

THE POOR HOUSE

This is a story of people who learn what it means to become a Poor House for Christ.

It is the painful process of learning to decrease, so Christ may increase in our life. It is painful because we must die to ourselves.

Ultimately this book is about the healing and life found in surrendering to God. It describes in story form what I believe Western Christianity has become, what it needs to become, and how our church and world might change if we let God transform our lives.

The Poor House

Rev. Anthony Perry

MISSING
Thousands of sons and daughters are missing. Please bring them home.

Anthony Perry has been a pastor for twelve years. He currently lives with his wife and children in North Carolina serving the in the EM Church. Pastor Perry is a graduate from Emory and Henry and is a dedicated lifelong Student of Ashland Theological Seminary.

Rev. Anthony Perry

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The Poor House

ANTHONY PERRY JR.

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The characters and events in this book are based on fact and fiction. In some cases names and places have been changed to protect the identity and the lives of those involved.

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Anthony Perry Jr.

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Dedicated to the Greatest One

ANTHONY PERRY JR.

Introduction

What is a Christian? Is a Christian a follower of Christ? Are they practitioners of a diverse Christian religion? Maybe they are those who live a certain Way, believe and follow a certain Truth, and participate in a certain Life.

Throughout the history of Christianity movements in the church have begun when the church placed emphasis on particulars within the Christian faith. Many times these particulars grew out of a certain cultural or sociological need.

Industrialism brought out the need for Christians to meet the modern man in his new environment and changing culture. The great awakening brought life to a lifeless religion. The focus on justice and equality took reign during the civil war and the civil rights movement.

What about today?

This book originally was intended to focus on another emphasis in the Christian religion of my day and time. This was the emphasis of purpose and meaning. It was also meant to help the non-Christian understand Christian views of life and belief.

Part of the desire to write this book grew of my own disdain for our culture's misrepresentation of all Christians and the religion we live.

Once again I have felt moved to alter the focus and direction of this writing. I needed less of me and my pet peeves and more of Him. In fact this is my new, but old direction of emphasis.

It is a main scriptural emphasis. "We are being built into a spiritual house," and "Blessed are the Poor," are a few scriptures behind this new, but old emphasis.

Part of my inspiration for writing comes from a group of teens that met at my church on Saturday nights for a service

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sponsored by what I called the “Poor House Ministry.” The emphasis was for us to learn in these meetings what it means to be a Poor House for the Lord.

This is a story of people who learn what it means to become a Poor House for Christ, as they face the culture and world views that have been impressed upon them through the educational system and multimedia of our day.

It is the painful process of learning to decrease, so Christ may increase in their life. It is painful because we must die to ourselves, so that we can be resurrected in Christ.

Ultimately this book is about the healing and life found in surrendering to God. It describes in story form what I believe Western Christianity has become, what it needs to become, and how our church and world might change if we let God transform our lives.

It is my intention for this book to challenge you and teach you, but most importantly to change you.

Pray for me and I will pray for you. Pray that God will grant us the grace and fortitude to become Poor Houses, so that together we may become rich in Him.

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Chapter 1
The Problems

Joe stared blankly out of the kitchen window above the sink, as he leaned his hip against the counter. The sun's rays entering through the window pane warmed him and subdued his morning chill.

The laughter of his twin daughters Camry and Camille sounded from the other room, as he enjoyed the smell of his brewing coffee.

Their shrieks and giggles made him wonder what could ever be that funny. Nothing for him seemed funny anymore.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed his teenage son inspecting the two dollar coffeemaker he bought at the junk store yesterday.

Little Joe spoke. "So dad, they thought this coffee maker was broken and that's why they sold it so cheap?"

"The note said the water sometimes overflows out of the top if you don't position the pot right." He knew what little Joe was doing. This was his way of asking for coffee without actually asking. The aroma from the percolating brew had lured him away from watching morning cartoons with his younger sisters. He also knew what was coming next.

"When am I going to be old enough to drink coffee dad?"

"When you're old enough to work and buy it for yourself."

Joe turned his head and gave his son a silly look to accompany his teasing words. His young teenager let out a snort of disgust. He watched amusingly as his son turned to exit the room. The snort was little Joe's typical reaction to all those things denied to him because of his age.

He actually had a list of smart aleck responses he used on his son when moments like these arrived. No matter which one he

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used little Joe gave the same old snort as a response. He returned his gaze back to the snowy country scenery outside of his window, and chuckled at his son's inability to adapt to his antics.

On the verge of tears little Joe spoke as he walked through the doorway leading into the living room. "It isn't fair!"

Joseph looked down into the kitchen sink at the cup of partially drunk tea and thought to himself, "Who told you life was fair son?"

The cup belonged to his wife. She never finished drinking all of her tea in the morning, because too much of it made her nauseous. Tanya stayed the night even though they were officially separated.

Her reasons for leaving him filled his head again. "I need my space for awhile. I need time away from the fighting to figure things out."

"Things are not fair in this world son." He said under his breath. The past two years proved that to him. During this time Tanya had ripped out his heart and stomped on it.

This is why he couldn't understand his kindness towards her. Despite the pain she caused him he gave her deposit money to turn on her utilities, moved out all of her things, and paid her trailer rent. There was nothing fair about any of this.

"What's a matter with me?" He thought. He reminded himself it was for the kids and not her. Somehow this thought was supposed to make his actions justifiable, but he wondered if it was just an excuse to cover up the fact that he still cared for her.

Nothing happened even though they slept in the same bed. All she did was ask the same old dread inspiring question she had asked for the past three months.

He could hear her voice in his head. "Do you miss me not being here?"

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It reminded him of a recent discussion with a friend. He told his buddy, "I don't understand. When she asks me if I miss her I want to tell her no. Instead I tell her yes, but I miss her like I miss my melanoma." He definitely didn't miss having melanoma. In fact, he was relieved that it was gone and felt the same about Tanya.

He was too angry to miss her. He was angry for the pain and disruption she caused them all. His innocent children had to face the ugly reality of marital conflict. It was a painful reality he never wanted them to experience.

"Life isn't fair." He said out loud. He would do anything to erase the unfairness of the past two years, but he knew that was impossible. All he could do is figure out how all of this happened and try to stop it from happening again. All he could do is deal with the situation and help his kids get through it with the least amount of damage.

Continuing his gaze out the window he watched two squirrels play a game of chase around a large tree. He wondered if squirrels knew anything about happiness. If they did, then these squirrels seemed happy. He missed being happy. He wondered if Tanya felt the same.

She had grown increasingly unhappy over the past five years. Unfortunately she viewed their entire marriage through the lens of her current unhappiness. She sunk into misery and took everyone down with her.

He didn't deny the struggles they had early on in their marriage. At eighteen they were still children. They weren't mature enough to enter into a lifelong committed relationship. Who is?

They used to look back and laugh about their gullibility and innocence. It made them marvel at how they had grown. He knew if it wasn't for love they wouldn't have been able to make it through those tough years. A few years ago he believed their

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love was so strong it would endure anything life would throw at them. He had lost his faith in their love to do anything now.

A movement outside his window caught his attention. His next door neighbor Jack was sneaking slowly towards his back fence. In his hands was a rifle. Following the direction of Jack's line of sight his eyes rested on a large ground hog that was sniffing around two large piles of dirt. The groundhog had mistakenly made Jack's backyard its home.

"You big dummy," he thought, "if only you were smart enough to realize what digging holes in Jack's yard gets you." It's a shame animals aren't smart enough to know better. It's a shame they don't have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. He grunted at the thought of people not learning from their mistakes even though they might have many opportunities. A loud gunshot was heard and the ground hog fell still.

With all the emotional damage done he wondered if he even wanted a second chance to get it right. Even so, he had spent a great deal of time trying to figure out the mistakes that led them here.

He wondered if one of the mistakes was his career change. It changed their life drastically. The new position required him to attend college and work full-time. This meant not seeing each other as often. Soon afterward Tanya decided to go to work to help pay off some of their bills. Most of their free time was now spent taking care of the kids and the household chores.

This had to be mistake number one. He churned out a rhyme he once heard. "Time together makes things better, time apart separates hearts."

If only they he had been wise enough to understand the consequences of their choices. He shook his head frustrated. Even though they thought they were doing the right thing they never saw this coming. Sometimes you have to accept you can

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never know where you are going in life until you get there. For some folks it's too late then. He felt it may be too late for them.

One of the unexpected things that happened in all of this was change. He and Tanya had both changed. People forget they are constantly growing and maturing as individuals. Their needs and wants change. Ideally in a marriage they should grow and mature together as they meet each other's needs and wants. They barely had time to even talk to each other. It didn't take long for them to grow in different directions that were unhealthy for their marriage and family.

There were signs of trouble, but he didn't take them seriously enough. One of them, of course was Tanya's increasing unhappiness. She told him she felt second to everything in his life. He believed it was problems at her work and stress misplaced onto their relationship.

There was a point in time when all they had was each other. It seemed as if they lived for one another. Then life happened and everything changed. Tanya was always important to him. He loved her more than anyone in the world. It was just that other things were also important like paying the bills and carving out a life together. Your attention becomes divided. He wondered if this was the reason for her feeling second to everything in his life.

"I can't take all the blame." He thought. He constantly reminded her of his love for her and that their situation wasn't going to last forever. Between work and school he tried everything he could to make her feel loved and appreciated, but she wanted more than what he was able to offer. She worked on building a list of things that she believed proved him wrong.

Some of her list items included how she gave of her time and energy for everyone else's sake in the family and never received anything in return. She also wanted him to show her more

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appreciation, offer her more affirmation, and complained that he needed to take care of her for a change.

She soon came to believe that he wasn't the only one that was placing her second. She believed that friends and family treated her as if she were invisible. Her claim was that he was always the center of attention.

Somehow he knew she was spiritually dying inside, but he couldn't help her. He didn't know how to help her. He figured she would eventually work through her issues.

But she didn't and with every nasty comment and fight she cut away the strands of their relationship. He wondered if there were any strands left inside of him to snip. Wiping away a tear revealed to him there were.

He felt Tanya was searching to fill a bottomless void inside of her. She needed to find her own way. He tried to help, but after awhile she didn't want anything from him.

The way she began to respond to their troubles made things even worse. Some days she wouldn't even come home after work. She wouldn't even call. He missed numerous appointments, because she wasn't there to watch the kids when she was supposed to.

He could still hear her main excuse ringing in his head. She would say, "I'm staying away from the house so we won't fight. It's too much for me to handle right now." The excuse didn't make sense. She could have come home and he could have left to get his things done.

With clenched teeth he muttered, "She also stopped cooking, cleaning, and laundry too!" Joe could feel anger welling up inside of him. "Maybe the fighting had something to do with that too!" The feeling of things not being fair overwhelmed him. "I became a one parent household, so she can do whatever it is she wants."

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It was then that he began to notice their savings account running dry. She also began to keep every dime of her paycheck. With a little snooping he found that she opened an account at another bank.

The stress was unbearable at times. It disrupted his work and studies. His heart felt broken, and his life felt shattered.

And then there were the kids. The kids were always wondering and worrying about mommy. He thought of every excuse in the book to explain why mommy didn't come home, but the kids were smart. The excuses eventually couldn't stop their tears.

He would question her about where she had been all night and a fight would break out. Tanya would yell and blame it on him. She would say she was a big girl and didn't need to answer to a daddy anymore.

His face felt flush and he could feel his blood pressure rising. He thought about the struggle over the past two years to work things out, but when one problem seemed to be resolved another problem popped up. When that problem was resolved and Tanya couldn't think of anything else she would resurrect an old problem from the dead. She always kept some problem on her list between them.

He wasn't stupid. He suspected that she was probably cheating on him. He denied it at first. The pain that came from confronting this truth was too unbearable. He stayed away from it as long as he could.

Around the time he was beginning to suspect she was cheating an anonymous phone call was made to his father in Toledo. The caller said that Tanya was cheating on him with a co-worker named Bill. He wondered who the anonymous person was. He also wondered how they got his father's phone number. It made him think it was someone that was close to him.

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He didn't approach her about it right away, because he wanted to find proof before he made any accusations. One night he thought he had found it. He caught her whispering on the phone with someone. Casually he asked her who she was talking to. She said it was her mother.

When she hung up the phone his suspicions led him to hit the redial. The redial didn't do anything, so he went into the other room and called her mother. When he asked if she had talked to Tanya that day she told him she hadn't.

That was a bad night. When he confronted her she said she was talking to a girl friend at work about their marital problems. She said she thought it would upset him. It was then he brought up the call made to his dad concerning her cheating on him with the co-worker. She said Bill was just a friend at work and denied having an affair. Up until now he hasn't been able to prove otherwise. He still believes that she was talking to him that night.

"I should have suspected something when she quit attending Church." He thought. This led him to think that all these problems she claimed existed in their life were her excuses for her affair. He felt she wasn't trying to make things better and the affair was probably why.

Despite the fact that he was torn over their troubles and was reeling from the pain, he was glad she moved out. He didn't have to worry if she would come home. He wasn't stressed because of the daily fight that took place when he didn't live up to her expectations. It was wonderful, because he didn't have her sharp and painful arrows jabbed in his heart over and over again.

He remembered the first night she stayed at her trailer. He barely slept. It wasn't because he was hurting, lonely, or even sad. In fact he lay in his bed and laughed as he enjoyed peace

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for a change. He thought he could finally move on with his life, even if it meant moving on without her.

The very next morning he looked in the mirror and smiled and realized he hadn't smiled in a long time.

A month after she moved out he went to the Lawyer's office and filed for a legal separation. He was tired of waiting for her to make up her mind concerning their marriage. It was a huge relief when she signed the papers. It made him wonder why she hadn't done this earlier, especially if she was as miserable as she led him to believe.

Still looking out the kitchen window he laughed to himself at the thought of her wanting to know if he missed her. "I know what I miss," He said in a low voice, "I miss the loving, caring, and compassionate wife that I once knew. I don't miss the Jekyll and Hyde she's become."

He walked over to the coffee pot and poured some coffee into his cup and added his sugar substitute. He needed to watch his sugar intake, because he recently found out he was diabetic.

The only thing that really bothered him about the diabetes was the fact that it caused severe pain in his feet. They usually felt fine during the day, but when he lay down to sleep his feet were in excruciating and stinging pain. The doctor had prescribed a number of medicines, but they didn't worked.

Camille came into the kitchen full of excitement. With a big smile she yelled, "Happy Birthday Daddy!"

He responded, "Thank-you baby!" He was beginning to think no one remembered. His daughter waited with a look of anticipation. He figured she was waiting for something more than just a thank-you. He gave her what she wanted. He hugged her and she trotted back off into the living room happy.

He returned to the window again, as it dawned upon him that he turned thirty-three today. Secretly he wanted to escape

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somewhere so he could piece his life back together and find his way.

He tried to think of where he could go, but the only place that came to mind was his grandparent's house.

Around the holidays he became sentimental when he thought about his grandparent's house. The nostalgia of the wonderful holidays full of love there warmed his heart. Tears began to form in his eyes. He quickly wiped them away and composed himself.

Conversations with his mother offered him a new perspective on those days. She told him she didn't remember those times with fondness the way he did. Instead they were uncomfortable and unpleasant for her. She blamed his grandfather for all his years of drunkenness and abuse towards her and her siblings.

Grandpa had quit drinking and changed before he ever experienced the person she had known. He found it hard to believe that his grandpa did the things she said, but that was the nature of someone who abused alcohol. This was more evidence of the unfairness of the world.

He thought about his grandparent's house today and the many ways it was different than he remembered. It wasn't exactly the place one could go and get a grasp on their life. When he was eight years old it used to be bigger than life to him. Now it was just a small four bedroom house with barely enough room to move around. There also wasn't any resemblance of the love he knew there as a child.

There were many things that had a lot to do with it. Through the years his family had changed. They had suffered through bitter arguments, divorces, and the pit falls of life. It drove wedges between their relationships driving them all apart.

He thought about his uncle's comments about the family being cursed and laughed. "We are cursed;" he thought, "we are

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cursed with a long list of bad decisions in our lives.” These bad decisions led his uncle to feel the family was being oppressed by some dark malevolent force.

He knew the true identity of their oppressor. They were their own dark oppressing force. They were their own worst enemies.

Over the years his Grandma suffered from strokes and a heart attack soon after she quit smoking. His Grandpa was troubled by severe diabetes and a strong anti-social disorder. Dale, his once genius cousin, lived in his grandparent’s basement disconnected from the world because of his Schizophrenia. His uncle Frank had been undone by a broken marriage and alcoholism. Now all Frank and Dale did was play video games while they buried the pain of their wounded souls under drugs.

Events in time worked to wound them all in some way. There was one positive thing to remember. “We are still a family and we are still hanging on, no matter how dysfunctional we are. Sure we’re screwed up, but we’re still a family.” He laughed and then blurted out loud, “I feel closer to them than ever before! I’ve officially joined the ranks of the dysfunctional and wounded!”

He paused for a moment to see if the kids had heard him. Their laughter led him to believe they were still focused on the cartoons.

He missed his family. The feeling was intensified because it was the holiday season.

