heaving and shaking. That warm bright blanket held me, I felt the warmth begin to penetrate every pore of my body, coursing inward racing toward my heart. I could feel the years of hurt, anguish, injustice, disappointment and guilt melting in that glorious light and heat, running down to my feet and out of my shoes. Hurt was gone, hate was gone and love was taking over.

That experience may have lasted for 30 minutes as God's love simply overwhelmed me. I start to get myself together and get up, and then it would hit me again. If you've been to a water park where they have a giant suspended bucket that fills and dumps on people below at a regular interval – it was almost exactly like that. Eventually I was able to look around and move again, the world glowed like it was in High Definition Technicolor 3-D, and all throughout that day it continued to intensify.

I was doing internal inventories, asking myself what was going on and feeling as though I had pounded a case of Red Bull. In truth I had hardly eaten over the past 3 days, and I hadn't even had a single cup of coffee. I felt electrified!

Then it started to dawn on me, I felt happy, and not just happy; overjoyed, undone, but in the best possible way. I wasn't angry anymore, I didn't feel hostile or cynical inside even when I thought about people who always made me feel that way. When I thought about those who had hurt me the most, I felt empathy and dare I say, compassion for them. Something was definitely different. I found myself feeling, saying and doing things I knew were completely out of character for me. To say it all in a big dumb way, I was in love with the world and everyone in it.

Over the hours, days and weeks that followed, there was no let up, there was a party in my heart and I was so excited to see and meet people to hug them and tell them and invite them in to this amazing experience. I may have been too excited; people began to look at me in a very strange way, a way which paled in comparison to the strange way that had looked at me previously. What's wrong with him; too much coffee? Is he going off the deep end?

Oh yeah!

I was changed, I was healed; I was born again, again!

No experience I had, no one I had ever talked with, no counsel I had received, no book I had read and no class I had ever sat through prepared me for this. Not in all my years of life, ministry, or school, not in any lecture or sermon had anyone ever expressed to me that anything like this was even on the menu of possibility. I had no clue. I had hoped I would not live out my days in misery I had come to know over the past several years. In hopeful moments, I thought maybe restoration was a possibility; maybe someday I could get back to where I was. I never imagined there could be something this far beyond everything I could imagine, but that's God for you.

Ephesians 3:20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

What happened was, that God came through on His promise from back in Ezekiel 36:26, remember?

Ezekiel 36:26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

He got rid of that old beat up heart, so full of pain and deception and gave me a new heart, that could feel and love. It wasn't just a figurative expression, a cognitive ascent or a cerebral experience. It was an enema for the soul that reprioritized everything I thought, understood and believed, in much the same way that only the birth of my children had previously. I began to see everything very clearly for the very first time. I no longer had to worry about sin, struggle with temptation or beat myself up over un-forgiveness, He made my heart RIGHT, and that made everything else right. Having a right heart didn't make me perfect, and I still am not – but what it did do, was make my motivations right, and that lead me toward right actions and away from wrong ones. No struggle, no inner-war, no conflict of interest. It made everything work right and made everything make sense. My days of spinning those plates were over instantly, it took me years to get prepared for the operation, but when the time was right, the change came almost instantly. I am reminded of Habakkuk: "Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay."

THIRTY

So once upon a time there was a boy, probably a pretty normal kid, there's no reason to suspect otherwise. One morning he woke up. We can probably imagine that he had trouble getting to sleep the night before. It's hard to sleep the night before an exciting event; little did he know how exciting the event would be. I can't tell you if he travelled alone or with others, where he was coming from or how long it took him to get there, but I do know where he was going, and that he brought a lunch. There was a rabbi who had become famous for His wisdom and doing "miracles," and that rabbi and the guys who travelled with Him were going to be in the area, that's where the boy was going, to see the rabbi. For his lunch he brought five small barley loaves and two small fish. You've heard one this, right?

Sometimes my mind reels at the thought that I am over forty years old, it just doesn't seem possible. Well, at least not until I try to get up off of the floor after wrestling with kids, or fixing a faucet, then my joints all sing "Happy Birthday" to me. In my mind and heart, I have only aged three or four times in my whole life. When I turned ten, I felt older than I had previously. When I turned sixteen, I stayed that age until I was twenty-seven. I have been that age pretty much ever since, though the past few years had their moments. I am immature in many ways; I have never made a very good adult, in some ways that's been good and in others bad. The good news for me (and others of my immature persuasion), is that Jesus has a very special place in His heart for the young. Remember over in Mark chapter ten, people were trying to bring their children to Jesus, and the disciples sent them away like backstage security at a Motley Crue concert? Jesus rebuked those disciples and then He said:

Mark 10:15 "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Most of my life, I think I've been kind of like most of the people who heard Jesus say that. I've been sitting around saying, "What did He mean by that?" Well, since what happened to me happened, one of the great benefits has been an exceeding clarity in dealing with and understanding issues that have, at times seemed a bit uncertain before. What does it mean to be "like a little child?" Little children are helpless.