He wasn’t going to have to miss them much longer. They were moving back to Ohio in the summer. Since his marriage fell apart the urge to return home had grown.

The hardest part of that decision turned out to be the easiest. When he shared with Tanya his thoughts on the matter he found that she had been thinking the same thing. There was no fuss or debate about the subject.

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He thought her quick agreement to move back meant that she didn't love the man she was seeing, or maybe they were no longer involved. Then he thought maybe the man she was seeing would move back with her. He shook the thoughts from his head. They were just too painful handle.

Joseph took a large swig of his coffee burning his tongue. Doing his best to ignore the pain he sighed with relief at the thought that he would be back home soon.

He believed God affirmed his decision when a job opened up back home in his own organization. He was scheduled for an interview next month. His boss assured him that the position was his despite the formalities. It didn't stop him from playing the field and sending out résumés.

Part of this decision stemmed from him wanting to continue his education. He applied to a graduate school in Ohio that caught his attention. He was accepted for the fall of next year. Thinking about this made him feel that he really was moving on with his life.

He turned and looked towards the clock realizing that it was time for the kids to go outside and wait on the school bus. He yelled to them in the living room. "It's time to go kids!"

The kids plowed into the kitchen and gave him their usual morning good-byes of hugs and kisses. Even Joseph Jr. offered him a hug and a happy birthday wish. He guessed his son wasn't that mad at him. Joseph followed them to the front door and watched them run to the end of the driveway through the quickly fogging glass on the storm door.

"I'm glad the kids stayed overnight." He thought. It's why Tanya stayed over. Last night was a scheduled sleep over night. It was to let the kids know they were still a family despite the separation. He really missed them being here filling the house with their laughter. He missed his children barging in on him

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while he worked. He missed them showering his ears with their curious questions.

At least he didn't have to drive over to the trailer this morning to watch them get on the bus. Tanya started work before they left for school, so he showed up to make sure the kids were safe.

The school bus rolled up the street and the kids hopped on board. As the bus sped away he wiped the glass from the condensation and waved to the kids. He waved until he couldn't see them anymore. He closed the door and returned to the kitchen to tip off his coffee.

He headed down to his office in the basement. He hadn't accomplished much lately, but that was the nature of his vocation. He was told by co-workers that slow times would come. He thought it was unfortunate that they arrived when his life was full of turmoil. It left him a lot of empty time to be swallowed by his problems. He found himself not wanting to deal with his emotions. All of this free time made it difficult.

He went over his list of things to do for the day. The only thing he needed to leave the house for was a Christmas luncheon with the little old ladies missionary club at the church. There were a lot of elderly women in the church, and only a few old men. He felt obligated in some way to be there for them. They needed the help of a strong young man. Not only that, but they loved him and made him feel needed. It was like having a plethora of mothers all at the same time.

It reminded him of how he missed not having his own parents nearby. He especially missed his mother. There was nothing as comforting as a mother's love and care when you are hurting, even if you are thirty-three years old. In thirteen days his mom was turning fifty. God willing, he planned to be in Toledo for the celebration.

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He thought about how odd it must look for a young man to be attending a Women's Missionary Society meeting with dozens of elderly women.

He began attending the meetings when they asked him to come and join them for a special training session. It made him feel like he was a part of the church and doing something good.

Yesterday, while his kids were at the Church Christmas Play practice, he went out and bought each lady in the Missions Society a cute little bear figurine and a decorative holiday bag. It wasn't much, but it's the thought that counted.

He finished walking down the steps to the basement and the phone rang as he entered through the doorway. When he picked up the receiver it was a voice he loved to hear. It was his sister.

"Happy Birthday my brother!" She said.

"Thanks, but I have reached the age when I need to stop remembering my birthdays."

"Oh, you're not that old." Christina responded.

"I know, but when I was younger I remember thinking people my age were old. So, by that standard, I am old." They both laughed.

"Are you looking forward to the trip?" She asked.

"God yes! I need to get away for awhile."

"Don't worry we have lots of fun planned for you to take your mind off of things. Well, I have to get to work. I just wanted to call before heading out the door, so I could wish you a happy birthday and tell you I'll see you in a week."

"Thanks. I love ya, sis."

"I love you too. Tell the kids I said hello and I love them."

"I will. You do the same for me. Bye sis." Joseph hung up the receiver.

He thought about how his little sister had grown up to be a beautiful woman. She too had gone through a great deal in her life, but she managed to keep her head up and spirit positive. "I

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can't wait to see her," he spoke out loud. The kids were excited too. They loved going to see their family up north.

Joseph tried to get his brother Paul and his family to fly up from Texas to make it a family reunion of sorts, but Paul's work schedule kept him from coming up until the end of January.

He was proud of his younger brother. He had done well for himself. He began to think how different their relationship was compared to when they were kids. They used to fight like cats and dogs when they were younger, but now they were closer than ever. He missed him.

Joseph walked over to flip the switch on for his little space heater. The basement always stayed cooler than the rest of the house and the little heater took the cold edge off. He returned and sat in his office chair and pressed the power switch on his computer.

There was a special relationship that existed with his computer. It offered him something more than just the small world where he felt trapped and powerless. Sure he spent endless hours playing mindless and pointless games, but at least he wasn't stressing about his situation.

He recognized it for what it was. It was an escape so he didn't have to deal with his problems or face his pain. It was a cop out and he knew it, but he wanted it this way, at least until he could learn to cope. He knew his best efforts could have been spent learning to deal with his problems, but he couldn't understand why they weren't.

While his computer loaded he looked at his reflection on the computer screen. The shabby clothes he slept in the night before lunged out at him. His large stomach that came from hours of exercising the mind and not the body lay stretched before his eyes. He felt broken, worn out and used. Seeing his stomach made him think that he should exercise today, but he knew that was probably not going to happen.

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He double clicked on his internet provider and when his computer connected he pulled up his E-mail. His inbox was filled with junk mail as usual. He quickly deleted all of them. There wasn't anything important that came to his inbox, but it felt good to receive the junk mail in a strange sort of way. It meant that people out there knew he existed and were attempting to reach him. Sure they wanted his money and his business, but it was still nice to know that others knew you existed and were trying to reach you.

He played solitaire for some time and when he looked at the clock in the lower right hand portion of the screen it read 9:41 A.M. It dawned on him that he needed to get ready for the ladies luncheon.

Joseph shut down his computer, turned off his heater, and walked to the other side of the basement to his washer and dryer. He had washed and dried his clothes the night before. Seeing the laundry reminded him that the kids had a load of clothes in the bathroom floor that needed to be washed. He grabbed his outfit for the day from the dryer and began to wonder, as he did every morning, what purpose the day was going to serve.

He looked at the basement in all of its disorder. His eyes surveyed the overturned boxes the kids had emptied and scattered all over the floor. They were always looking in them for some hidden treasure to play with.

"I feel like my basement," he thought.

"All right Joseph, what difference is today going to make? Why did you get up out of bed, are you going to work, going to eat and tonight going to sleep? What is the point of your breathing today?"

He leaned up against the washer and asked, "Why do I do this to myself? It's the same questions day in and day out," he thought, "and it's always the same silence in response."

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Talking to himself he said. "I need change. I need a renewed sense of purpose. I need to find my way again."

He then looked up to the ceiling of the basement as if looking to heaven. He shouted "I know!" As if he were letting God know that he recognized his condition. He laughed to himself, "Like God doesn't already know."

A thought tickled his attention. "Today I am going to begin to do something new. Today I am going to begin my search for a renewed sense of purpose."

He breathed a sigh of disappointment, because at one time he thought his life's purpose was figured out, but when his marriage failed and his life fell apart, he felt his purpose was lost in some way.

He asked himself, "Have I lost my true sense of purpose, or have I just lost my sense of security?" He felt deep inside that his purpose really wasn't the problem. He knew the map for life that he was following was the right one, but something was still wrong. Something was missing. He needed something more. "What I really need," he thought, "is a resurrection."

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Chapter Two

Attempted Escapes

Joseph expected heavy traffic on the highway because of the holidays. The road wasn't congested as he thought it would be. He was also glad that the weather hadn't hindered the trip. The forecast was calling for over a foot of snow late tonight, but he would be in Toledo before the weather changed for the worse.

He stopped at the half way point in Marietta and ate lunch. This had become his custom when he traveled to visit his family. After lunch he refueled his truck, and picked up some snacks to hold him over for the rest of the trip. Returning to the interstate it was a four hour drive from this point.

The only sounds he heard were the tires rubbing road and the constant hum of the engine. As he listened to the soothing noises his mind played over the commitment he made to find a renewed sense of purpose in his life. Every day the commitment was at the forefront of his thoughts, but he never found a place to start his search.

Frustrated with his few failed attempts he spent most of his time making sure the loose ends were wrapped up for the trip. This meant making sure everyone had clothes for the week, giving emergency numbers to those who might need to contact him, taking the vehicle in for inspection, taking care of odds and ends at work, and even hunting down the last of the Christmas presents.

Tanya originally planned to stay behind in Virginia, but she called four days ago to tell him she changed her mind. This was going to make the trip a little more comfortable. His vehicle was a little Ford Ranger and the word "sardines" was the only way to describe what it was like when they were all piled in the truck.

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She and the kids drove up a few days ago making the trip more bearable for all. He wasn't going to be able to say the same thing for the trip back. Even now Tanya was heading back home to Virginia by herself. This meant he would be driving the kids back with all their luggage and presents. "Sardines," he thought.

He thought it was odd that Tanya wasn't going to spend the holidays with her family this year. Her excuse was that she needed to work the day after Christmas and didn't want to travel on Christmas Day to get back in time. In the past she always made arrangements for a week off around the holiday season. He guessed she didn't consider it necessary this year.

This wasn't like her, but during the past few years she changed into a person he didn't recognize anymore. He felt anything was possible with her. Nothing she could do anymore would surprise him.

A question popped into his head. It was asking if someone else was the reason she planned to spend Christmas away from her family this year. Shaking the thought from his head he focused on the road. It would be too heart breaking if it were true.

Near Canton Ohio he saw Tanya's bright red car on the other side of the freeway. He was actually looking to see if he could spot her. He watched as she passed, but if she saw him, then it wasn't evident. He guessed the reason he was looking was to see if she would be looking for him too.

The remainder of his trip went smoothly and he arrived at his parent's house at three-thirty in the afternoon. When he pulled into the driveway his dad's dog Pepper alerted the kids of his arrival with her barking. They flew out from the house to greet him. He exited his small truck into their embraces and suddenly realized just how exhausted he was from the trip.

"Daddy we missed you!" Camry shouted excitedly.

“I missed you too sweetie.” He responded as he hugged her and kissed her on the head.

“I’ll unload the presents!” Joseph Jr. yelled, as he began to loosen the straps holding the cargo in place on the truck bed.

Camille ran and squeezed him. “I love you daddy. You’re the best daddy in the whole world!”

“I love you too honey.” He squeezed her back.

The girls then ran over to help their brother unload presents.

Helping his son remove the last strap he grabbed his luggage. Walking over to the front porch steps he stopped. The day wasn’t over yet and it was going to be a long night. He wasn’t going to survive unless he rested.

He carried his luggage up the steps into the house and down the steps into the basement where his parent’s guest room was set up. He watched as the kids placed the presents on the floor and inspected the name tags to see which ones belonged to them.

“Where is everybody?” He asked the kids.

“Grandma and Christina are at work and Grandpa had to pick up some things for Christmas dinner.” Joseph Jr. responded.

“You guys are here alone?” Joseph was disgusted.

“Grandpa is down the street at the grocery store. He keeps calling every fifteen minutes to check on us.” Little Joe responded.

He would have a talk later with his dad about this. Right now he needed some rest.

“Hey kids, can you stay down here and play, so I can catch a nap on the couch?” It was a reasonable request since all the video games were in the basement anyway. The couch was also more comfortable than the bed.

“No problem Dad.” Joseph Jr. responded. “I’ll keep them busy.”

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Joseph laughed. "Then it's a plan." He gave the kids one more hug and walked up the stairs with the dog at his heels.

Each step of the old house creaked under the load of his weight. When he reached the living room he kicked off his shoes and sprawled out on the large leather sofa and got comfortable. The only audible noises in the room was the dog panting at his feet, and the sound of the air pump on the small albino frog tank making bubbles. It was fairly quiet.

He was close to dozing off when the house door alarm began beeping. The front door swung open. Pepper who had nestled down at his feet jumped up and began barking. He opened his eyes and lifted his head to see his sister Christina rush through the door with her hands full of folders.

"I can't believe that I had to work the whole day on Christmas Eve." She threw the folders on table by the door and looking at Joseph smiled. "Hey brother!" She followed these words with a wild rodeo wave of her arm in the air, "So, are you ready for some fun!"

"I'm ready when you are!" He laughed. "Besides I think I need a good family get together to make me feel better about my life. This way I can compare myself to everybody else and realize I'm not that bad off." Joseph chuckled again and slowly stood to his feet.

She looked at him with pity. "Funny! Very funny! It will be O.K. Joe. We've all been through it and you know your family is here for you. Just think about enjoying yourself tonight. A good time will take your mind off things."

"The only problem to your hypothesis is I still have to wake up tomorrow and face my misery all over again."

She was about to walk over and give him a much needed little sister hug when the phone rang. She halted in disgust and walked over to answer the phone. "The phone never stops ringing in this house."

Picking up the receiver and placing it to her ear she said, "Hello." Her eyes rolled when she recognized the voice on the other end. Looking towards her brother she said, "Oh, hello Manley, yeah he's right here."

Joseph knew Manley was aware he would be in town for the holidays. Manley was his only lifelong friend. They had been best friends ever since kindergarten and Manley knew how his family worked around the holidays.

His sister handed him the phone rolling her eyes again. She then stuck out her tongue and placed her finger near her mouth in a gagging motion. He laughed as he placed the phone to his ear. "Hello!"

"Hey Joe, what's up!" Manley yelled excitedly.

"Nothing much, it is the same ole, same ole brother," he responded.

"Is your family doing their Christmas Eve thing tonight?"

"Yep, you know it and you know you're invited."

"I have to drop my kids off at eight, so I'll see you around eight-thirty."

"Sounds like a plan." Joe said. "I'll see you then." He hung up the phone and there was an overwhelming bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. He wondered what kind trouble was on its way.

His family hadn't been able to get together and have a peaceful, uneventful gathering for a long time. There was always some commotion, or fight that broke out. "Great," he thought out loud, "like I need more drama in my life right now."

His sister who was still nearby gave him the love filled hug that was interrupted by the phone call.

He was glad, because he needed one.

Joseph then took a step back, laughed, and bowed before his sister. He had been waiting for this. "Shall I announce our guest list Madam?" It was his invitation for her to play a game that

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they secretly played. It was one more shred of evidence that they shared the same twisted sense of humor.

In the game they would pretend they were announcing guests at a royal party, but instead of announcing some noble guest with a grand title they would speak truthful and sharp remarks about members of the family.

“Ooh yes! Let me sit down first.” Christina moved over to the couch giving her brother her full attention.

“The celebration crowd will gather at eight o’clock. It is my sneaking suspicion that I will announce Aunt Cindy’s arrival first. She is a mother of three, divorced, but her life is probably one of the better success stories, at least, so far. Aunt Cindy has a black belt in struggling with all the horrors of divorce, dating after marriage, and purpose for her life.”

“Good call!” Christina shook her head yes in approval of her brother’s observation.

“Next on the guest list Madam is Uncle Ray who will arrive with his new girlfriend. A woman so admired that I have been informed of the many nicknames the family has honored her with. Behind her back she is called such names such as Trailer Park, Elvira, and the Big Easy.

Whatever her real name is, she obviously makes Ray happy while at the same time irritating everyone else. This makes her O.K. in my book.”

Christina kicked out her legs and giggled. She liked that observation too.

“I appreciate your affirmation Madam.” Joseph bowed again before her.

She responded “You are welcome kind sir.”

Joseph continued. “But alas, Ray is another life that has never recovered from divorce. He too was once a success story, but after his wife left him homeless and penniless he plummeted from the heights and hit rock bottom hard.”

“Real hard!” Christina added.

“Next is Aunt Dana and be assured she will be the life of the party. Where could you begin with her list of misery?”

“I agree.” Christian nodded.

“Currently she lives with two of her children and one of Ray’s kids. You could call them kids, but all of them are eighteen and older and have decided they will never grow up. They may be considered an adult by law, but they are still lost children at heart and in mind. Dana has literally established a Peter Pan Utopia in her home. If only they could find their happy thought and learn to fly away.”

Christina stood clapping in response. “That was good! I like that one the best so far!”

“Would you like to hear your announcement?” Joseph raised one eyebrow and gave a little smirk.

“Will it hurt?” She asked with excitement.

“No, but it might make you laugh!” He answered

“Darn. O.K. let’s hear it!” Christina sat back down on the couch.

“Christina will arrive with beer and liquor bringing along a few of her beautiful friends for the old men to drool over. Christina is also divorced and has an old boyfriend who stalks her night and day. She would like nothing more than to get rid of him, but one of her little boys that she loves calls the stalker daddy.”