We adults are self-reliant, we like to take care of our own issues and problems, no one wants to be a bother, or especially a whiner. We admire the "self-made" man or woman, and still attribute ideas like,

“The Lord helps those who help themselves,” to the Bible, despite the fact that it’s not in there. Children are not too proud to admit when they need help, in fact, there are occasions when they will ask for help they don’t actually need. Ever been in a store or restaurant when some little child yells, “Mom, I gotta go the bathroom!”? Sometimes the statement will contain far more information than that, other times, that child will then emerge from the facilities with their pants around their ankles, yelling, “Daddy, I can’t work the zipper!” No pride, no ego, just the need for help and a willingness to ask, no matter who is listening or what they think. God is our Father, I think he waits to hear that call. I think to some extent my yelling meltdown in the kitchen was really just another concession speech, but louder with more colorful language.

Little children believe.

We adults are road weary and full of experiences that set all kinds of limits on what we can believe, or what we view as possible or realistic. Little children are not interested in that line of reasoning, they are unhindered by the baggage we collect and carry. A little child can believe that a cape can make you fly and a blanket over your head can ward off boogie men. Little children believe Santa can make it around the world in one night delivering presents and they can probably accept that Jesus really walked on water without turning it into some figurative mythology.

Little children are joyful.

Little children love to smile, laugh and have fun. They are always ready to join in playing, singing and dancing. Adults have to be dragged into singing or clapping, even at church where it’s “OK.” Adults need to be serious and to be taken seriously; they can’t just go around laughing and smiling. The thing is adults don’t want to be this way. Adults have created social constructs to make laughter acceptable. A joke is a contextual “safe place” where it’s OK to laugh. Kids feel that it’s ok to smile and laugh anywhere they go, only adults feel the need to pay an eight dollar cover and a two drink minimum to enter a social establishment in order to laugh in an acceptable context.

Little children have an enormous capacity for love.

The love of children is pretty free of restrictions. They make friends easily and rarely take into consideration things like race, sex, age, socio-economic, religious or political background. Little children love generously; they are adaptable and always ready to make room for others to join in. Little children, until they learn to be selfish are generally very generous. Ever sit down by a little kid fumbling Cheerios into their mouth? It won’t be long and they’ll be trying to feed you some too. The generosity of little children leads them to always want to lend a hand and help out, the less qualified they are for

a given task, the greater the likelihood they'll want to help out, they always want to help paint or do the dishes. Sure, no one wants to live in that house or eat off that dish, but their heart is full of love, instead of being full of limits.

In every category, they are pretty much the opposite of most adults. Then I thought of this:

Revelation 2:2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. 4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

That church at Ephesus had a lot going for them; good deeds, hard work, perseverance didn't tolerate evil, but, they had forgotten their first love. In almost every explanation of this passage that I am familiar with, that "first love" phrase is said to be referring to Jesus. So I checked it out and you know what, that's not a noun phrase, it's a verb phrase. So, I got to thinking, what if that doesn't mean they forgot Jesus, what if it means they forgot to love as they first did, when they first got "saved," or like they did when they were little children.

Not unlike when Jesus said:

Luke 11:42 "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

Not unlike what He might say to you or me, or any congregation of frozen chosen languishing in church houses anywhere in this country or the world. Hunkered down in the experience of life, unhealed hurts, the politics of religion, the in-fighting and church splitting. Remaining in the church building and refusing to love, acknowledge or be involved with the individual people who make up the actual "CHURCH"

We can continue to do a great job in all the religious stuff, the tradition, ritual, doctrine and dogma and still fail at the central idea – LOVE.

That little boy, with his loaves and fishes, he got it. That's how the story starts, with Jesus testing the disciples to see if they "got it." They did not.

John 6:5 When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” **6** He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

Like most adults, they were ready to point out why it couldn't be done. That's us; we tried that once and it didn't work –or- I just don't see how we could do that.

John 6:8 Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, **9** “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

I've been asked, in a crowd of five thousand people, why did only one small boy think to bring a lunch? I don't think he was the only person who brought a lunch. I think he was the only person willing to share his lunch. All those adults wouldn't share unless they knew they had plenty for themselves first, and even then they might only share with a few close friends. That little boy was not concerned about having enough for himself, he wasn't even worried that what he had, wasn't enough for that crowd. He believed that if he put what he had into Jesus' hands, Jesus could make it more than sufficient for everyone there.

John 6:12 When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” **13** So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

After witnessing what happened some of the adults begin to say that Jesus is a prophet. Even after a supernatural manifestation, the adults still don't get it. That little boy understood before he ever saw a thing. That's faith, that's open hearted, generous, sacrificial love.

“and a little child will lead them.”

THIRTY-ONE

I was led back to those two gates we've already spoken of, one gate holds the path to the Kingdom of God, the other gate does not. We have a lot of ideas about the Kingdom of God, most of which involve an end-times scenario with Jesus sitting on a big shiny throne. This is one sense in which the Bible speaks of God's Kingdom, however, when Jesus talks about the Kingdom, what it is and how we may enter it, he seems to be talking about something different, something which is very near and available now. What it really boils down to is, that in order to enter the Kingdom, we must acknowledge THE KING. It's not just another mental ascent, it requires giving over dominion of our lives to THE KING of KINGS, bowing before Him in absolute surrender of our lives, hearts, wills, plans and agendas; everything of us, every last drop of us, now made His.

At least two times and maybe more, I have fooled myself into thinking I had entered that narrow gate, and begun my journey toward the Kingdom. The reality was that I had just been sitting in the parking lot, eye-balling the gate. Then I slipped into a daydream about what it would be like, which had seemed so genuine, that I became convinced of its reality. Now I sat wide awake, staring at the gate I had yet to enter, but inside my chest a new heart was beating. In fact it was my old heart that had lied to me because it was too hard and damaged to fit through the gate, and even if it could have gotten that far it would have never lasted the journey. My new heart, however, was ready to go.

We pray the Lord's Prayer and say, "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." And still we think of that Kingdom as a far off ethereal future in an eternal home beyond this little planet, but it isn't. Do we imagine like some of those who actually lived and were contemporaries of Jesus that He will manifest His Kingdom here through voting in some governmental system, or establishing some moral rule of law? Do we actually think that the entropy we see around us and the decline of the human experience on planet earth can be reversed through some positive action on our parts? What we need to consider when we pray "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven," is not any of those things, but instead, asking for God's Kingdom and will to be established in our lives, preeminent to all other things. The Kingdom of God will come, and we shall be caught up to our great reward, but that's the "in Heaven" part. The "on earth" part involves each of us, who call Jesus, "Savior and Lord" to actually get out of the way, and allow Him to be. One by one, like rain drops fall, merging into puddles, streams and seas and finally a Kingdom that can be manifest and flood the earth with God's glory. Will you be a drop in that bucket?

Is that too sappy?

As wonderful as it was when that wonderful blanket of God's love found me and fell on me, as amazing as it was to watch those lights come on, none of that really matters. What really matters is the change. Just like the important part of worship, fellowship and discipleship, is not those things, as wonderful and integral as they are, the thing that counts is the change they make in us. They are moving us to the place where we are hungry and ready for our blanket moment. They are changing our tune, bringing us to the cross; the place where sacrificial love isn't just a story about Jesus, it's also the truth of our lives.

One thing I do not want to do, is turn what happened to me into some kind of formula or model that anyone feels they have to follow. If our hurts, resistors and limiters are any indication of just how varied our human experience can be, I don't expect that the experience of spiritual open-heart surgery is going to necessarily fit into some kind of mold. I cannot offer a road map or a Google map, I can only offer hope that it is real, that it can happen; that Christian life, can be one without internal wars if we can find our way to full, absolute and unconditional surrender. He did it for me, He'll do it for you and in fact, if what I got was a tablespoon full, I hope everyone else gets a gallon.

I came on like a kid just back from church camp, and I prayed every day, "God, don't let this be a phase, don't let it go away!" I also prayed that God would prove my words by the way I live, that I wouldn't just tell people about this with my mouth, but I'd live it out in every moment of every day. The second thing I don't want to do is to give you the impression that I have "arrived." If anything, I have really just started the journey. I am as imperfect as ever, I still fail and mess up. For many years I mouthed similar words and sentiments, about how life is not a destination...blah, blah, blah...but I didn't really mean it; in my heart I really believed I had arrived. I'm *IN* baby, now I'm gonna coast! I think if we could be honest, many of us would admit to that same feeling. I was just telling myself stories in the parking lot, trying to pretend I was on the journey, playing with my inner selfness, struggling with my inner turmoil and exploring the great philosophical questions. Turns out that was all just a goof, the good news is that now, that's over with.

Now when I fail, when I fall, when I sin, or when others hurt me, I can simply ask forgiveness or give it, and let go of the guilt and the hurt. That wounded, jagged and treacherous internal topography is no longer there, so there are no places for that junk to find a foothold or a perch to set up camp, unless I let it.

God has established His love as the preeminent factor in my heart, mind and life. That factor has become the dividing line and purpose that sorts my "wheat" from my "chaff." It tells me what to keep and

what to throw back and it is at once, the purpose and the ability behind everything HE wants me to do. God's love calls the shots.

I like Shane and Shane, a lot! They have a song called, THE ANSWER – that song contains one of the most, I don't know how to say it...uh...inspired (I guess), lyrics, that really sums up everything I want to tell you in one line; it really is the answer!

“I have found the answer is to love YOU and be loved by YOU alone.”

BLAMMO! There it is, The Answer.