“Yeah Baby! That one was perfect!” Christina laughed.

“Let’s not forget Manley Madam.”

“Oh do we have too!”

“He is on the guest list.” Joseph nodded.

“Very well, you may continue.” Christina answered with a look of disgust, but it was all in fun.

“His eyes will reveal that he has fallen off the wagon and is smoking the ‘wacky tobacky’ again. Though it is considered

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by some to be one of the less harmless drugs it is not so for Manley. Manley couldn't exist as a sane person without at least spending half his paycheck on the stuff. Manley's life is a true horror story. No wonder he fits in so well on this guest list. One of Manley's good friends, who also happened to be his dope dealer, stole his wife and family from him."

Joseph's voice took on a tone of seriousness. "When Manley was going out the front door to work, Jim the dope dealer was coming in the back. Manley may not have been the best husband in the world, but no one deserves to feel the pain caused by a spouse cheating on you, let alone with a good friend."

There was an awkward moment of silence as they both realized just how close it hit home for Joseph. Christina knew about the mysterious phone call and Joseph had talked to her on the phone about his suspicions of Tanya's infidelity.

"That one is sad." Christina said.

"They are all sad if you think about it." Joseph replied, as he walked over to the couch to sit near his sister. "If it wasn't for our ability to laugh at our failures and pain we would cry ourselves to death."

They both sat silent for a minute.

Joseph realized that they both lost interest in the little game. Drawing close to his sister who slipped into deep thought he whispered, "Just let loose and have fun right?"

Christina looked at her brother and winked at him. "I think I am going to get a shower and get changed. When I'm done do you want to go to the store with me?"

"I'll be here waiting." Joseph answered.

He spent the rest of the day with his sister enjoying her company as they prepared for the evening. They purchased food, drinks and rented movies and games to keep the kids entertained.

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At about seven-thirty he showered and changed into jogging pants and an oversized T-Shirt. If it was going to be a long night, then he might as well be comfortable.

It was nine o'clock when Joseph's mother, who was last on the guest list, gathered with the rest of the family around the table in the overstuffed and cramped dining room. It wasn't that the room was small, but that the table and all the other dining room furniture were too big.

All Joseph could think of when he looked at them all crammed into the overstuffed room was "sardines."

Joseph watched his father quickly retreat into the basement. His dad's computer was conveniently located in a dark corner opposite the guest room. He went there to escape noise and relatives he didn't care for.

Here they all were Joseph thought. Many lives that, at times, seemed pointless and full of suffering, huddled around a table, playing parlor games, and drinking themselves to sanity by forgetting their reality. The sad part was they drank many times to the point of insanity.

"What are we going to play?" His mom asked everyone.

"We could play the 'Crazy Word Game.'" Ray suggested.

Joseph looked at Ray and recognized the emptiness and lifelessness that surrounded him. He felt the way Ray looked.

After hours of games and laughing the night ended as he suspected. His aunt Dana became so drunk that she called 911 on them for being mean to her. Joseph was the first to meet the police at the door. Dana drunkenly denied that she called. With some advice from the police everyone quickly got the hint and the party was abruptly ended before anything worse happened.

When everyone finally left Joe crawled into the bed and fell limp. He was so tired. It didn't take long before his mind settled, his eyes closed, and he was fast asleep.

Chapter 3

Nowhere To Hide

The next day was Christmas. Joe was glad it went by uneventful. He knew it was probably because alcohol wasn't involved. It was the following day when he answered the phone and recognized Manley's voice that he realized the lull would soon be over.

"Hey Joe, how was your Christmas?"

"It was nice and peaceful. What about yours?"

"Awesome. My kids had a good Christmas this year. Dude, your aunt was hilarious the other night!"

Joseph laughed. "So funny she almost landed herself in jail!"

"Hey, are you doing anything tonight?" Manley asked.

"I don't have any plans. What's up?"

"I called a few of the boys from the hood and we thought it might be nice to get together and hang out."

Joseph didn't have to think twice about the idea. He would have normally told him no, because going out meant going to a dance club, or bar. This time he didn't. He wanted to go out. "That sounds good. Just swing by here and pick me up when you're ready."

"Wow! I didn't think you would say yes! Hey, why don't you ask some of your family to come along?"

Joe knew where this was going. "You mean like my sister, my cousin, and my aunt?"

"You know me well my brother!"

What he knew was that Manley had a crush on most of the females in his family. Actually, Manley had a crush on every female that came within ten feet of him.

"I'll ask them just for you." Joseph laughed. "See you then."

"See ya!"

ANTHONY PERRY JR.

As Joe dropped the phone into its base he began to instantly justify his decision to go out. It's not like he was looking to do anything immoral. God knew the last thing he wanted was trouble, to get drunk, or a one night stand.

The only problem was he missed the companionship of his wife and even though he was surrounded by those who loved him, he felt alone. He warned himself to be careful and not let his desire for companionship get the best of him.

He laughed at the thought about what would happen if any of the church members ever found out he visited a dance club. "They would tar and feather me." Continuing to justify himself he used the excuse that Jesus never separated himself away from those who drank, ate and partied.

Heck, they called Jesus a drunk and a glutton one time and asked his disciples why their master hung out with the bad people. Bad people or not, the fact is Jesus taught that God loves all people the same no matter how others might label them.

Jesus taught it was the sick that needed a doctor. The only problem, he thought, was they were all spiritually sick and in need of a healer. It made him wonder why the bars and dance clubs weren't filled with followers of Christ inviting people to come and find the healing they need for life. It made him wonder why he didn't spend more time himself seeking the healing for his life.

He plopped down in front of the television and for the next few hours zoned out on old cowboy shows. The phone rang and his dad yelled from the basement for him to pick up the phone.

"Hey Tony this is Tracy. I was just calling to see if the kids wanted to stay the night at my place. We hardly had a chance to see them when Tanya was up. My kids really want to see their cousins."

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Tracy was Tanya's sister-in-law. He didn't have a problem with the idea. He put the phone down and yelled down into the basement. "Hey kids! Do you want to stay at Tracy's?" The response was an emphatic yes. Joe picked up the phone. "It looks like they are all yours Tracy. When do you want to pick them up?"

"I'll head over now."

"I'll have them ready." He hung up the phone and yelled into the basement. "She's on her way over. Get your stuff together." He could hear them moving. They bolted up the basement steps, gave him a hug, and ran up the stairs to the second floor to pack their things.

The front door suddenly opened and Christina walked in. She had taken one of her sons to his dad's house. She threw her purse and keys on the table and let out a sigh of relief. "That man gets on my last nerve."

Joe laughed. "Want to go out tonight?"

"Absolutely! Where do you want to go?" She asked.

"No idea."

"O.K. my next question is whose all going?"

"It will be me, some of the boys from the old hood, and the one who worships you from afar." Joseph chuckled as his sister gave him a look that jokingly said back off.

She knew he was talking about Manley. "Keep talking like that," she said, "and I'll never go anywhere with you again!" Christina lightly punched Joseph's arm.

Acting as if the light tap hurt he rubbed his arm and said, "Ooh, I'm just joking." He winked at her. "The truth is I want you to go. I want to spend more time with you before I leave."

"That means I have to ask mom to watch Tommy, but if she is watching your kids, then there won't be a problem."

“Yeah, about that, I sorta got lucky.” He told his sister. “I didn’t have to ask her to watch them. Tanya’s sister in law is coming to pick them up for the night.”

Christina responded, “Great for you, but sucks for me. It’s terrible when you have to go through a guilt trip to get your mother to spend time with one of her grand kids.” She paused for a moment. “I’ll get her to do it though. Fight guilt with guilt I always say. I’ll call Sandra and Cindy to see what they’re doing.”

Christina went to their mother and then made some phone calls. Joe waited for her on the couch. He was glad to hear his mom agreed to watch little Tommy without a fuss. He was also glad his Aunt Cindy and Cousin Sandra were going to join them.

With all the arrangements made he decided to get ready for the evening. He noticed a sinking feeling in his gut again. He knew it was going to be one of those nights. One of those nights he wished he had stayed home and no matter how hard he would try to avoid trouble; trouble was going to find him anyway. But he wanted to get out. He needed to get out. This feeling ruled his better judgment.

When Manley arrived at the house he had Sanchez, and Sanchez’s younger brother Ramirez with him. Joseph, Cindy and Christina hopped into Cindy’s car and followed them to the dance club. His cousin Sandra and her two friends had already left and were going to meet them there.

The club was a little place that opened where the old chicken place used to be. The owner who renovated the restaurant was one of his sister’s friends and because it recently opened many people didn’t know about yet. This meant a small crowd and a small crowd suited him fine.

When they arrived there were only a few other patrons present, but after awhile things picked up a bit.

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After settling in, Joseph walked to the bar where his cousin Sandra was sitting. She and her friends were halfway to where everyone else in this place was heading. He had playfully nick named the place where drunks go as, “La La Land.” He sat down beside her and waited for the bartender to come and take his order.

Sandra was at least ten years younger than he was. Their relationship was strange. Even though they were years apart in age and never spent a great deal of time together they were very close.

Sandra became aware that her cousin was sitting near her. She shouted, “Hi Joe!” and greeted him with a hug.

“Hey sweetie, how are you doing?” Joseph responded back with a big squeeze.

“I’m doing fine,” she said, “but I hear you’re not doing so well.”

“Things are rough, but I’m handling them. I’m just glad that I have people who love me and support me.” Joseph looked at her and realized that she wasn’t her happy, cheerful self either. This was odd for her. “What about you? Are you O.K.?”

Sandra looked down at the bar. “I’m not happy.” She paused for a moment. “My boyfriend Jordan and I kind of broke up a few weeks ago. We’ve been going out for over a year now. He wanted to take the relationship a little farther than I wanted. I want to get my life together before I make the big plunge of commitment. I’m still young and I’ve got a lot to figure out. He said he’ll wait for me until I’m ready, but I just don’t know.”

“You miss him?”

“Yeah, but he said we’re going to take our relationship a step further, or stop seeing each other for awhile until I can figure things out.”

“Ahh...,” Joseph understood now, “so this was his decision and not yours. This is his attempt to force your hand.”

Sandra raised her eyebrow at Joe's words. Joe was probably right.

The bartender approached him. "What will you have?"

Joseph looked at her with a blank stare. "I want something, but I'm not really sure what I want." He looked to his cousin. "Any advice?"

Sandra looked at the bartender and said, "Give him a Jaeger Bomb and put it on my tab." The young woman tending the bar quickly reacted to the order.

Looking to his cousin he asked, "What's a Jaeger Bomb?"

She smiled. "Don't worry you'll like it."

After a slight pause Joseph asked, "So, do you think that it is over between you two?"

"No. Not really. He still calls me every day and we talk a lot. I just don't know."

"It's obvious that you care about him. I just hope you don't find yourself regretting this later."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well," Joseph thought for a moment, "we would like to plan out our future and work out our plan, but for most of us this will never turn out exactly the way we want. For example, you might say he will wait for me if I decide I want to be with him, but that doesn't mean he will. If he moves on with his life, then you might spend your life saying I wish I never let him go."

"So what are you saying?" She asked.

"I'm saying you should consider the possible consequences, and be willing to accept them if things don't work out the way that you'd like."

A funny thought struck him and he laughed. "It's the story of our family. Think about how often some of us have failed to think things through and see the possible outcomes of our relationships, and choices. No wonder we get the rug ripped out from under us all the time. We build our straw houses and think

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they will last forever. A storm shows up and blows them easily away. What we have left is the pain of loss and the struggle of putting humpty dumpty back together again.”

After a slight pause he continued. “You know I bet you haven’t even asked yourself why it’s so important for you to get your life in order in the first place. Have you spelled out in exact detail what goals you want to reach and what having your life in order looks like?”

You should also ask yourself if what you are saying to this young man is a cover up for your own fear of commitment, or marriage. Is it because you are afraid of getting hurt, or afraid that you will miss out on something? I’m just saying maybe you should dig a little deeper. A good place to start is by asking yourself what life’s all about in the first place.”

Sandra looked at him with hurt eyes. “I feel like your judging me. I want your approval so much. I don’t know why, but I feel you’re disappointed with me.”

Joseph put his hand on hers. “No Sandra! It’s not like that! I’m not your judge and I’m not judging you. You have to choose the way you believe is best for your life. I would never look down on you. I just wanted to give you some advice, so you don’t make the same mistakes we’ve all made.

I’ll tell you what I do see when I look at you. I see a young woman that has grown up in a dysfunctional family. This world in so many ways has let you down. I know you feel that your mom and dad never nurtured, loved, and directed you in the ways you needed. You’ve seen the results of bad relationships, marriages, and mismanaged lives and it might make you hesitant when it comes to your own life. Your past could have influenced you in a lot of wrong ways, but you’ve avoided them. I just want you to make better decisions and be better prepared for life than we were.

ANTHONY PERRY JR.

I just don't want you to have any regrets. I also don't want fear to keep you from finding your way either."

He winked at her, "The Lord helped me. You might want to consider seeking His help."

There was an awkward silence for a moment and Sandra appeared to be in deep thought. He realized by her expression that he just put a huge damper on her night out. He tried to salvage it for her. "I'm sorry, I'm a party pooper, just ignore me."

Sandra smiled and reached to give him another hug. "Thank you for caring."

The bartender brought Joseph his drink and he excused himself before he made things worse.

Joseph walked over to the dark corner where the others were sitting. His Aunt grabbed one of the only comfortable seating areas when they first arrived.

Joseph sat down with the others and looked at his buddies who were pounding drinks left and right like water. Their table was already filled with empty beer bottles and shot glasses.

He knew the waitress was avoiding cleaning their table because of their overt remarks directed towards her. He wondered how long it would take for his buddies to get so drunk that they start hitting on every girl in the room. "This of course," Joseph thought, "could be the very source of trouble for the evening."

A few minutes after sitting down his sister came over to the table where he was sitting. She looked at him with disappointment in her eyes.

"What did you say to her?"

Joseph took his first drink of his Yeager Bomb and it went down hard. "I take it you mean Sandra?"

"Yes, Sandra! She is sitting over at the bar crying and depressed out of her mind. Her friend said it was your fault."

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“That does it,” said Manley, “you’re fired as a comforter my friend. Hey everybody,” he yelled, “Joseph isn’t allowed to talk to anyone else tonight.” Sanchez and Ramirez raised their beers and toasted to Manley’s words.

Joseph felt bad. Instead of answering his sister he just shook his head and blanked out. He was sure his sister was still talking, but why did he have to explain himself? He didn’t think what he said was all that wrong.

He then asked himself why he was even here in the first place. He looked at all the people dancing and drinking and asked, “Why are any of these people here? Why are they here breathing, laughing, crying, and pretending? Who are they really?”

“Hello, earth to Joe. Are you there Joe?” His sister asked.

“I didn’t think what I said was all that terrible.” He commented. “I just asked her to think things through and look at things from all angles.”

“I’ll go over and try to cheer her up.” Christina said. “You should lighten up too. You know that sometimes when we go through hard times our outlook can get a little skewed.” She said this in a motherly tone. “Let loose Joe, lighten up, and have fun. That’s why you’re here.”

As Christina walked back over to the bar to comfort Sandra, Manley, Sanchez, and Ramirez found another good reason to toast in her words.

Joseph wondered if the real point of his being in this bar was to let loose, lighten up and have fun. Were they all here trying to convince themselves that this drinking, dancing, laughing, crying and pretending was the way to be happy? Was all of this just a way to cope with life? Or was this all some sort of show they put on to prove to others that they have some purpose for their existence and life isn’t all that bad? Maybe this was their way of dealing with a lack of meaning in their life. Maybe this

was all the purpose and meaning they could find in a world that wasn't handing much out these days?

Then he asked himself his famous question. What purpose would this singular night serve? A tear rolled down his face as he realized that in the larger picture of things this night wouldn't mean much to most of the people here. It would just be one night like a hundred others. It held no great reason for being and it served no obvious purpose. Or did it?

Why was he here anyway? Was he here to be a positive Christian influence? Was it to be with his loved ones? Was it to drown his sorrows in alcohol? Was he here to bury the reality that his life had taken a turn for the worse and he was in pain? Why was he in pain? Why did it hurt so much? And why on God's green earth did he ask himself so many impossible questions?

He wanted to find the answers and he felt lately that God wasn't dealing any solutions out his way. Maybe his advice to Sandra wasn't all that good. He knew he couldn't see all the bumps in the road, so why was he telling her to look for them! Maybe it's because some foresight is better than none at all.

Manley looked at Joseph and noticed the tear running down his face. "Dude, it's not that bad, she's just drunk. You know how emotional people get when they drink. Tomorrow she won't even remember it."

"That's my point Manley. When tomorrow comes tonight may be lost time and a wasted opportunity for many of us."

Manley shook his head. "Dude religion has placed a damper on your thoughts. Ease up man. Enjoy yourself. I'm sure God doesn't see anything wrong with having a good time now and then."

As his mind went silent he realized that his sister's cell phone was ringing.