When my heart is set on only loving God, then I am no longer motivated or concerned by how people perceive me. I do not feel oppressed or intimidated by them because, I know they are just messed up people like me, that what they really want is His love (whether or not they realize it) and that HE has called me to love HIM, by loving them. I still love people too, but now I am doing it with His perfect unconditional love instead of my very fallible human love.

When my heart is set on receiving love from ONLY HIM, I am no longer motivated to do things to gain the attention, affection or admiration of people. I don't need anything from anyone other than Him. I can readily accept love from people without the need for building walls of protection. I know they're just messed up people like me, and I know THEY WILL HURT and DISAPPOINT me, as I will them. But that just doesn't matter, because He is my source. That truth allows me to easily absorb, forgive and let go of the hurtful things humans do and still continue to hold out God's infinite and unconditional love.

Isn't that what HE did for us? Isn't that what He is still doing for us?

THIRTY-TWO

From time to time I field a question from someone, “So, are you still all in love with everything?”

Yes, I am.

The first several months were wild; they had us running everywhere, reconnecting with people, spreading the love. I say us because once my wife saw how strange and even more different I had become, she recognized that I wasn’t just off on some new tangent; then, she wanted in too. And she got in, and in fact, we both even got re-baptized.

But is it the same now?

Not exactly.

In the beginning, it was overwhelming. It felt (I guess), like being shot out of a cannon. I was spastic and inarticulate, once I got started talking I could continue literally, for hours and did on several occasions. By way of example, my first attempt at writing this book ran nearly 170 pages. I was probably more than a little overwhelming and tiring to some of the people I first tried to share with, but I just couldn’t hold it in. God’s love is too good to keep to yourself, it’s better than life.

After those initial months, I found out on several occasions, that I was still capable of getting off course; still fully capable of mistakes and failures, even getting caught up in worry. I’ve heard ex-smokers say they are now sickened by the smell of smoke, I guess that’s what it was like. I’d start to panic asking, “Is that it, is it over?” Then I’d snap out of it and realize, it wasn’t God who had shifted, it was my focus that shifted. His love is infinite and unconditional; He will never leave me or forsake me. Now, I’d have to say I’ve gotten my sea legs. I have learned to dial it down a notch or two, so I don’t run folks off. God’s love hums in my heart, it is a quiet peace that gets me through daily dilemmas and circumstances, knowing that His love is infinite and unconditional – I can’t escape it. I know that when an opportunity arises to share or to serve all I have to do is take it, and His Love will kick on like a blast furnace. It’s just a matter of unkinking the hose, as I mentioned earlier.

I understand what the Bible and God have to say so much more clearly now and even better, I can let all the unanswered questions remain. After all, the Bible calls us to be “stewards of the mysteries of God,” not “People who sit around and figure out all the mysteries of God.” Do you really want to serve

a God if I can figure out everything about Him? Can you really even call a being divine, supreme, awesome, amazing or omni-anything, if a bunch of simpletons like the human race can figure Him out?

In the end, we have decided to say “NO” to no and yes to every opportunity to see the love of God in our hearts shed abroad and shared with everyone we can share it with. We want to spread God’s perfect love with reckless abandon.

THIRTY-THREE

So what does it all mean, my dumping this stuff on you? Is this some new revelation? I don't think so at all, I think it's the same old revelation that the Bible has always contained, it's just that in our post-modern, news cycle, short attention span, sound-bite and e-everything experience, where the gravitas of time and history have brought us; a place so jam packed with information and so stinking with self-importance that many of us have simply missed it. I know I did. That doesn't mean I didn't sincerely want it and seek it, it's just that everything being everything, I kept getting side tracked by my own inner malfunctions; that hurt and guilt, resistors and limiters we've talked so much about. When those didn't run me off the path, I'd wind up selling out to some second hand version or counterfeit experience. I had never had a full-on, first-hand encounter with the real deal. He was dropping hints and clues – giving me nibbles to wet my appetite and keep my on the hunt. He was drawing me and wooing me, but until the day I walked out of the bathroom, I had no idea what HE had in store for me. Up until then I was just following the herd, and all the while trying to legitimize myself. The real truth, the Gospel Truth, The Truth of God's perfect love is just so disarmingly simple; not easy per se, but not complicated in the least.

For most folks that's enough to scare them off. Nobody wants to believe any solution to anything can be just that easy. I mean people are always asking, "Why isn't there an easier way to xyz..." and most of the time the truth is, because we won't have it any other way. Somehow, accepting a simple solution, for what we perceive as our "oh-so" complex life issues, seems inadequate, or perhaps makes us and our problems seem less significant. Like King Naaman in 2 Kings, the solutions seems preposterously, ridiculously simple; how could it be adequate for this great and confounding issue. Just remember that most (if not all) of those issues stem back to one cause.