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“There it goes again!” said Cindy. “It’s been ringing on and off for about a half an hour now and it’s getting on my nerves.”

Joseph knew why his sister didn’t want to answer it. It was her ex-boyfriend Jack who was also the father of her son Chad. He wished she would turn the ringer off. One thing was for sure. Jack was persistent.

This was another case, he thought, of lust mistaken for love. It gave birth to another child who had to suffer the consequences of a relationship that should never have been. Joseph knew that Jack really cared about his sister, but he was still young and immature. Jack also had an ego the size of Mount Rushmore. Joseph found this type of self-centeredness to be the supreme ugly within people.

His sister, according to his relatives, kept romantic ties open with him in case of lonely emergencies. He laughed at the thought, “If lonely, then break glass for ex’s number.” It wasn’t fair to Jack if this was true. How did he know if it was true? He never asked his sister if it was.

Becoming utterly annoyed he answered the phone. His aunt Cindy looked at him with a huge smile on her face. “Tell him!” she said.

He knew what she was asking. She wanted him to tell Jack where they were.

Placing the phone to his ear he couldn’t hear anything on the other end. Wondering if anyone was there at all he said five words, “Jack – Drink up my friend,” and hung up. *Drink Up* just happened to be the name of the Club they were at. He intentionally used the phrase knowing Jack might get the picture. His sister told Jack earlier that evening when she dropped Chad off that she planned to stay in for the night with her family. She didn’t want Jack to know where she going, because he would have dumped Chad off at his sister’s and followed her.

ANTHONY PERRY JR.

Joseph hoped to put him out of his misery. It really wasn't his place he thought, but he was tired of games. He was tired of the way people treated other people. Why can't people just be honest with themselves and with everyone around them? Why couldn't they treat others with common courtesy? Why couldn't they treat others the way they wanted to be treated? "Maybe," he thought, "they really didn't know how. Maybe it was easier for them to keep things safe by not rocking the boat, but was it really worth it?"

The phone didn't ring again.

He realized that Jack got the message when he showed up at the Club near closing time. Of course his friend Sanchez feeling uninhibited from the booze decided that Joseph's sister might be a good trophy to obtain for the night.

Jack, seeing Christina talking to another man, walked up to her and said, "So is this the new guy that you're doing now?"

Joseph quickly jumped up between the two men whom he thought looked more like two oversized boys. "Jack this is just Sanchez my friend. Christina grew up with him. He's more a brother than anything." Joseph looked at Sanchez. "Isn't that right Bro?"

Sanchez shrugged his shoulders. "If you say so Joe."

It didn't matter what he said because Jack was already drunk and ready for a fight when he came.

Chad got close to Sanchez's face. "Maybe Sanchez would like to go outside and settle this like a man?"

With those words a huge crowd barreled outside for the show.

Out in the parking lot the two circled around like pro wrestlers do before they start slamming each other all over the ring. When the fight began Joseph watched as his sister decided to be a human wall. She pushed her way between the two who

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thought that bashing each other's brains in was going to solve whatever problem they believed existed.

Christina soon became a punching bag and a walking mat between the two Neanderthals. Luckily, because of his size, Joseph was able to grasp each one in a head lock and pull them off of her. He quickly let them go and rushed to his sister.

After Jack and Sanchez were separated they showed their true age by calling each other names.

With that his night at the bar was over, just as he thought it might end. He just didn't like the idea that he was the cause of the trouble. If he would have kept his mouth shut Jack would have never showed up.

He and his aunt Cindy loaded up his sister into the car who was crying eighty-proof tears at this point. Next, they loaded up both his cousin Sandra, who had turned into an obnoxious drunk, and one of her friends, who couldn't walk two steps without falling on her face, into the back seat. Cindy who was the designated driver began her two o'clock in the morning taxi ride to take the drunks home.

The car was filled with crying, cursing and screaming. Joseph somehow managed to blank out and separate himself from the drunken stupor.

He thought to himself about how he tried to live a good life. He loved the Lord, he felt led by God to minister to people, and he was a loyal and faithful husband and father. He was not perfect by any means, but he wasn't that imperfect either.

Sure he could go to the example of Christ's suffering and say he was sharing in that suffering by enduring unfair treatment, but this didn't ease the pain he was feeling. He remembered the Bible said that when a Christian seeks to do good they would suffer.

He then pictured himself as a modern day Job of the Bible. He didn't have Job's wounds and sores on the outside, but he

suffered like Job from wounds and sores on the inside. Like Job he felt he had lost everything. This is when hope entered. Maybe like Job he could get it back better than before.

Would he be able to have the happiness and contentment with his life as before, but even better? What stopped him from having it now? Was it Tanya? Was it because of the pain and anguish that Tanya put him through that kept him from happiness and contentment? Was it because everything that he believed was wrong with families and marriages today was now afflicting him in ways he described to others and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

He was so angry with Tanya. Why did she do this? Was her life so bad? Didn't she think about the kids? Did she think the grass was greener on the other side? "Silly woman the grass has to be cut on the other side too," he thought.

He was trying very hard to deny his anger, but he realized the truth that he was beyond angry. He was furious. When you laid it all down it was more than this, it was pure and genuine hate for what had happened. "Hate the sin," he reminded himself, "and not the sinner." He wasn't sure if he was being sincere to the motto.

For some reason his mind touched upon his financial situation. He finally accepted the fact that no matter how he had tried to budget his money after the separation he didn't have enough to live on. He didn't have enough to buy himself food every month and pay his bills. That was why he was beginning to max out his credit cards. It's how he paid for Christmas and the trip up.

He and Tanya began the process of building a life together, but now all that was left in the rubble of a broken dream. It was that broken dream he was paying for financially, physically, and emotionally. He didn't want to do it, but he played with the idea of bankruptcy.

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“Joe!” Cindy yelled again.

Hearing his name he snapped out of his thoughts. “Hmm?”

She laughed. “This is your stop. You want to get out, or sleep in my car?”

Joseph looked up to see his parent’s house and chuckled. “I guess I’ll get out. Thanks for the ride Cindy.” Before he shut the door he leaned down and said, “Maybe tomorrow we can go see a movie. That’s more my style.”

“O.K.” His Aunt said. “That sounds good. We can take your mom along and treat her for her birthday. I know there’s a new movie out that she’s wanted to see.”

“Sounds like a plan. See ya tomorrow.”

He helped his sister out of the back seat and walked her up the front steps of the porch. His dad met them at the door. There was a smile on his dad’s face and Joseph knew he stayed up late in hopes that he was drunk. It would give his dad something to poke and fun him about, but he was going to disappoint him.

“Are you drunk?” he asked his son with a smile on his face.

“Sorry dad, I’m sober as J-bird. I don’t think I can say the same thing for my dear sister here.” Joseph helped his sister into her bed, got a glass of water from the kitchen sink and headed to his bed in the basement. He set the glass on the nightstand and without changing into his nightclothes or covering up he plopped down. It was the last thing he remembered.

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Chapter 4 Surrender & Revelation

“Dad! Dad, wake up!” Joseph Jr. pushed on his dad’s back.
“Grandma Sally wants to talk to you.”

Joseph slowly rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed. He rubbed his eyes, yawned, and took the phone from his son.

His sister in-law planned to drop the kids off after lunch. Since his son was standing next to him he assumed it was early in the afternoon.

Sally was Tanya’s mother. He was not always on best of terms with his mother-in-law. On a number of occasions they didn’t see eye to eye, especially when it came to religion. They had more than one heated debate over the subject, but Sally never held a grudge or took it personal. He never did either. This was their way of lovingly tolerating each other.

“Hello?”

“Hi Joseph, I was wondering if I could take the kids to the movies and dinner today.”

“Sure, no problem. What time do you want to come and get them?”

“How does four o’clock sound?”

“That sounds fine with me. I’ll have them ready.”

“How are you doing kiddo?” She asked.

Joseph heard sincerity in her voice. He talked to her many times about Tanya. She was more than aware of what was happening. This was one of the rare situations she had sided with him. They both tried to talk some sense into Tanya, but she wasn’t being the kind of person who listened to reason. Tanya was doing things her way and that was all the reason she needed.

“I am hanging in there and mad as hell I suppose.”

“You know that I am here for you if you need me.”

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“Yeah, I know Sally, and I appreciate it.”

“Well, I’ll see you at four.”

“Sounds good; see you then.” He pressed the off button and handed the phone back to his son.

Joseph looked at his son who was staring at him with a look that resounded with pity. “Have I reached that point,” he thought. “Have I reached the point when my kid looks at me and feels sorry for me?”

“Your grandma Sally wants to take you guys to the movies at four. What time is it now?” He watched as his son ran off. He could hear him upstairs telling the twins the good news. A few minutes later his son yelled down that it was two-thirty.

“Well,” he thought, “I might as well get up and waste another day.” He grabbed a change of clothes and headed upstairs to the shower. Locking the door behind him he turned the water on, adjusted the temperature, and pulled the knob for the shower head. Stepping into the tub and pulling the shower curtain closed he let the waters pour over his head and began to softly cry.

He prayed for God’s healing streams to wash over him like the water flowing over his head. He didn’t know exactly how long he was in the shower, but it was long enough to have his mother pound on the door for him to hurry. She wanted in so she could get ready for the movie. It was then he remembered that he and Cindy were taking his mom to the movies for her birthday.

His mother-in-law arrived at four just as she said. He left with his aunt and mom shortly after.

The trip involved a short hop on the freeway. The movie theatre was located right off the exit. The Mega Movie-Plex didn’t awe him. In a society where everything was becoming super sized he had grown indifferent. In fact it only increased his desire for something more private and smaller.

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They purchased their tickets and hurriedly walked past the snack bar. He noticed the prices were super sized too. They found a place in the theatre where they felt comfortable, and then waited through fifteen minutes of previews before the film ever began.

As the movie began he started feeling sick and dizzy. He waited hoping the feelings would pass, but they didn't. Whispering to his aunt he asked, "Cindy, can I have your car keys?"

His mother overhearing said, "Are you all right honey?"

"I'm not feeling well mom. I need to lie down."

"Do you want us to take you home?" Cindy asked.

"I'll be all right. You two finish the movie and I'll wait for you in the car."

Joseph took the keys and tried to exit the theatre without causing too much distraction for others. When he entered the concession area towards the exit doors the strong smell of buttered popcorn made him nauseous. He quickly ran towards the doors to escape the stench turning his stomach.

Suddenly he recognized an all too familiar tingling feeling in his throat. As soon as he pushed open the doors and hit the cold air he vomited on the walk in front of the theatre. He must have vomited three more times as he slowly made his way to his aunt's car through the falling mixture of snow and rain.

Joseph opened the driver's door, started the car, turned the heater on full blast, and then crawled in the back seat shivering. Before he fell asleep he decided that he was going home tomorrow no matter how bad he felt. He wasn't going to stay one day longer, not even for his mother's birthday. He just wanted to go home and sleep in his lonely bed, and listen to the sound of nothing.

Tears filled his eyes as the thought of being alone struck him. The children would be with Tanya at her trailer and he would be

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alone. He would have to settle for their laughing, their questions, and their company every other weekend.

“I dare you to make me content with that Lord!” he whispered angrily. Within minutes he wept himself to sleep.

Joseph began to dream that he was in the middle of a busy intersection where a police woman was directing traffic. He saw Tanya walking down the street ahead of him. She looked at him and picked up her pace to escape him. He screamed for her, but she wouldn't respond. When he tried to cross the street after her the policewoman stopped him and shook her head no. She wouldn't let him cross.

The dream quickly moved to a different setting. He was standing at a stove working to prepare dinner. He looked in front of him where he thought a window should be, but there was only a brick wall. He heard the sound of his children laughing and playing from the other side of the barrier. He called for them, but they didn't hear him. He yelled to them that he was preparing dinner, but they didn't respond. How are they going to know dinner is done?

Joseph suddenly woke up. The freezing mixture was still coming down outside and the car was still running. The radio was playing one of his favorite songs, “I Don't Really Care.” The movie must not be over.

He pondered on the dream and it made perfect sense to him. Tanya walked right out of his life. No matter what he tried to do to get her to stop or catch up with her she just kept walking. When he thought about it, she was the policewoman too. She wielded the authority to keep him from getting close to her, from chasing after her.

The working at the stove part of the dream was his worst fear. He feared that he would spend his life working to provide for his children and that he wouldn't be able to share in their life fully as a father should. It was a horrible dream.

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He emptied his mind of thoughts and the sound of the car heater, music, and running engine once again lulled him to sleep.

He dreamed again. This time he dreamt that he was present at the last battle of a war. Everyone around him was happy that the war was finally ended. For some strange reason he was looking for Tanya among the casualties coming in on trucks and ambulances, but he couldn't find her. He ran into the hospital to look for her and to see if she had been brought in, but she wasn't anywhere. "Maybe she was dead" he thought. "Maybe she wasn't brought to the hospital, because she was dead."

The car doors opened and his aunt and mother got into the front seat of the car startling him awake. The two began discussing the movie without bothering to ask him how he was doing.

He thought about the second dream. This dream made perfect sense too. She showed no damage from the separation. Hardly a tear was shed on her part. Maybe she was dead. Anyone who would throw away fourteen years of marriage like it was an old worn out shirt must be dead inside. She must be as spiritually dead as a person can be. He realized the truth of this and he felt sorry for her.

The drive home from the movies was tolerable. The shaking, turning, and bumps didn't cause him throw up, but he knew he wasn't finished.

Before the night was over he threw up three more times as he packed his clothes and the kid's Christmas presents onto his truck. He covered them in garbage bags to protect them from the sleet mixture that continued to fall. When all was done he lay down to sleep with every inch of his body aching, especially his stomach.

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He slept well through the night and woke early the next morning. He got the kids ready and as they were saying their good-byes the phone rang. The call was from his friend Manley.

“Dude you are not going to believe what Sanchez did after that fight with that dude Jack?”

“What did he do?”

“After the fight I took Sanchez home and then four hours later he showed up at my door asking to borrow sixty dollars. He said he needed the money to fill a prescription for one of his kids who was sick.”

“Which one of these kids and by which mother are we talking about?” Even though which kid or mother didn’t matter, Joseph brought it up because of his bitterness towards Sanchez’s irresponsible choices in life. It was a stab at the irresponsible lifestyle that he despised.

“It is his kid with this last girl. Anyway, I was tired and didn’t have any money on me, so I gave him my bank card and told him to go up to the bank and take out sixty dollars and bring the card back to me...”

“Oh, no, please don’t tell me that he robbed you.”

“He took two hundred and sixty dollars from me. It was all I had Joe. His brother said he spent it on crack. I swear anything that would make you sell out a friendship like that has to be evil. I’m never going to trust another living soul in my life again. Everyone I have ever trusted has burned me.”

“My church has an emergency fund. When I get home I can get in touch with the church treasurer and see what we can do to help you out.”

“I appreciate the gesture, but you don’t have too. My mom is going to loan me fifty bucks till payday. I’m just flabbergasted. I just can’t believe it.” Manly was silent for a moment. “Well, anyway, you have a safe trip home and I’ll talk to you soon. I’m going to keep hunting down our so-called friend. I looked for

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him all day yesterday, but he's hiding from me. He knows what he's going to get when I find him. See ya Joe." Manley ended the call.

Joseph hung up the phone. He would never have thought that Sanchez would do something like that, but he had seen how crack could make people do crazy things they normally wouldn't do. He hoped Manley didn't do anything stupid.

He loaded his kids up in the small truck. The trip took about seven hours. When he got close Beckley West Virginia he called Tanya so she could meet them at the house and pick up the kids. When he pulled into the drive she was waiting.

It didn't take long to unload the truck. He hugged and kissed his kids good-night and went straight into his bedroom to lie down. Tanya followed him.

"You haven't seen me in a few days. Don't you want to stay up and talk to me? Tell me how your trip went."

He didn't feel like talking. Joseph lay down on his bed and rested his face in the pillow. His stomach hurt horribly and he wasn't in the mood to talk. Lifting his head he said, "I'm sick, maybe tomorrow after I get some rest."

"Did you miss me?" she asked.

Those words cut his patience like a knife. He wanted to scream. He wanted to yell at her and tell her to get the hell out of his house. He thought about telling her the truth by saying, "No, I didn't miss you. I hate what you've done to us. Get out of my face. How could you do this to us?" but he didn't. Instead he said, "Let's talk tomorrow O.K.," and dropped his head back down.

"Ok." With that she turned off the light in his room and left.

He could hear her gathering the kids into her car. When he heard the car pull out of the driveway he was relieved. He rested as well as he could in his lonely bed and in his lonely house.

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Joseph was startled awake when the sound of his alarm clock began blaring. Looking he could see that it was still set for six in the morning. It was the time he usually got up and went over to Tanya's trailer to watch the kids get on the school bus.

He wrestled his way out of the covers he was twisted up in and stood up. He felt dead, completely and utterly dead. He wondered why he was getting up. He didn't need to.

In fact why should he get up and eat, or sleep, or even work? He wondered not only why, but how. How was he doing this? He didn't have the strength or will.

Suddenly deep within he noticed something. "What is that?" He thought for a moment. He knew what it was! It was life! He looked to heaven. "It's You! Isn't it?"

Tears rolled down his face. "You are why I am getting up! You are how I am doing this! It's You!"

There was a lot he needed to do to get ready if he was going to go along with this life moving in him. He called the church's lay leader and told him that he would be there this morning, so he didn't have to fill in for him. He showered, shaved and ate breakfast despite the fact that it possibly wouldn't stay down. He prepared some of the materials he needed for the morning and set off for church.

During the ride to the church the sense of this life of God within him remained. Half way there a startling revelation came to him. It was so startling that he pulled off on the side of the road.

It all made sense to him now! He couldn't see the real problem, because he was so distracted by everything else that was happening in his life. How could he have been so blind? It was true! He had been so wrapped up in his situation that he lost sight of the big picture.

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Thoughts flooded his mind. Then as soon as it began it ended. Looking out his side window he made sure no cars were coming. He hit the gas and was off.

Joseph arrived at the church seven minutes before the service began. He went to the Pastor's office and put on his robe, grabbed his Bible and the list of weekly announcements that his secretary left on his desk.

He also left a note for his secretary giving her Manley's address and instructing her to send him money from the emergency fund.

When the music from the organ began to play he marched down the aisle behind the acolytes, and stopped at the altar to ask for God's help to do what he knew he must do. He went up to the pulpit area and sat in the Pastor's chair. It is then he asked himself if he had lost his mind. He was sure he hadn't. He knew everyone would think he was crazy. He didn't care.

The lay leader led the service as usual and when the time came for the sermon he stood and read from the story of the flood in Genesis. Without an outline and no preparation he hesitantly began to speak.

"We live in terrible times. I'm sure many of you agree with me. I realize that some of you may not. I guess it depends on how blinded you are to the reality of the pain and wickedness around us.

Our culture and society have unknowingly and blindly accepted different ways, truths, and lives that exist as a wall between them and God. This darkness makes them unable to recognize what is good, valuable, and of utter importance. They seek happiness, fun, self fulfillment, and love as their priorities. It's an inward and selfish pursuit. It is a great deception.

It blinds them from seeing and believing God's ultimate will and design for life. The world teaches them to receive first and give only if it doesn't get in the way of their own comfort and

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happiness. In God our goal is to give and not receive. To care about giving to the greatest good, as revealed by God, and to receive from God all that is good for everlasting life.

I have witnessed people seeking self profit at the expense of their neighbor, their neighborhood, at the expense of their family, and at expense to their relationship with God. In the process the lines of right and wrong become blurred. It has blurred these lines to the point that some churches lift up and honor their own way as the Christian Way.

We have become so used to this dark path that it is hard for us to believe that there is another Way than the way we believe. Unless we turn from the direction we are traveling we will march straight forward into the same conditions that caused God to flood the earth and wipe out humanity in the Genesis story. In fact these very conditions make our world a likely candidate to be wiped clean of the sin and wickedness that infects it.

You might think that we as Christians would never do anything like this, and we would never be led astray! But if you have been taught from your youth the lie is the truth, then it is hard for you to see and believe the words of Christ that say even the very elect will be led astray.

In some churches the darkness has reinterpreted the Way, the Truth, and Life that is Christ. It leads them away and astray from the truth and the Spirit of Truth.

Many of us have been taught to understand and believe in this misshapen message. It is so misshapen that one can barely tell the difference between someone inside the church from those outside the church. It is so misshapen that the statistics say that the same ills that pervade our society are equally present within the redeemed and empowered body of Christ.

What used to be a solid rock has become shifting sands that people sink in and stumble over. Many churches are filled with

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division, arguments, and debates that draw their attention away from their mission as the kingdom of God on earth.

I believe this is why there is such a great mistrust of the church in the public eye. The public is asking, “How can the Church be the one God trusted to rightly proclaim and display the Way, the Truth, and the Life when they don’t seem to know themselves what that is anymore?”

Something happened on my way here this morning. I want to share it with you.

There has been a great deal of turmoil in my life and many of you are aware of my situation. Lately I have been feeling that somehow I have strayed from the path that God laid before me. I thought it was caused by the trouble I was experiencing in my life, but I know now that it is something far deeper and spiritual than I first imagined.

I realized this morning that my personal problems overshadowed and stemmed from the real problem I was wrestling with. It is the problem we all need to wrestle with.

Jesus, his followers, and even the Apostle Paul faced this conflict in the scriptures. It has been seen in times past as the conflict of “Who has the truth and nothing but the truth.” It is the conflict that existed between Jesus and the religious, the educated, and the political parties of His day.

The letters of the apostle Paul describe it well. Friendship with the world and its wisdom and ways places us in the position of enmity with God.

Today under the light of modern thought, of progress and profit, of enlightenment learning against revelation, we have found it logical to reshape the Way of God in our own image.

We approach the scriptures texts with a capitalistic and democratic viewpoint or with whatever human system we live under. It has become in this manner a way for each one to interpret rightly for their particular context and liking. It only

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becomes accepted as God's Way only after we have given it our misshapen stamp of approval.

It makes us the final authority of truth. For me it has birthed a false Christianity. A perversion of the truth that teaches the truth is inconceivable, the way is relative, and the life is questionable.

The Apostle Paul tells us that without God's Spirit we can't understand God, God's love, and what it means to walk in that love with God and each other in kingdom relationship.

What is it that people want to hear? They want to hear, "I am O.K. and you are O.K., so live the way your conscious directs, and fulfill your hearts desires. Our conscious may not condemn us, but it doesn't mean we are innocent.

What is it that Christians want? Sadly, this sometimes is their own heart desires in their situation, and this at times is not God's Way, God's Life, or God's Truth for us.

In the words of Amazing Grace I will say this morning I was blind, but now I see.

Today I choose to live in God's kingdom. In order to make this a reality in my life I have decided to choose a radical, but biblical call and approach. What I am about to do I am doing for Christ on behalf of the kingdom. You may not understand it at first, but my hope and prayer is that it will be used for the Glory of God and the kingdom's renewal."

Joseph usually presented an altar call and led the congregation in the last hymn at the end of the message. Instead he took off his robe and set it on the altar.

He looked over the congregation and in a tearful voice said, "I hereby formally resign as your Pastor." Joseph walked out of the church amidst gasps. He asked himself again if he had lost his mind. He knew he hadn't.

Petitioners reached out trying to stop him and talk to him, but he kept walking. Many followed him out to his truck trying to

reason with him, but when he reached his truck he got in, started it, and left the crowd standing on the walk with their mouths wide open and in shock.

When Joseph pulled up to his house Tanya was waiting with the kids in the carport. They were making snowballs and throwing them at anything they could take aim at and hit; including each other. Joseph exited his truck and without saying a word passed her, unlocked the door to his house, and entered. Tanya hurriedly followed after him.

“What’s wrong? You look white as a ghost. Are you still feeling sick?”

“Tanya, do me a favor. Tomorrow rent a truck, then come here and take everything you want.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” she said

“I resigned as Pastor and I’m leaving. I can’t take any of this stuff with me, so you can have it. Take my coins, stamps, cards, and comic books and sell them. Sell whatever you want. Use the money to take care of the kids. When I get to where I am going then I will let you know.”

“You’re talking crazy! What happened! Slow down a minute and talk to me!” she screamed.

He headed for his camping gear in the basement and he could hear her pick up the telephone frantically pressing the buttons as fast as she could. He always kept his gear packed and ready in case he found the time to get away. Unfortunately the camping supplies hadn’t been used in years.

He then made his way back up stairs and into his bedroom. There he began packing clothing into his bag.

Tanya was in tears as she handed him the phone. “It’s your mother Joe. She wants to talk with you.”

Joseph ignored her and walked past her down the hall and into the kitchen. He began loading canned food and non-perishables into his pack. Looking at the clothes he was wearing

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he began to walk back to the bedroom. He stopped when he heard a knock at the kitchen door. Looking through its white see through curtains he noticed his Pastor-Parish Chairperson and a few of his good friends from the church. He kept walking.

Tanya was crying and sobbing to his mother over the phone as she once again followed him towards the bedroom.

He turned to her. "Get the door Tanya."

She set the phone down on a nearby table and ran to the door. Opening it she began frantically asking questions to the church members who were just as confused about the situation as she was.

He walked into the bedroom and shut the door behind him. Joseph fumbled through his drawers until he found his long underwear and his wool socks. He was going to need these.

He was in the process of changing when his Pastor Parish Chair knocked on the door.

"Joe can't we just sit down and talk this over?"

"Sorry Dan, there's nothing to discuss."

"You at least owe us an explanation. Can't you give us that?"

When Joseph finished changing he opened the door and stood face to face with the crowd that now filled his hallway. "I am going to put my faith in Christ's words that say, 'don't worry about anything else, but seek the kingdom of heaven and His righteousness and God will provide for all your needs.' And the words that say, 'Any man who has given up property, family, wife and children to follow me shall receive a hundred fold in this life and in the life to come.'

I realize that people will think I'm crazy, but sometimes it takes drastic measures, in drastic situations, to ensure drastic change."

"You haven't thought this through Joseph. That isn't what that scripture meant. What you're saying is unreasonable."

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“Whoever said the Kingdom’s Way always leads to reasonable actions Dan?”

“How about sitting down and talking this thing over rationally. The pressure has gotten to you, you need some rest, let us help you.”

“Listen to him sweetie.” Tanya butted in. “If you want to leave the church, then I will come back to you. We can try to make it work again. I know we can work things out if the church is out of the way.”

Joseph looked at her and shook his head. “Tanya I want you to listen very closely. Are you listening?”

“I’m listening honey.”

In a tearful voice he looked into her eyes and said, “Get behind me Satan.” He walked through the crowd gathered in his hallway and went outside where he found his children playing. He called them to his side. The others had followed him outside baffled.

“I have to do something kids. I will be away for awhile, but I will see you soon.”

“What is it you have to do Dad?” Joseph Jr. questioned.

“I’m going to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, then teach others how to find it. Jesus has called me to follow Him.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Dan chimed in.

Joseph ignored him.

“When will we see you again daddy?” Camille asked.

“Probably in a few weeks, but it may take longer.”

Camry popped in, “Like the time you went to Israel with the church?”

“Yes baby, like the time I went to Israel with the church.”

“We’ll miss you dad.” Joseph Jr. added.

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“I’ll miss you too, but I’ll see you soon. Now give me some hugs and kisses.” They gathered in a group hug. “I’ll talk to you in a few weeks.”

Joseph stood up and began walking down his driveway. Despite pleadings and an offer of a vacation he continued down the street away from them all.

His children followed, as far as they were allowed, and stood waving good-bye. Tanya was at the end of the driveway crying and sobbing to the members of the church to do something, but they were as helpless to stop him as she was.

Joseph never felt freer and at the same time he never felt so lost in all his life. Whatever this decision would bring he didn’t know, but he was going to deny himself, take up his cross and follow Christ. He would seek, ask, and knock. He would find the kingdom of God and teach others how to find it as well. He was committed to let nothing distract him, or get in his way. He would find what he was looking for following Christ.

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CHAPTER 5

Victims of the Darkness

2 1/2 Years Later

Sarah was becoming frustrated. Why wouldn't her hair curl right? It was like it had a mind of its own. She let out a moan as a knock on the bathroom door startled her.

"What is it?" She asked wishing she was home in the privacy of her own apartment.

"It's almost time to go Sarah."

She responded to her fiancé's mother. "Okay, I'll be right out." Sandy is going to be a good mother-in-law she thought. Rich didn't have that unseen umbilical cord that some sons have with their mother.

Sandy also took her side on a lot of things. It wasn't because she favored her over her son. Rich just didn't have a mature thought process. He argued irrationally for what he wanted, instead of realizing what was best in the situation. He was so hard headed sometimes that it took both of them to convince him he was wrong.

She finally gave up and slammed her curling rod down on the bathroom sink. She would just have to walk around with her hair out of place. She was aware that no one else would probably notice the imperfection, but she saw it. She knew it was there and that was bad enough.

Sarah unplugged her curling rod and placed her brushes and make-up into her overnight bag. Opening the bathroom door she walked down the hallway into Rich's old room where she had slept. Sandy wasted no time in turning it into a guest room.

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Two months after Rich left for the military she cleaned it out, painted it pink, and filled it with fake flowers and feminine decorations. She chuckled, “When Rich sees his room he is going to throw a fit.”

She set her bag on the dresser and picked up her shoes. Sitting down on the edge of the bed she untied them so she could slip them on her feet.

It suddenly dawned on her that she finally felt happy. Her childhood was tragic, but she overcame her circumstances. Despite her past she went to college, met a young man that loved her, and in a week she would be married. She would finally have the normal life that she always wanted as a kid.

She already knew how she was going to raise her kids. Her mother’s bad example taught her all that she wouldn’t do. The opposite of her mother’s actions must be the right way.

Sarah finished putting her shoes on and grabbed her purse on the night stand. Rich’s plane was landing in over an hour and she hadn’t seen him in seven months. She missed him horribly.

He finished his technical school in the military and was given orders to a base in Florida. She couldn’t wait to get out there and find a house, a job, and begin the process of building their life together.

Looking in the mirror one last time she said, “My wedding is one week away. I am excited, I am nervous, and I am happy.” Looking at her hair she continued, “Oh yeah, and my hair is out of place.”

She headed down the stairs and made her way into the kitchen where Sandy was grabbing her car keys and purse. “We have an hour drive, so we better get going.”

If there was one thing Sarah learned about her future mother-in-law is that Sandy hated being late. She herself wasn’t as punctual, but she was going to be on this occasion.

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Sandy's thoughts this morning were consumed with getting there in time so she could see her son get off the plane. Barring any unforeseen events she would do just that. She felt pride rise in her heart for her Son. She couldn't believe how she needlessly worried about him when he dropped out of college. At least he is doing something with his life. He has a beautiful fiancée and a great future. At least she could hold her head up high at the Woman's Club and boast about her son in the military and how he was engaged to a Business Analyst. So many other mothers at the club couldn't do that and she felt sorry for them.

Sarah opened the door and walked out of the house. Behind her she heard Sandy close the door and twist the knob to make sure it was locked. She walked to the car, opened the door, seated herself and buckled up. The sun hadn't risen yet and the cool and moist fall morning air was refreshing and revitalizing as it sent a chill through her body. When Sandy got into the car she was shivering.

"Burr! It's a cold one this morning." Sandy said as she placed the key in the ignition. Starting the car she turned the heater up full blast.

Sarah always wondered why people didn't wait for the car to warm up before they froze themselves with air that wasn't yet heated. She closed the vents closest to her.

Her thoughts quickly changed and she began replaying the strange phone conversation with Rich last night. He told her that there was something he needed to tell her. He was mysterious about it, but she believed there was a surprise behind it all. Maybe he bought tickets to Hawaii or the Caribbean for their honeymoon. She was excited and she couldn't wait.

Rich actually tried to talk her into staying home and waiting for him there. He even pleaded with her saying that he didn't want her to go to the trouble and that she really shouldn't bother

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getting up so early. How silly of him. Why would this be any trouble to her? She missed him, she loved him, and she needed to see him.

The drive went smoothly and they arrived at the terminal with time to spare. They literally ran from the parking garage into the terminal only to be halted by a security check point.

Sarah watched as Sandy walked past other people in line and fought with airport security. She demanded to get through ahead of everyone else so she could be there in time to see her son get off the plane.

Despite her attempt it didn't do any good. And in spite of her worry of being late it only took fifteen minutes to make it through the check point, up the escalator, and down the short stretch to terminal seven.

Sandy grabbed Sarah's hand as she positioned them directly in line with the ramp entrance.

Sarah looked at Sandy and asked, "How do I look?"

Sandy stepped back and inspected the young woman up and down. "Like a young beautiful bride waiting for her groom." She hugged Sarah.

Sarah felt butterflies in her stomach. She didn't know why she was so nervous, but she was. Seven months seemed like a lifetime, but it gave her seven months with her future mother-in-law to plan the picture book wedding she always dreamed of having.

Through the large window adjacent to the walkway the two watched arm in arm as the plane with its whining engines taxied into position. The large turbines powered down and within a few minutes the walkway doors opened and the first passengers began to exit the plane.

Sarah hopped up and down nervously. She was ready to run to him and fall in his arms.

Then through the crowd she saw him. She removed her arm from Sandy's embrace and took two steps forward clutching her hands together. She couldn't believe how handsome Rich looked in his military uniform.

Then she saw her. Her stomach lurched when she realized that Rich wasn't alone. In his hand was nestled another hand. It was a hand that belonged to a tall young blond with short hair who was dressed in a female military dress uniform. When her eyes locked with Rich's his head dropped.

"What...what...is this?" She could hear herself mumbling, but it was as if someone else was speaking. Rich let go of the young woman's hand and whispered into her ear. Leaving her near the ramp doors he glanced at his mother to only quickly turn away from her confused stare. He walked towards Sarah.

He stood fumbling for words in front of her. "I'm sorry Sarah. I didn't want you to come to the airport. I tried to tell you not to come last night. There was something I have to tell you and I didn't want to do it over the phone. I wanted to tell you face to face. I'm sorry you have to find out this way, but..."