I have attempted to share my experience with many people, with very limited success. Reactions range from looking as if they'd like to run away, to regarding me with something akin to pity. There are some who take it all in, very sincerely; with some level of longing but, they lack of ability to believe it could happen to them. Others regard me with incredulity that I would even suggest such a course as being appropriate for them. There are a few, it seems, who connect with it and recognize it as something they too have longed for. If you've made it this far, maybe you're one of them and you'd like to know what next?

I wish I knew, I wish I could tell you, I wish I had some magic compass, or a list of steps to get you there but I simply do not have those things. We are all individuals and you can't have my experience,

I do believe you can have your own, but if all you have is my experience, it is probably false and will be very disappointing in the end, I mean that's the same thing I used to keep falling for.

Since I can't give you any of that, if you want some kind of tips...I can do that.

1. BE HONEST. If you can't be really, really honest, especially with yourself and about yourself, you probably will never get out of the starting gate. Honesty can be a very difficult and even painful thing to face off with, but the truth can set you free. You are not qualified to provide the level of honesty you need, only God is. If you really want this, then asking God to show you, who you really are and how He really sees you is the obvious place to start.

2. THE CAUSE IS NOT THE CURE. Don't think that if God does meet your request for honesty and does reveal your root hurt(s), or the thing that motivates your resistors and limiters, that you are then automatically cured or healed. Knowing you have cancer does not eliminate it. I had it in mind for years that if I just knew what was behind the things I did, then I'd be better. That's the rationale of psychology; the answers are inside of us. That's crap! Psychology only treats people, it never heals them. There is no answer inside of us, only more questions and confusion.

3. HURT. Don't be afraid and don't feel like a failure, if you have old hurts that were never dealt with, they will continue to hurt until you bring them into the light. Many times when we deal with forgiveness, we take on the belief that to forgive means to forget or at least shut up about it. No one wants to hear us whining and complaining about how we've been hurt. Or we think if we hurt we have failed to forgive entirely. Not so. Remember forgiveness and hurt are two separate but related issues. Hurt for your hurts, go back and allow yourself to revisit them however you need to, physically, mentally or otherwise, but don't stop there!

4. CRY OUT. God does want to hear about your hurts and complaints. When you get to the place where that hurt is really, well...hurting, cry out and tell God all about it. I'd advise that you get really explicit in talking about each individual hurt or sin and why it causes you pain, express the angst, and emotions that come with it. To me it's like crawling up in your Daddy's lap to just have a good cry, and tell HIM all about the things that have hurt you and the things you feel guilty about.

5. BE OBEDIENT. In some cases, not every one necessarily, God may lay it on your heart to contact a person to ask or offer forgiveness. Perhaps He will move you to offer some gesture of forgiveness and healing, which may appear only symbolic, but may well result in coming to a true release from

those old hurts, because of the faith that obedience requires. Don't argue. If you feel yourself go on an internal defensive or beginning to construct rationalizations, Just Do It!

6. BE HEALED.

THIRTY-FOUR

There's a great little verse in Bible which goes something like:

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

That's a frequently cited model for expanding evangelistic influence, but I think it works equally well as we consider the process of healing. If the inner most circle is Jerusalem, then that represents YOU. Since, as my oft quoted friend says, "the hose gets wet first," if we hope to be able to influence anyone with God's cosmic love, we must first allow God's love to have its way influencing us.

For many of us, this journey starts with dissatisfaction that leads to desperation, something has to drive us to desire more than what we have, more than the status quo we see on Sunday; to have a deeper relationship with God, to know that we are genuinely HIS; genuinely being conformed to His image. That desire is the first evidence of God drawing us closer to Him. We must always remember to count the cost; is this journey one you really want to take? Is the cause important enough? Is the calling within certain enough? Is the price one you're willing to pay?

The process of being genuinely healed by God demands serious consideration. We're not talking about a round of trips to a Christian counselor to discuss our personal issues. It's not a support group or cell group share session or even a prayer line for laying on of hands. This is hard work and its work that only God and you can do – you yield and He heals. He does all the heavy lifting.

Consider these things:

Psalms 30:2 O LORD my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.

Psalms 107:20 He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.

Psalms 147:2 The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. 3 He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Isaiah 6:10 Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

Isaiah 30:26 The moon will shine like the sun, and the sunlight will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven full days, when the LORD binds up the bruises of his people and heals the wounds he inflicted.

Isaiah 53:5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 57:18 I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, 19 creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace, to those far and near,” says the LORD. “And I will heal them.”

Jeremiah 17:14 Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.

Jeremiah 30:17 But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds,’ declares the LORD, ‘because you are called an outcast, Zion for whom no one cares.’

Jeremiah 33:6 “Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security.

Hosea 6:1 “Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.

Hosea 14:4 “I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.