"No! Just shut up Rich!" Sarah couldn't believe it. She didn't want to hear anymore. She knew what he was going to say. Her eyes glanced from Rich, to the young woman, to Sandy and back to him again. How utterly embarrassing, how devastating, how could he do this? How could this woman do this? Didn't she know that Rich was engaged? Didn't he tell her? Of course she knew! She had to know.

She slapped Rich's face as hard as she could, then turned and ran. She didn't know what else to do. Tears were running down her face. She heard Sandy's voice yelling after her, but she didn't care.

Sandy turned her attention to her son. "You are nothing, but a fool young man. How could you do this to her? How could

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you do this to me?" Turning from her son she began to quickly walk after Sarah.

Sarah ran through the crowds, down the escalator stairs, and out of the terminal sobbing the whole way. Once out the doors she grasped one of the support beams connected to the front awning. She clung to it and held on tight. How could he? It hurts, it hurts, how could he? Why? She felt a heavy pressure on her heart.

What did she ever do to deserve this? Her whole life was full of abuse by the ones she loved. She felt used and forsaken. Her whole life was a curse. She always found her place in the wake of everyone's destructiveness. She was done. She didn't want to live anymore. She would never love again. She would reject the world that had always rejected her. No one would ever hear from her again. No one would ever hurt her again.

In a show of strength she pulled herself together, straightened up and began to walk. She ignored the people whose attention had been drawn towards her. She raised her hand and wiped the tears from her face, but new ones replaced them.

Behind her she heard Sandy yelling for her to stop. She darted into a large crowd and then behind traffic to lose her. She didn't want to talk to Sandy. She didn't want to talk to anyone. She would go somewhere and hide. She would go somewhere and die in peace.

She hated life and everything about it. She hated people. "Everyone will hurt you sooner or later," she thought, "but they were not going to hurt her ever again." She would never let that happen ever again. She would never trust or find her meaning in relationships with other people again.

Sarah took off into an all out sprint. She ran for ten minutes until she became convinced that she had lost Sandy.

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Throughout the rest of the day she would run and walk in spurts. At times she would stop and hide herself behind a building, or a dumpster, and cry until she couldn't cry anymore. Once she actually dropped on the sidewalk crying. A couple stopped and asked her if she was all right. She ignored them, picked herself up and continued on. The gentleman yelled after her, "God loves you. God can help."

"God doesn't have anything to do with this." She said. The man's words concerning God stuck in her head as she walked. She switched back and forth from God, muddling through the pain, and to her new plan for her life without anyone.

She followed this pattern through the day and into the night as she traveled in the direction of her small apartment. She purposely chose a way back to town that was out of the way, so Sandy couldn't find her.

Sarah didn't want to talk to her. She didn't want to talk about what happened. She would never talk about it again. She would never talk to Rich ever again.

It was dark and early in the morning when she arrived on the outskirts of her home town. Thunder could be heard in the distance. Smelling moisture in the air she hoped that the rain would hold off until she reached her apartment. That hope was lost when it began pouring down heavily.

She was going to walk in the downpour, until a flash of lightning convinced her she needed to seek cover. Through the pouring rain and flashes of lightning she spotted a bridge, and a long drive across from it that led to a Seminary. She decided she would take her chances under the bridge. Reaching its edge she began fumbling down the muddy slope that led to the bottom.

Her eyes caught a glimpse of a flickering light when her foot slipped in the mud and she tumbled down to the bottom. She fell face first into the mud.

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Sarah screamed in frustration and anger as she lay in the muck crying. Large drops of water pelted her. Nothing worked out for her. No matter how sure and good it looked nothing ever went right. She couldn't trust anything or anyone. The world is against her. She didn't want to move. She didn't have the strength. She was going to stay there and die. If she was lucky a lightning bolt would hit her and put her out of her misery. She then did something she never did before. She prayed. She prayed out loud for God to strike her dead.

"Can I help you instead?"

Sarah was startled by the voice. She immediately ceased crying and jerked herself over looking in the direction of the voice. Fear covered her and she became filled with anger. She could barely make out a man with a garbage bag for a rain coat. He had a long and scruffy beard and was hovering over her with his hand out.

"No! I don't need anyone's help." She yelled at him. "Get away from me!"

He said, "Alright, but if you would like something to eat and a warm fire it'll be over there." He then pointed in the direction of a fire under the bridge.

"I told you I don't need any help." She screamed.

"Yeah, I heard you the first time." The man straightened up and began to walk back towards the bridge.

Sarah watched him. From the looks of it the stranger was living under the shelter of the stone overpass. From what she could see there was a small tent, a few makeshift tables, along with a small, but inviting fire. The stranger walked to the fire and sat down. He placed what looked like slop into an aluminum foil pie pan.

She rose to her feet and stood there for a few moments when a loud crack from lightning nearby startled her. She hurried over to the shelter of the bridge. Her clothes were soaked and

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covered in mud. A cold chill was now running through her body and she was shivering.

The stranger noticing her out of the corner of his eye took a spork out of a clear plastic bag lying at his side. He shoved it into the food on the pan and threw it like a Frisbee in her direction. He stood up and reached into his tent to pull out a blanket. He set it in front of her on the ground and sat back down.

She was hungry and she was cold. She wasn't going to be shy at a time like this. Thoughts of hypothermia flooded her thinking. Stripping down to her underwear she wrapped herself up in the blanket for warmth and placed her wet clothes near the fire. She then picked up the pan the stranger had thrown. It was full of beans and franks. She hadn't notice until now, but she was starving.

There was a place to sit on a large rock near the fire opposite the stranger. Its flames were offering welcomed warmth. In anger she barked at him. "I'm going to sit here until the rain stops, but I don't want to talk to you."

"Good." The stranger spoke. "I don't want to talk to you either."

She sat down and wept as she ate, but the stranger never looked at her or said a word. He just sat there reading what looked like a Bible.

It wasn't long before the stranger retreated into his tent leaving her by the fire alone. He left his Bible sitting on the milk carton he was using as a chair. She watched silently as the rain continued on into the morning. The Bible the stranger had left had a strange appeal to her, but she resisted the urge to pick it up and read.

It was early in the afternoon before the showers finally stopped, but Sarah didn't leave. She couldn't. She was filled with fear about returning to her apartment. What if Rich was

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there, or Sandy? She actually felt safe under this bridge and she feared and hated the world around her.

For six days she watched the man leave and return. He would feed her and build a fire at night. He brought her used clothes, but never spoke a word to her except when he told her where a port-a-potty was up the road. He always left his Bible sitting in the same place when he went to sleep. She began to wonder what had brought him under the bridge. She began to wonder if they had a similar story in common.

For six days she stayed under the bridge without coming out except to use the bathroom. The only other time she braved going out was on the first day when she walked up the creek to a small pool so she could bathe and wash her muddy clothes in privacy.

Underneath the bridge she began to feel more and more comfortable. She felt free and safe from the scary world out there. She wept much of the time, but never again in front of the stranger. On the seventh night she decided that she wasn't going back to her apartment. She made up her mind to stay and live under the bridge whether the stranger liked it or not.

That night when the bearded man returned she spoke to him for the first time since her arrival.

"I want to stay here." She demanded.

"That's fine. Do what you want. I don't own the bridge."

"We can talk, but I don't want to talk about my past and I don't want to hear about your past. We can talk, but nothing personal."

The stranger looked at her. "Can we talk about God?"

"As long as we don't talk about me," She answered.

"It's a deal." He laughed.

"My name is Sarah."

"Some call me the Seeker. Others call me the Preacher. Either one will do."

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“Okay then.” She responded. She began to think he was a religious quack, but to each his own she believed. He seemed harmless enough.

“Okay then.” The Preacher responded.

Charlie

Charlie unlocked the door to his small dorm room. With one hand he opened the door and with the other hand he threw his overloaded book bag into the chair that sat a few feet inside the door. Turning around he closed the door and rested his head against it as he fastened the locks.

Pressing his head against the wood his mind swirled with the professor’s lecture. He never heard these things from the pulpit in his church. Did his pastor know these things? Did his Pastor believe these things?

The words of the Preacher then filled his head. “There are two ways people view the scriptures today. They can view them skeptically and make them prove themselves to us, or they can trust them and let them prove us under their light and direction.”

He once thought Seminary was there to mold him and transform him into a spiritually mature Christian, but he felt he was spiritually less prepared for ministry than when he first started. He would graduate next year, but he wasn’t ready. He gained knowledge, but he felt he had lost faith and his passion to serve.

Charlie felt alone. He tried to talk about these things with the other students, but they didn’t struggle with the lectures like he did. Was there something wrong with him? Why was he the only one who seemed to be struggling? Maybe they were just hiding their own struggles? Maybe they just didn’t care like he did.

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He lifted his head up and walked to the small desk in his room to his laptop. He pressed the button and lay down on his bed as it booted up. He was mentally exhausted.

He reviewed the lecture in his head. Today's lecture touched upon the fact that modern theologians have offered up the concept that the miracle stories were not true, but were presented as a way for the writer to express spiritual things he wanted people to believe concerning Jesus. The professor said this view was based on the fact that this style of writing was common in this time. Those who wanted to make converts would write to an audience in this way.

Then there is the dating of the gospels. That is why some of the gospels are dated later. If the gospel has a story of Jesus predicting the fall of the temple, then they conclude that it must have been written after the temple was destroyed. The gospel writers included the prediction as a prophecy of Jesus to represent Jesus in a better light and prove their point concerning who they believed Jesus to be.

Charlie spoke out loud. "Why couldn't Jesus predict the destruction of the temple before it was destroyed? After all he was the Son of the Living God. Maybe Jesus did know what the Scribes and Pharisees were thinking in their minds and hearts. Maybe He did perform miracles. Doesn't God know what we are thinking? Wasn't Jesus God in the flesh? Can't God do anything? Do we have to believe that we can't take what the gospels say literally about these things?"

Charlie was frustrated. He wondered what faith had to do with any of this.

Then there was the Preacher. His words called him to hold on, and to keep believing, to keep seeking and that his faith would come through his Seminary experience tested and purified by fire to be unwavering.

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His lessons and studies at the Seminary made him second guess, doubt and question. The Preacher's words inspired faith, hope, and love. Were both of these important as his professors taught? They seemed to work against each other.

He also knew he couldn't continue on this way. There was something he was missing. There was something he needed.

Charlie reached for his Bible on his night stand and opened it up to the gospels. He began to pray.

"Lord I will trust that you are revealed in this Word. That it is true and through it You reveal yourself so we can know You and love You. Speak to me Lord. Let Your Spirit guide my heart and mind into the truth. Teach me, mold me, and make me after Your will. Teach me to follow You. Help me to enter Your kingdom. Amen."

Charlie read for hours. He was overwhelmed with the feeling that God was near. It revealed to him that his faith was still alive.

Tanya

Tanya knelt on her knees at the foot of her bed and prayed.

"Lord, I thank You for today. I rest my life in Your hands. Shower Your grace upon me and lead me in Your Way. Amen."

She rose to her feet looking at the empty bed. Tears entered her eyes as she thought of Joseph.

Her mistake cost her. It cost him. Admitting her adultery was devastating. She would never cheat on him again. She wanted nothing more than to make things right. She was ready now. She was ready to follow Christ at Joseph's side. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else was more important.

Chapter 6
A New Covenant

Six Months Later

Another cold night came and passed. His body shivered. Moving softly he tried not to disturb the figure nestled in the sleeping bag next to him. Slipping on his wind breaker and boots he slowly moved to the front of the tent and unzipped the flap. Stepping out into the morning sun he zipped the tent back up as quietly as he could.

Joseph looked toward the stream and the reflection of the sun off of the water made his eyes squint. Looking away from the glare he noticed puddles of water where the sun had melted the morning frost.

He closed his eyes and stretched his chilled stiff body. He lifted his hands to the sky. He whispered. "Good morning Lord."

He suddenly remembered today was his anniversary. Today celebrated his third year on the streets. More importantly it was exactly two years ago the New Covenant and the kingdom of God became the reality he was seeking.

A strong wind blew and caught a sleeve of cardboard nestled in his camping gear. The piece of cut up box rested at his feet. "How convenient." He chuckled. He dropped his knees down onto it for prayer.

Bending forward he rested his elbows to the ground and prayed silently.

The tower bells of the Seminary broke his train of thought. The ringing bells reminded him of the poem they inspired. The poem was important to him, because soon after writing it he

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found his sense of purpose again. Closing out the clanging chimes from his thoughts he finished his prayer.

He lifted himself up and took a deep breath of the morning air. Still on his knees he recited the poem that had become an expression of his calling.

Silly bells, why do you ring so?
As if your sound could change the world,
As if without you none could go,
Silly bells, what an ego you have.
Your tones they vibrate through the air,
As if they could direct a life,
As if they could mark history here.
Silly bells, many wish you would not ring.
Silly bells, faithfully you ring true.
Is that not why you were created?
What else can silly bells do?
But ring so that everyone can hear.
Silly Bells you do what you were meant to.
Be true to yourself and what you are.
Can we hold that against you?
As if our opinions mattered anyway.
Behold, there, one stands in the distance
Who waits to hear your morning song.
To you his heart is very true,
To him silly bells ring joyous sounds.
What is your purpose silly bells,
But to be spent for such a service,
To ring out as a meadowlark's song,
And enjoyed like butterfly's kisses.

"I'm a silly bell too." Speaking these words under his breath, he heard the tent unzip behind him.

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Sarah stepped out of the tent into the brightness of the morning. Her eyes adjusted as she took inventory of the beauty around her. The trees, the flowing stream, even the songs of the birds seemed to be yelling beautiful!

Of course the Preacher is in his favorite position; can't let him off easy this morning. "Preacher, every morning it's the same thing with you! You're always out here talking and waking me up. Why can't you go down towards the end of the stream and yak to the birds or something."

He looked at the young woman making her way from the tent and turned his head away chuckling. He knew this was her way of saying good morning.

Joseph's thoughts suddenly moved towards his family. They were visiting today. A sense of loss and a deep hurt filled his chest. He missed them. It was the cost of the sacrifice he made to follow Jesus this way.

John Wesley once said the world was his parish. He believed he was experiencing what Wesley must have felt when he made this statement. Living on the streets helped him to understand the reality of the kingdom of God. All the distractions of the world were powerless out here. It made him wrestle with his demons and his doubts. It taught him to surrender and trust in the character and promises of God. He experienced the provisions of the New Covenant in a way others miss out on.

"I'm so stiff." Sarah couldn't believe the tightness in her back and legs. She bent over and moaned as she touched her toes. Her back cracked. She could feel the muscles in the back of her legs stretching. "I'm too young to be having pains like this. I need to get in shape." Her stomach grumbled and overshadowed her complaining.

She slowly lifted herself up and glanced at her watch. "Uh, you do realize that you're late again! You're so absent minded

sometimes. I don't know why you ignore those bells the way you do."

Joseph jumped to his feet and grabbed a small wooden fruit box that he salvaged from the garbage dump months ago. He slung it over his back for easy carrying and began to walk towards the trail beside the bridge that led up to the road.

Sarah's stomach growled even louder. She rubbed it hoping it would quite the noise. "Go on, I'm right behind you."

They hurried out from under the bridge making their way up the dirt path to the street. The narrow paved drive that led up to the Seminary was directly across the road. It was a beautiful and peaceful place surrounded by a grove of trees and hidden away on a hill like an ancient monastery.

He knew that over two hundred students were going to gather there today and learn theology and ministry skills, but he wondered if they were being humanly molded, or divinely transformed.

Many of the students were struggling spiritually. He wasn't a stranger to the things they were wrestling with.

Before attending college a fellow minister told him, "If you don't have faith when you go to College to study religion, then you won't find it when you get there." He soon found out the reason why.

Religious courses in some colleges and certain seminaries are not in the business of teaching faith. They are there to teach objective studies. They are not there to encourage a person to accept things by faith; they are there to give you the tools they believe are valuable in discerning and reasoning your faith.

They teach you how to think, and not what to think. They are more concerned with your mind and how you will apply it to your faith seeking understanding.

The problem with this, he thought, was that it taught the student to constantly doubt the authority of the Scriptures. He

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felt it had nothing to do with true spiritual transformation. Many students had been educated, but left spiritually bankrupt. They didn't learn anything that brought them closer to God or His kingdom. At least this was his experience.

College had changed him. He was a strong believer when he started, but when he graduated he was left tossed like a ship at sea. His marital problems didn't help matters. Both of these things sent his life spiraling out of control.

Looking back he recognized God was with him every step of the Way. God saved him through the turmoil. He even believed the suffering was necessary. He was thankful, because it strengthened and matured his faith.

He quickly walked up the drive to the Seminary parking area with Sarah close behind. His faith was much stronger. Beyond a shadow of a doubt he was certain. God uses the Bible to reveal the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Nothing would ever make him doubt scripture again.

Joseph caught sight of the small group he had come to visit and love. They were huddled around one of the stone picnic tables in front of the main building.

Bobby spoke as soon as he caught sight of them. "Hey Preach. We were starting to wonder if you slept in on us again." The other students laughed. Bobby knew the thought of the preacher not showing up was absurd. They also knew the preacher was notoriously late.

Joseph laid the box on the ground and they all joined in a group hug for prayer. They knew the routine.

Joseph asked Bobby to lead the prayer and suddenly noticed a familiar feeling. It was a strong pressure in his bladder. Despite the urge to answer nature's call, he waited for the prayer to end and sat down at picnic table with the rest of them.

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“I’ve been praying for all of you. I remember it was like having a thousand voices giving you a thousand alternative interpretations of the truth.

Sometimes it makes you feel that you can’t find a leg to stand upon. I’m not going to say the struggle is pointless. Sometimes what is perishable must die, so the imperishable can be put in its place.

Remember you’re not hearing anything new. Truth and lies concerning the scriptures and Jesus have existed in the past as they do now. By facing them head on, and heart on, God will transform you to have strength, endurance, and wisdom to help you nurture and protect those you’ll serve.

Remember how you came to God. It was through the Good News of the Scriptures. It was through the New Covenant. Its grace and message have been imparted to your hearts, minds and souls. You were forgiven and born again sealed with God’s Holy Spirit. Through the scriptures you encountered the living Christ you came to love and felt called to serve.

Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. Put on the full armor of God and you’ll prevail. Remember this always. Jesus is the Truth.”

“Shoot!” Bobby caught sight of his watch and interrupted. “Sorry, we’re late for class Preach. We gotta go!” He zipped open his shoulder sack and pulled out two sandwiches and two bottled waters. “Enjoy your breakfast.”

Bobby set the waters on the picnic table and tossed the sandwiches. Joseph caught one, but the other hit the ground.

Sarah picked the fallen sandwich up and chuckled as she watched the students wave good-bye and rush into the building.

Joseph had another pain in his abdomen. “Ooh.”

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Sarah looked at the Preacher and noticed his uncomfortable posture. “Looks to me like you are either shriveling up or you need a potty break.”

Joseph winked at her and laughed as he rose from the table and fast walked into the building to find the rest room.

Sarah sat on the wooden box the preacher had lugged up the hill. She didn’t understand why he wasted his time in bringing it. He never used it.

Fifteen minutes later Joseph returned with a sigh of relief. “Much better!” He reached the stone bench and sat down facing her. Opening his bottle of water he took a huge swig.

Sarah had already devoured her peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She was so hungry. She looked at the preacher. There was something she wanted to get off her chest and now was as good a time as any. “I have been listening to you for almost six months now and I have a question.”

“Hopefully I’ll have an answer for you.”

She thought for a moment. “I hope I am saying this right. In one place Jesus says that people will be separated like sheep and goats. Those who cared for others will be saved and those who didn’t will go to hell.

Jesus in another place says if anyone gives even a glass of water in His name they won’t lose their reward.

It sounds to me like he’s teaching that only those who follow him and do good to others, no matter how small their effort is, will be saved.”

Joseph chased down some of his sandwich with some water. “You’re putting the cart before the horse.”

Sarah’s head tilted in wonder. “What do you mean?”

“You have to get behind the horse of faith in the Way, Truth, and Life of Christ to understand that it isn’t the cart full of works that saves you. Jesus saves. It’s our faith, hope, and love in Christ that moves us to do good works.”

Joe continued, “Good works, no matter how many you do, will never make you worthy to stand before God. There isn’t a person among us who has acted perfectly in every situation. Therefore we all fall short and stand guilty before God for misusing our life.

Christianity believes we are loved, forgiven and saved by faith in Jesus. Christ is the only one the Bible says was sent by God to rescue us from being separated from God and condemned to death because of our sin.

Jesus died to remove the death penalty of sin against us. His perfect goodness is credited to us. Our relationship with God is fixed. God seals us with His Spirit so that we can begin changing and becoming what God has always desired for us to become.

This is why we don’t have to do good things to get on God’s good side. Jesus has already restored us to a right relationship with God through His sacrifice on the Cross.

We do good things for others because we love God and God teaches us and enables us to love and care for other people. We care for others because it becomes something we want to do.”

“You seem so sure of yourself. How do you know that anything you just said is true?” She asked.

He chuckled, “Because the scriptures teach it, my reason understands it, the tradition of the church claims it, and my experience through the Holy Spirit of God confirms it.”

I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that I have salvation as a gift from God through faith in Jesus Christ. I no longer have to find contentment and happiness from things outside of me. God has given me contentment and happiness within me. It’s a gift, and a treasure that I have found only with God through Christ.”

Sarah thought about what he said. Finishing her water she turned and started walking away. She began singing the words

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of a rock song she memorized as a kid. “Your lips are moving, but I can’t hear...I have become...numb.”

Joseph knew this was her way of saying the conversation was over.

Sarah quickly turned around towards him, “Let’s go find some more food. I’m still hungry.”

“So am I.” He picked up the wooden box and slung it over his back. “Off to the nursing home we go.”

She smiled as she thought of the elderly people that welcomed them on Wednesdays. They had lucked out when it came to the nursing home. Apparently the closest town with a church was almost thirty minutes away. This made visits by clergy rare. The nursing home also couldn’t afford to staff a chaplain. The preacher was the next best thing.

What she thought was really sad was how family and friends rarely visited the folks stuffed away there. Her heart ached as she thought of those in the nursing homes that didn’t have anyone care about them. She couldn’t imagine being cooped up somewhere waiting to die.

It dawned on her that’s exactly what she had planned on doing when she first met the preacher. She realized that even through all of her pain life was still worth living. It wasn’t all bad.

Her mouth watered as she thought of the bag with cans of soda pop, processed meat, and crackers waiting for them there.

Sarah turned and began slowly walking backwards down the paved drive. Her eyes carefully watched her feet and the edge of road so she didn’t head into the brush. She lifted up her head to invite the preacher to join her little game when she caught a glimpse of someone closing in on them. “Oh boy, you did it now Preach. Look what’s coming.”

Joseph turned to see the Academic Dean of the Seminary. He first met him at one of the Church’s Annual Conferences when

he was a pastor. He met him again at a District Preacher's Retreat. His supervising mentor said he was considered one of the top experts in the New Testament. Joseph enjoyed listening to him and reading his books.

"Preacher, I need to talk to you for a moment." His tie whipped up from the wind and hit him in the face. His cheeks blushed with embarrassment as he grasped it with his hand to hold it down.

Joseph smiled. "I always hated wearing ties Mike. I don't miss them at all. What can I do for you?"

"Ties don't really bother me, but a tie whipping me in the face is another story." Mike laughed. He stopped abruptly and smiled. Speaking in a low voice so only the preacher could hear he said, "Please don't take what I am about to say the wrong way. I certainly have no issues with you meeting with the students in the morning, but when it interrupts classes and lessons and certain professors find out, it does become a problem. In fact, one of the students was marked tardy yesterday and lost a letter grade. He's in danger of failing, because of it. I am certain that you and I don't want that."

Joseph hated to hear this. "What do you want me to do Mike?"

"You know some of the professors are asking that we no longer permit you to come onto the grounds. I don't want to see that and neither do the students. I don't want this get out of control. I just wanted you to be aware of the situation." The Dean's face revealed his frustration with the situation.

Joseph nodded. "I'll work hard at not being on campus right before classes start, or if they're in session. I'll mention something to the gang about the problem and we'll make some changes."

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The Dean reached out his hand to the Preacher. They both shook hands letting their common admiration for each other be expressed in a strong squeeze.

Mike smiled. "Oh, by the way, I have something for you." He pulled a small battery operated alarm clock from his suit pocket. "It was just sitting in my desk drawer. I use it for five minute naps. I thought it might be helpful."

Joseph laughed out loud. "Outstanding! I wonder why I didn't think of this before."

"Hold on I want you to have something else." Letting go of the handshake he reached into his back pocket and grasped his wallet. He pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and placed it into preacher's hand. "This is for lunch."

Joseph dropped his head in gratitude.

Mike patted the preacher on the shoulder, "It will be O.K. my friend. God is still on His throne and will always be on His throne." He waved at Sarah and turned to head back to his office.

Joseph turned around towards Sarah. With his head down he walked in her direction.

Sarah sensed something was on his mind. She had learned to pick up on these things over the past few months. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Joseph answered her. "It's funny how a person, a smell, a place, a sound, or image can pull up memories for you."

"What memory would that be?"

"His tie reminded me of one of my old prisons cells."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"There were a lot of things I used to want in life. I wanted a good career, a good life, a family, and a house with a white picket fence. A little respect and honor would have been like the cherry on the dessert. I had come to believe in the things the world taught I needed to do in order to gain what I wanted, so I

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was educated, I wore the suit and tie, I walked the walk and talked the talk, and I sought the money. All of these things drove me like a slave master. It made my life a prison cell. It filled my house with things, but only brought me sorrow and pain.”

Sarah was relating the preacher’s story to her own. She had been driven to make a life for herself that she never had as a kid. She realized in some ways they shared a common story. “So what happened?”

“Jesus set me free from my prisons. He set me free from all the traps I had allowed myself to be caught in. He taught me that I needed to empty myself of all these things, so that I can fill myself with all the good things of God. He taught me to be a living Poor House, so I can become rich in Him.

Living on the streets I’ve learned to trust God for all things. I live to help others find the same freedom to trust God. It’s the freedom to enjoy the benefits of God’s Kingdom and know the joy of the New Covenant.”

She grabbed the preacher’s hand and began skipping him down the pave drive. Once they reached the main road they walked it into town, crossed the main streets, and strolled through the park to the front of the nursing home. The whole time she pretended to listen to him as he babbled and yakked.

Mr. Reedy hearing the preacher’s voice on the other side of his fence stood up on his stool and popped his head over the fence to look. “They’re here everybody.” He was so glad that the Wednesday service could be held at his apartment. It made it feel like church at times. He missed going to church. Stepping down from his stool he unlatched the gate and ushered for the preacher and Sarah to come in.

Joseph noticed the folks had lined up their chairs in Mr. Reedy’s living room as usual. When they saw him and Sarah they lit up like Christmas trees.

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Sarah realized how grateful she was for the kindness showed to them by the residents and owner of the home. They made arrangements for them to have check-ups at a nearby clinic, for them to receive basic toiletries, and they even allowed them to take showers and change clothes whenever they needed.

“We’ve been looking forward to your visit all week.” Mr. Reedy spoke as he patted the preacher on the back.

Sarah walked through the patio doors, into the living room, and sat down in the closest empty chair. Mr. Reedy sat next to her patting her on the knee.

Sitting down on his makeshift podium Joseph prayed and then began to talk.

Sarah listened about how he felt the understanding of what it means to be the Church had been changed. He felt it was lost somehow behind disciplines, meetings, agendas, and committees.

He talked about what it meant to be a disciple of Christ in God’s kingdom on earth and how people have reconciled the world’s ways to be God’s ways, so they can justify not aligning their own lives to God’s will.

He then told the residents they were closer to the kingdom of God than many of the people in America’s churches, because they have lost everything and learned to trust in God alone as Poor Houses.

He said as long as they have breath they can share the riches of God’s message with someone else. He told them they were needed to reach out to a younger generation that was too blind to see their hearts were astray.

After the message the preacher prayed again and she watched as the he visited with each of the residents praying for their needs and for God to use them. She realized the preacher was more than a friend to them. He genuinely loved them, and they loved him.

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While he visited, she slipped out of Mr. Reedy's room and walked down to the end of the hall. The nursing home set a room aside that had its own bath. She missed these luxuries living on the street, but she was content with where she was.

On the streets she knew what to expect out of life. Here there were no surprises that pulled the rug out from under you and crashed your life. You knew what to expect on the streets, because your place was at the bottom and the bottom was fine with her. She turned the knobs and adjusted the water. Quickly undressing she stepped into the shower and closed the curtain as she let the messaging hot stream roll down upon her head and body. She laughed. "I hope the preacher likes a cold shower, because I think I'm going to stay in here awhile."

Chapter 7

Broken Covenants

Stepping out of the shower onto a towel she dried herself off and hung the wet towel on the rack. She pulled out a clean outfit that had been stored under the sink. The nursing home washed all their clothes for them. She threw her dirty clothes in the bathroom's hamper. They would be cleaned, folded, and waiting for her under the sink when she needed them again.

She dressed, grabbed her hairbrush, and opened the bathroom door to let the condensation on the mirror dry. She quickly noticed the preacher on his knees by the window. He didn't notice her, so she just stood in the doorway brushing her hair, quietly waiting until he finished.

She didn't hesitate once he lifted his head. "It's your turn sport. No one likes a smelly preacher. Could be bad on business you know." Sarah hoped to get a response out of him, but he rose to his feet, walked towards her, shoved her gently out of the way, and closed the door in her face.

Sarah sat on the room's bed with a smile. A few seconds later she heard the shower turn on and the shower curtain being closed. She fell back onto the bed wondering what it was that made her like him so much. Sure he gave her shelter and was her food ticket, but there was something more.

A light blinked on in her head. She felt safe near him! She wondered if this was a wise thing, or if she had trapped herself again. She didn't want to think about it and emptied her thoughts. She wanted to think about nothing for a change and just rest.

The sound of the shower's running water was soothing and it began to lull her. It reminded her of the sound of a soft summer rain. It reminded her of the sound of the rain the first night she

met the preacher, but without the thunder and lightning strikes. There was a peace in it all as she dozed off.

Joseph finished his shower and dressed in his clean clothes. Opening the bathroom door he saw Sarah sprawled out on the bed asleep. For days he thought about asking her if she would like to meet his wife and children, but every time he came close to asking he remembered the promise they made to never talk about their past or share personal things. Somehow he felt meeting his wife and kids was a very personal issue.

He decided to let her sleep. Besides, her afternoon naps lasted hours and he would be back before she woke.

He put on his socks and shoes and left the room shutting the door quietly behind him. He walked down the hall and waved at the receptionist.

She yelled after him, "Tell the wife and kids I said hello!"

"I'll do that Wendy. I'll be back for Sarah in a little bit. She conked out on the bed."

"Good for her," Wendy said. "She probably needed it."

Joseph walked out of the front entrance of the nursing home and headed across the street towards the park in the center of town.

He saw Tanya sitting on the picnic bench watching their daughters soar in the park's swings. He thought, "What a beautiful day." Little Joe's hands firmly pushed on Camille's lower back sending her high into the air. By the time Camry's swing returned he was behind her to send her flying off. Back and forth he went.

Tears welled up in his eyes. He had missed them. He yelled out half laughing, "Hello my little family!"

The kids jumped from the swings and little Joe, even though he was behind them, passed the girls by, but Tanya reached him first. One after another he felt their arms around him and he couldn't remember feeling happier. He gave each one a big hug

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and a kiss. "I hate that you guys are so far away. I wish Mommy's job was closer. I sure have missed you."

Camille hugged him again. "We missed you too daddy."

"You could always come back home Dad." Little Joe responded.

Tanya looked at the kids. "Why don't you guys finish playing so daddy and I can talk. Daddy and I will set up the picnic and call you when it's done."

"O.k. mom," said little Joe, "but hurry up. I'm hungry." He ran off with his sisters back to the swings.

Tanya walked to the picnic basket and took out a blanket. She unfolded it and spread it on the grass near the bench. Sitting down she patted the spot next to her so Joseph would sit near her. When he sat down she repeated what she had told him a hundred times. "I'm so sorry Joe. I miss you so much."

The pain instantly consumed her. Tears rolled down her face. She didn't want her children to see her cry; she didn't want them to ever know. To hide her tears she turned over onto her stomach and faced away from them.

Joseph kept his eyes on his children. He loved Tanya, but he didn't know how to respond to her. The pain subsided, but bits of anger still lurked inside. It would show when he least expected. He could never trust her enough for things to be like they were. It was the issue of trust that kept his heart from getting too close to her. It was this closeness, this intimacy that she wanted, but he couldn't give it to her. He knew better.

In a low voice he said, "You don't have to keep telling me you're sorry. I know you're sorry and I miss you guys too." Joseph said these words many times to her, but she was convinced that he still hadn't truly forgiven her.

"Then why can't we move on? Isn't trust a choice?" She understood that she broke a deep and sacred trust between them. She didn't know what more she could do to earn it back. She

didn't know what more she could do to show him this would never happen again.

She couldn't believe the spiritual destruction and turmoil the affair caused. They both had been devastated. If there was any good that came out of the whole situation it was that she became convinced that God loved her and forgave her. God had carried her through. She wouldn't have been able to bear the guilt and shame if God hadn't.

Joseph shook his head. Down deep he knew he was afraid of being hurt that badly again. He still loved her, but he couldn't love her as freely as he did. He didn't know if he could ever love anyone like that again.

There were other questions that haunted him. Did God even want them together? Every time he would pray and ask this question the still small voice within would say, "Let her go." Every time he tried to let her go, he stopped himself from doing it. It was so confusing.

He felt the truth of the affair tore the final threads of the bond that held their marriage covenant together. He didn't feel one with her. He didn't feel joined by God to her. She had torn apart what God had joined together. He was convinced that if they chose to stay together they would have to live with this painful reality.