Hebrews 12:11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. 12 Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 13 “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

It took years for me to be ready for that moment of healing, but when it came, when His love set me free, it changed everything about me that I could “see” from the inside. I no longer needed drugs or booze to make life bearable or to get to sleep at night. My food intake became based on nutritional needs, rather than emotional needs. Anxiety, worry, fear and depression vanished. I was no longer motivated to do things to ingratiate myself with others. I was no longer intimidated by others or my perceptions of how they perceived me. When love is your motive you stop worrying about the perceptions others have about you. When love is your motive, you don’t worry about it being ok to approach, speak to, or even hug another person. When the motive is right, everything is right. I began to recognize myself saying and doing things that I knew were not in my character; things that I was not comfortable doing. Comfort is a BIG deal for us human people.

Generally, we humans tend to be far more concerned with our immediate physical comfort, and physical healing. God, on the other hand, is far more concerned about the internal/eternal healing of our inmost being. I am not here to say God doesn’t or God won’t heal your body, what I am here to say; with a healed body you can walk around down here for a little while, with a healed heart you can walk around up there forever.

There are places in scripture that talk about us being perfect. Jesus says in Matthew that we should be perfect as our Father is perfect. Paul says in Colossians that he wants to present everyone perfect in Christ. There are a few places in Hebrews which speak of us being made perfect. Look, you don’t have to be on this planet for long to realize that humans, even Christian ones, are not perfect – in fact most of us readily accept that none of us are perfect. The word translated “perfect” in the New Testament really means complete. God does not need us to be comfortable, God wants and needs us to be complete, in fact he wants to be the one to (and really is the only one who can) complete us. He wants to satisfy that longing we have inside, He wants to make us whole. He isn’t here to end the party or stop the fun, in fact, until HE is the engineer of your train, you haven’t seen the real fun. He has an amazing adventure in store for you, buckle up!

THIRTY-FIVE

When folks look at me like an idiot, which is often, some of them are doing it while trying to tell me they have already had this experience I am trying to share. Of course what I want to ask is, "Why can't anyone tell?" That sounds mean, but the truth is that once God's love gets a hold of you, you can't hold it in. I tried to tell people about my experience but I came off like a raving loon, I'm afraid. The first place it really influenced was my home. That's the next ring or Judea in the model. My wife and kids began to see a real change in me, not one based on my guilt or weak attempts at contrition. They, just like I, had begun to see and hear me acting in ways that were totally contrary to my character up until this point. It may have taken a few weeks or even a month before they realized, it was genuine.

My wife was the first one I approached. As I have stated previously, she endured sheer hell from me on my crisis journey through instability land, she certainly deserved something. It began with repentance.

We spent at least one full day and maybe two (it's a little blurry now) alone together in our home. Over that time I slowly and methodically repented for every individual count of wrong I had perpetrated on her and our children. This was not a blanket, hit and run, apology. I took time to express in detail my sorrow at the things I had done, and I gave her opportunity to express anything she needed to. I accepted full responsibility and did not try to mitigate any of it, by any means of excuse. I was wrong. Now I wanted to make it right, and I was willing to say or do whatever it would take to relieve any pain or injury I had caused and see the relationship restored, no matter the time or cost.

For that period of time, we were face to face, without interruptions. We wept and even laughed some, and with each issue that we addressed, a section of the wall between us came down, and relationship was restored. As we went on, she began to confess things to me, and she asked my forgiveness and allowed me the same opportunity, which I had extended to her – to share my feelings. We cried and shared, but in reality what we were doing, was setting each other free from our past hurt, guilt and perceptions. We were helping one another become new and free, together.

It was a wonderful synergy as we shared and got back in touch with one another, like a reunion of long lost friends or family. We praise God for those days of open repentance and free forgiveness, for restored intimacy and renewed trust in our marriage. We praise God for the effect it has had on our marriage since then. After a few weeks of seeing the changes in me, my wife and I had another con-

versation because she didn't want to be just a spectator, she wanted to be in on the whole thing. She essentially followed the same steps or tips I gave in chapter thirty-three. In one afternoon! In fact she felt so changed that we both got re-baptized that same evening, as I mentioned previously.

Our marriage has never been the same. I do not know a human being I am closer to than that wonderful woman. She is my best-friend and first-partner in all things. We have no more secrets, nothing is hidden between us, once we found out how much freer we could be without it, it all had to go. We share a trust and compassion for one another that has eliminated the insecurity and selfishness that drives most marital turmoil. We are all in love again!

If you are married or considering marriage, realize that when you get married and enter into the covenant of marriage, you become one flesh. Most marital turmoil is based on people entering marriage without understanding this as something for than figurative. Most folks enter marriage seeing it as a 50/50 proposition, but it's actually a 100/100 proposition. You cannot come into marriage with your first consideration being how to maintain your autonomy, your space and your stuff. If you do, or if you have, there is going to be trouble.

If two individuals enter marriage carrying the baggage of life's hurts, resistors, limiters and all that stuff, then when they become one flesh, they are in fact, one person with twice as much baggage. That baggage will inform and determine the source of your marital conflict. Do yourself a favor; jettison it! If you are not married; do it now, before you ever consider attaching yourself to another busted human. If you are married and are having trouble and considering counseling, consider this; until you resolve your personal mess/baggage, your marriage problems are just going to continue to circle back to the same luggage. You will argue over who is right, who is wrong and who is to blame; you'll try communication strategies and trust building exercises, but the simple truth is – if you don't get your personal individual problems fixed, you aren't going to fix your marriage, because inevitably, you always see the other person as the cause of the problems. Anyway...

Part two of healing in my family was my daughters. I cannot express to you or anyone how much I regret them seeing me the way I have been, especially knowing that young girls memories and impressions of their fathers many times inform and influence their choice of mate. I know that of the hurts my daughters bear in their young hearts I am almost solely responsible. It's a terrible thing for a child to grow up around an unstable parent; it's also fairly awful for the unstable parent to realize what damage they have done. Nevertheless, I could not undo what I had done, but I was (and am) committed to trying to clear out what of the wreckage I could. I sat down with each of my daughters individually, face to face and much as I had with my wife, I repented. I confessed to them that I had not been

a good daddy and that I knew that I had made them feel uncomfortable and afraid in their own home. I went into detail about events I could recall and asked them to share anything they wished to with me, in expressing their hurts and feelings. I just as I had previously with my wife, I asked their forgiveness.

Do we live in a house where everything is perfect and nothing ever goes wrong? Not at all, but we do live in a home where love, grace, mercy and forgiveness get lots of exercise.

THIRTY-SIX

So here's the big one. You've probably thought from reading my opinion of the CHURCH, theology, doctrine and dogma that I am ready to chuck it all, that I am here to encourage a walk out, or advocate leaving the church. That is not my intention at all; in fact my intention is quite to the contrary. You see I can, and parts of me would love to, get into a big old discussion (SOAPBOX) about all the things that are wrong with the church. There are a million different opinions about what's broken and a dozen more about how it could be fixed. One big problem for the Church, in America at least, is that we face no real persecution. I mean we have imaginary inflated boogey-men like, no Ten Commandments or Nativity scenes in government owned public places, but we hardly face any real life or death, martyr making persecution. Throughout history, the Church actually tends to flourish during those times of persecution. In our times, the CHURCH has become lazy, overfed, Christian veal; reluctant to give or serve, unless of course, it's totally comfortable, convenient and there's a little pay-off for us.

However, going off into one of those diatribe tangents only serves to open the myriad of possible places we could lay the blame, and that dilutes my point entirely. My point is, that there are not really a million problems with the CHURCH; there is only one problem; Christians. I don't care how creative the nomenclature, if you're a Christ-follower, Jesus-Lover, Messiah-tastic, Follower of the Way or whatever you want to call it. To be in Christ, is to be in the Body of Christ, which is the CHURCH.

There is no way to get around it. For my two cents you cannot claim to love Jesus and hate His Body.

Here's my plan, join me if you dare. Get healed, get your inner junk worked out, then share that with your family and try to help them get fixed too, then enter circle number three: Samaria, the Church. I say stay right there in the congregation you are in, and put some roots down; not "I show up every Sunday" roots, but some real roots. If your church is involved in a damnable heresy or cultic activity, you have a legitimate reason to bail out, otherwise sit tight. Stop church hopping, and stop talking about starting new churches, we don't need any more "churches."

Starting new churches where there are already churches is either (and yes, I really mean congregations):

A). Arrogance: We get sore, mad and self-righteous and decide we know better, we can do better or we have a better handle on what God really wants. Pride and arrogance.

B). Pandering to Selfish Humanity: We start a new church to pander to a demographic (cowboys, bikers, mac users) or we go to a church based on its ability to pander to my wants and desires.

Nobody knows us better than Jesus, and if we trust Him, then we'll trust that He knows better than we do, what's good for us. That pride and arrogance; that un-submissive spirit that leads to the complaining, back-biting upon which church splits and new congregations synthesize, is as ungodly as about anything being complained about. Maybe staying in that congregation and learning to live with and love others you don't agree with or don't like is just what the doctor ordered. Gold is not refined without fire and diamonds are not formed without pressure. Maybe you could even learn to worship where they don't play the style of music you like. Maybe you could learn to scrub a toilet to the glory of God while you wait for God to bring you the ministry He promised, instead of always self-promoting. Maybe you could even learn to have a meaningful conversation with someone you don't necessarily agree with. Maybe you could even learn to love them, rather than just shaking your head and walking away. Maybe, but that's only going to happen if you choose to stick around, instead of running around and hiding out.

It's amazing to consider what the church would be capable of if we got past looking at what church can do for me, for long enough to consider what we could do for church. There's the real issue. Somewhere along that history of the church we started going to church, having church and doing church; and we quit BEING CHURCH. It's all about the style, atmosphere, activities, programs, outreaches, production, bells and whistles. The organic community is lost in the shuffle. Not gone or forgotten, but drown out in the business, busy-ness and bustle we create to make our congregational life seem more real and important than it really is. You see without the bustle, the facilities, activities, the lights, sound and video displays – a moment of silence might happen in which, we the CHURCH, might accidentally realize that we have yet to connect with that greatest fulfillment, that perfect peace that we are hardwired for; God's Cosmic Love. That realization and restoration, in each individual and family, can turn us back into THE CHURCH again.

What does that look like? Well, you get healed; your family gets healed, and then you go to "church." When you get there find someone you don't know and go start a conversation. Introduce yourself, and then ask questions about THEM. Anything you can think of, find out all about them, in that way you can find ways and needs through which you can serve them. Offer to take them out to eat after

church or even crazier, invite them into your home and share a meal. DO NOT get caught up in small talk, or church talk. Invest your time and heart into them. When you recognize a need they have that you can meet, meet it. Maybe they need advice, a friendly ear or shoulder to cry on. Maybe they need a job, financial help or a ride somewhere. Listen then serve, make room for them in your life, don't be afraid to get your hands dirty in the sea of humanity. Eventually you will need something, and then you have a relationship to support you as well.

Then Repeat.

That's the whole shooting match, rebuilding that organic community, one relationship at a time. We don't need a book, a directive, a program or permission from anyone, because we already have those things – THE BIBLE! What we need, is to just do it. The Bible says if we enter by the door we are no longer just sheep but shepherds of the sheep, we are responsible for one another.

Philippians 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

I have a congregation inside and outside of church, friends and neighbors who help one another, someday I need something and one of them shepherds me, some days the roles reverse. In the end that is as much church as any of the ornate facades bearing the name "church."

When God's perfect Agape love rules our hearts, there's nothing to it.

THIRTY-SEVEN

John 13:35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

That kind of says it all. The fourth ring, the ends of the earth. The most effective outreach tool the Bible gives us is simply this, if we will love one another, the world will recognize who we are and that what we have is what they want. The early church did not have theology, doctrine or denomination to get in their way. HECK! They didn't even have a Bible and they were SOUL WINNERS baby, 24/7! We, on the other hand, have all those things, and a thousand more and we're stuck in the mud. The Bible says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." The Bible warns us not to think more highly of ourselves than we should, but we do. In the end, its easier to contemplate high things, than to live them and I suspect that's why we choose to get bogged down in all of our religiousness. It's easier than the very simple example of Christ, the life of sacrificial love.

If we could get over ourselves and get back to the basics of loving one another genuinely, we would all realize how easy and fulfilling it is. We might also realize what a huge waste of time, effort and resources all of our prior evangelistic effort has been. If we could love genuinely, we might well find we are fishers of men, and the fish are jumping into the boat.

But, many if not most of us, would rather argue about who or how God loves. We like to excuse ourselves from making the effort. We like to see people converted, but don't feel called to help. We love to help convert people, as long as we can hitch them up to our religious cart. It's always something, but rarely love.

Just like being CHURCH at church, we can be CHURCH in our neighborhood, school, mall, place of work and really, anywhere we are, if we choose to make room to get involved with the humans around us. Can we make time and space for those people or, are we just too busy?

Too busy to serve our God, who gave His own life as a ransom for ours?

He apparently set us free from the bondage of sin and death so that we could run around ignoring Him and those He wants us to connect with, in favor of doing all the stuff we want to do, with all the people we like; sounds crazy.

When His love rules us, it makes all those outreach projects, mission trips and the like take on an even more significant and eternal value. It's no longer something we do just for the fun of fellowship, to feel we've done our part, assuage our guilt or to add to our Christians resume. When we extend the perfect love of God to other hurting humans, we are answering the call, we are in the game! James insists that if our faith is genuine, it will lead us to do righteous works:

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. 20 You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

But Paul reminds us that works not motivated by love, are useless:

1 Corinthians 13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Remember where we started, discussing what the Bible says about God's love? How He loved us while we were yet sinners, He loved us by making a sacrifice of His own Son, That nothing can separate us from His love and that even if we choose Hell rather than Him, He will not stop loving us, we'll just stop feeling it draw us back to Him? He made it so easy for us who deserved death; maybe too easy. There are a ton of reasons, but I can't figure out why we insist on making it everything but easy, on ourselves and others. All you need is love.

Galatians 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Well maybe you feel like I owe you a big “what’s it all mean closing sum up” chapter; I kind of feel like, I’ve already spilled all the beans and would have very little else to offer you. I mean, I could ramble on about a bunch of side issues but, the truth of the matter is that if you made it all the way through this bunch of babbling, you are most likely in one of two camps:

1. You think it’s just what you’ve been looking for and can’t wait to get started
2. You thought it was a load of crap and can’t wait to write a letter or email and tell what’s wrong with it.

Of course there is the possibility that you really just don’t care.

In any case you’ve got better things to be doing than listening to me prattle on.

Peace.