Continuing in a low voice he said, "I keep reading where Jesus says a person is allowed to divorce if their spouse is unfaithful. Then I ask myself why He said this. Is He saying that the pain and brokenness that infidelity causes can't always be healed or fixed?"

Tanya wiping her tears turned back towards Joseph. "How can we understand God's forgiveness and love if this is true? How can we understand God's ability to heal our wounded hearts? To believe those things is to believe that there are some

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things in a Christian's life that God's grace and power aren't big enough to fix."

Joseph shook his head. "I can't accept that. It's got to be because of our limitedness that God makes this concession of divorce, but I don't ever see it being God's will." Tears began to roll down his face. His pain had come to the surface once again.

"I really believe that with God all things are possible. I've tried, but I can't grasp a hold of the trust that I had before. Something inside of me wants to move closer to you, but there's this huge barrier that I can't get passed. It's almost as if my heart has a mind of its own. I have prayed about it over and over again."

"Just let go Joe and let God do what you know in your heart He can do. The Lord can make things right. God can open the door, so you can love me again like before. Take a step in faith, so we can find the intimacy we need to move on."

Joseph's eyes dropped to the ground. "I've been reading Hosea in the Old Testament."

Tanya dropped her face into her hands. Joe keeps reading Hosea, but he still hasn't grasped its message.

"God tells Hosea to take a cheating wife back. Her affairs left her poor and alone to the point she was sold into slavery. Her affairs made her a Poor House. Hosea purchased her back from slave traders and told her she must prove herself faithful to be his wife again.

It's the story of God and Israel. Israel had cheated on God over and over again by finding their way in everything else, but God. This would leave Israel alone, poor and abandoned by the Lord. Israel would be left defenseless against armies who would take her captive.

When I think of God buying Israel back from the destructive end that her life of sin led her to, then I think of Jesus buying us

back on the cross and forgiving us. I think of taking you back into my arms and loving you again as my wife.”

Tanya began to plead through her tears. “Then do it Joe. It’s been three years since you left and I’m not going anywhere. I could have left, but I didn’t. Isn’t that time and proof enough? I’ve found my Way in Jesus. I’m ready now to be the wife He’s called me to be.

I haven’t let go, but I think you did Joe. I think sometimes it would have been easier for me just to move on, but I realize that would be a big mistake. I know how valuable my marriage and my family are to me and to God. It was because of my sin and suffering that I learned this, but it took God to teach me through the suffering and pain!”

“God has taught me things through all of this.” Joseph responded. “I got a glimpse of how God loves His people, despite their unfaithfulness. I believe it hurts God greatly when His people go astray. From my own experience it’s almost too painful to bear. I also learned how much He yearns for us to be faithful to Him.”

“You’re afraid Joe.” She said. “You’re afraid of being hurt again. It’s a fear that God’s love can conquer. The Bible says perfect love casts out all fear. God was never afraid to love his people again.

Can’t you see how much I love you? I made a mistake. I was confused, lost, and believed in lies. Can’t you see that I’m ready to be faithful to you and only you until death do we part?”

She began sobbing loudly. “Why can’t you just believe?” Tanya faced him once more. “I believe if this is what we both want, then God will give us the desire of our hearts. If not, then let me go and stop letting me hang on.”

There was silence as a question entered Joseph’s head. “What would bring God the greatest Glory in this situation?” An answer popped into his head. It would be for us to be

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reconciled, for us to show the power of God's love to heal our relationship. To show that there is no woundedness, or brokenness in this life that God can't fix.

Joseph was struck hard to the core of his being. All the pieces began to fit together. Is this the truth? The Good News of Jesus called out to him. Joseph knew. The choice was clear.

Joseph jumped up to his feet "I understand!"

Shocked she responded, "Understand what?"

"I know. I've realized God's will for us. It's the same as God's will for all His people."

Joe's words didn't clear up her confusion. "Spit it out Joe!"

"God's people in scriptures are referred to as His bride. I believe the reason for this is because in marriage we learn the truth of God's desired relationship with all human beings!

The Bible says we are called to know the Lord. This knowing that Jesus talks about is an intimate knowing the way two lovers know each other.

If we looked at this as our purpose for being placed on this earth, then we could say that it is to freely choose to know God as His people the way a husband knows his wife and a wife knows her husband. We are created to be in a sacred covenant with God to share intimately in God's life the same way we were called in a sacred covenant with each other to share intimately in each other's life."

"Where are you going with this Joe?"

"In order for people to know one another intimately they must love each other, they must be faithful to one another, and they must have hope for the present and future. It is in love, faith, and hope that a healthy, intimate relationship exists.

It only takes common sense to know you can't be intimate with someone you don't love, or who is unfaithful, or where no hope for the future exists.

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God perfectly loves, and the Lord is faithful to His covenant. He calls us to share in the hope that He has established through Christ. God in grace and mercy opened the door for us to know Him, because humans have not loved their God, they haven't been faithful, nor have they placed their hope in Him.

They have sinned against the One who desires to have a deep and intimate relationship with them. From the beginning they have cheated on Him like an unfaithful spouse."

Tanya could only stare blankly at him. Where was he going with this?

"Can't you see Tanya? This is why God purchased humanity from sin and death the way Hosea purchased his spouse back? She was not only restored as Hosea's wife, but she became his possession to never be lost! That is why we were bought at a price! It cost God the life of His only begotten Son and God gives each of us the chance to accept that He has purchased us back forever. We accept God's purchase of our lives by having faith in Jesus that is expressed in a life lived in love towards God. We are to do this in the way a husband and a wife are faithful to each other in love.

Tanya looked at him hopefully, "Does this mean anything for us?"

"God made it possible for His people to choose, in love, to be faithful to him. He did this in the hope that their relationship together will ultimately be fulfilled eternally in Christ. God has given all the people of the world the same opportunity. We are all invited to choose faith, hope, and love in Christ.

It is when we enter into that restored relationship as the people purchased through Christ that our intimacy with the Lord is restored. When we draw close to God, God draws close to us and our intimacy increases!"

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“Are you are beating around the bush Joe? You keep saying the same thing over and over again. Is this leading somewhere? Are you going to answer my question?”

“I suddenly realized that the Kingdom of God is a living, life giving, relationship existing between God and humanity. It is something that should be evident between every member of God’s household, because God is within each of us drawing us closer.

I realized that despite the pain we have caused God by our actions, despite the fact that we’ve made mistakes, the Lord still loves us and wants us to return. I still love you Tanya. I need to have an open door in my heart the way God does. I want to live in the way of Christ and I’m ready to make the right choice.

What was missing wasn’t my love, but my full trust and hope for our relationship. I had no hope for us. I have to choose to have hope by faith. I believe this how we can let God’s way live through us, so we can be a witness to the world. I think I’m ready to try again.”

She heard it loud and clear. She jumped to her feet and wrapped her arms around her husband. “Joseph, you don’t know how long I have waited for you to say those words.”

Joseph smiled. Hugging her back he said, “We may not be perfect like God, but we can learn from our mistakes. We can have faith, we can choose to love, we can choose to forgive, we can choose to have hope, and through it we can be transformed into His likeness and reflect His glory.

This is part of what it means to be God’s Kingdom on earth! This is the example the church needs to follow!”

Tanya wanting to hear the words she longed to hear asked, “Does this mean you will finally come home?”

Chapter 8 Revelation

Sarah opened her eyes. She hadn't rested like this in months. She almost forgot what it was like to sleep on a real bed. She turned her head toward the bathroom. Looking she noticed the door was open and that the dirty clothes and wet towels were gone. The door to the room was closed, and the lights were turned off. She couldn't have slept that long. It then dawned on her that she was the only one in the room.

Sitting up she wondered out loud. "Where is he?"

Raising to her feet a sudden sense of fear overcame her. The feeling was strange and hard to explain, but she felt nervous. She ran to the door and swung it open. Down the hall she could see the secretary talking on the phone at her desk. She made her way quickly to the desk and stood there looking around. She tapped loudly on the counter above the desk with her knuckles to get Wendy's attention.

Wendy held up her finger telling her to hold on. Sarah became aggravated when she realized Wendy was on a personal call. Wendy kept babbling on, and on, and on about her hair stylist. Even though it was only a minute, it seemed like an eternity to her. Finally she hung up the phone.

"Can I help you Sarah?" She asked inquisitively. "I've never seen you so antsy. You're usually so calm and laid back."

"Where did the preacher go?" she asked.

"He didn't want to wake you. He said you were sleeping like a baby. He'll be back in a little while. He just went over to the park to meet with his wife and kids."

"Meet with his wife and kids?" The words hit her like bricks. "I've been with the preacher for six months and he never mentioned having a family. Are you sure about this?" Sarah thought this had to be a mistake.

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“Yes sweetie, I’m sure. It’s been about seven months since their last visit.” The secretary thought about it for a moment. “There is no doubt about it though. One look at those kids and you know they are the spitting image of their father.”

Her heart felt like it sank into her stomach. “Kids! I don’t understand.”

“I’ve talked to his wife a couple of times. She moved a few states away for a job, but the preacher’s stayed here to continue his ministry. She actually believes that God called him to live like a homeless person! It makes me scratch my head. Sounds like religious fanaticism to me. I guess the preacher is a little off track in his spiritual life.”

Those words made Sarah angry and defensive. If she was saying things like this about the preacher, then what was she saying about her. “The preacher is a decent human being Wendy and I assure you that he’s more on track than you are!”

“Sarah!” Wendy responded in shock as she stood to her feet.

Sarah wasn’t going to stand around and continue this conversation. She darted from the counter and out through the nursing home doors. She ran across the street towards the park as fast as her legs could carry her. Car horns, squealing tires, and people shouting at her filled the air, but they were like whispers in her ears.

Questions popped into her head as she ran. What if he leaves? What if he goes back to his family? What will happen to me? What will I do without him? She began to realize that she set herself up again for a fall. She placed trust in him. How could she do this to herself again?

Running, she reached the sidewalk that circled the park. Her eyes caught a hold of him. In one split second she stopped dead in her tracks. It seemed like time had slowed to a crawl. Her eyes watched the preacher on the ground wrestling with two little blonde girls about the same size and age. An older teenage

boy sat with a woman on a blanket spread out on the park grass. A large picnic basket sat near paper plates with half eaten sandwiches and chips. She hadn't noticed until now, but the cold morning had turned into a beautiful warm day.

The boy and the woman laughed as the preacher tickled, twisted, turned, and played with the young girls. She wasn't aware of it, but her feet were moving towards them the whole time. She didn't know what to do. Should she leave? Should she hide? Should she go back and wait and act like nothing happened? Should she say something?

The preacher catching a glimpse of someone approaching spotted Sarah walking towards them.

She never thought about it before, but looking into his eyes was like looking into the eyes of a small child. It was like looking into the eyes of someone you could trust. "There it is," she thought, "Here is where I made my mistake."

Joseph was startled when he saw Sarah. "Sarah! Come here I want you to meet my family!"

She couldn't. She just couldn't, so she turned and ran. She could hear him calling after her, but she didn't care. She just ran. She ran as fast as she could back to the bridge. Each time she placed her foot down it sent a hard jolt through her body. Her legs starved for oxygen began to hurt. She labored for them to move. She didn't know if he was following and she told herself that she didn't care. She just couldn't go to him. She didn't know why. It bothered her that she didn't know why.

The bridge was her home. She could be safe there. But what if they tore down the bridge one day?

As she moved down the trail making her way to their camp she spotted one of the Seminary students from earlier that morning. He was perched on a large stone in the center of the stream. She startled him.

Sarah became angry. How dare he trespass into her home?

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“What are you doing here?” She asked rudely as tears began to flow.

The young man stood up from the rock and walked through dry places in the stream towards her. Calmly he asked, “Are you a Poor House like the preacher? I want him to teach me how to be one.”

The question hit her with a thud. What a stupid question she thought. At first she just chuckled at his words through her tears. Her chuckle then became a laugh. Her laughter then became uncontrollable. She dropped onto the stony ground in a state of confusion.

Then something began to change. She began to feel comfort. Sarah knew why, but she felt the idea of her being a follower of Christ was too outrageous and unbelievable. Suddenly the truth overwhelmed her. The truth is she was a Poor House. She had been learning to become one all along. Sarah realized for the first time that she has faith in Christ. She has more faith in Jesus than anyone or anything she had encountered in her life. Did this mean she believed?

She looked up at the young man with wet streams marking her face, “Yes,” she said firmly. “I’m a Poor House for the Lord.” She knew in her heart that she was a follower of Jesus and believed. A sense of freedom overcame her and she felt freer than she had ever felt before.

Charlie taken back by the young woman’s actions that sent her falling to her knees. He didn’t know if she was laughing with tears of joy or sorrow. By the time she responded to his question he finished making his way over to her. He dropped to his knees in front of her and they embraced. They held one another for a long time as they both wept.

“I believe I am called to be a Poor House too.”

Sarah eventually pulled herself away and wiped the tears from her eyes. “Look at us crying like two little babies.”

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “We are two little babies that haven’t been introduced. I’ve seen you with the preacher, but we never talked.” He held out his hand to shake hers. “My name is Charlie Packard.”

Sarah took his hand in hers. “You can call me Sarah Charlie Packard. We should cry together more often. We make a good team.”

Charlie laughed. “I feel better now that I got that out. What about you?” They both smiled and hugged each other. It almost seemed like the moment they shared entitled them to be the best of friends.

Charlie stood wiping the droplets of moisture from his face. He walked over to a place where his belongings were. He brought a sleeping bag and other camping gear with him. He looked at her and shrugged his shoulders. “I brought these things just in case.”

“Are you quitting Seminary?” Sarah asked.

“No. At least I don’t think so. I want to finish Seminary. It’s just, well, I don’t really know. I wanted to talk with the preacher first.”

She shook her head as if she understood his dilemma. “You should finish Seminary Charlie. I just hope that you’re not making a mistake choosing to follow Christ this way.”

“What do you mean?” Charlie was puzzled.

“I’m not sure, but when the preacher comes back we will know for sure.”

“I don’t understand?” He said still confused.

“Don’t worry that makes two of us.” Sarah lowered her head trying not to think about the scene from the park. She began trying to make sense out of all that just happened. A question formed in her thoughts. Looking towards Charlie she asked, “Can I ask you something?”

He nodded his head yes, “Sure.”

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“Why? What was it that finally made you decide to give up that comfortable bed, your room, and three square meals a day to risk coming here?”

Charlie stood still and thought about it for a moment. “I guess it was a number of things. All my life I lived the way I was taught to live for Christ. I believed in the ways handed down to me from family and church. I was taught the scriptures, and how to understand them. I never questioned or drew outside the lines, because I had no reason to question.

Seminary left me doubting everything. Listening to the preacher helped to keep me from giving up on my faith in Christ completely.”

Charlie kicked at some of the small stones on the ground. “I began to see and read things in the Bible differently. Even my views of the Church have changed.

I went to the scriptures without any preconceived, pre-planted beliefs, or culturally programmed thought and I let the Bible speak. I just listened.”

Charlie laughed and then continued, “Actually I went running to my Bible like a kid to a bowl of ice cream.” He hesitated a moment, “In a way you can see that bowl of ice cream all your life, and people can tell you how good it is, but there is only one way to truly appreciate it. Taste it and experience it yourself.

It became more than a book to me. It was speaking words of life to me. The more I learned from Bible, the more the preacher’s message became clearer. It changed me from the inside.”

He looked into the sky as if he were searching for something, “I guess that sounds pretty fantastic to believe?” Charlie finished talking and began to unpack the green, oblong bag that held his little two-person tent.

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Sarah chuckled, “It sounds like you were set free from a spiritual prison. The preacher talks about them all the time.

Charlie thought about it for a moment before answering, “I guess you could say I was a prisoner. I felt lost.”

Sarah stood and walked closer to him. “The preacher once told me that a person can’t be taught to have faith and that most people settle for learning how to live like they have faith. He said faith goes beyond receiving information and saying that you believe it. True faith moves what you have heard and believed into action.”

He thought about it for a moment. “I think he is right. I learned that the faith I had wasn’t faith at all. I was just living what I had been taught since I was a kid. I guess I needed to encounter God.”

Sarah thought for a moment. “How did you encounter God Charlie?”

Charlie looked at her momentarily and let his eyes shift to the ground. “I began to meet God in the words and actions of Jesus in the Bible. Then I met him at the door of my heart.

A few days ago I was up late. I began praying. I asked God to forgive my sins. I was amazed at how many of them I could remember. I surrendered my life. I was tired of trying.

I told God if he wanted my life and could do something better with it, then it was His. I was tired of the struggles and fighting going on in my head. I was tired of being afraid of the world around me. I gave up. I gave up and He came in. I think for the first time in my life I encountered the presence of the living God. I haven’t been the same ever since and His presence hasn’t left.

The preacher is right. The truth about God’s kingdom needs to be received through faith and not just read, learned and stored in memory to be followed. All of your heart, mind and spirit have to be involved. God needs to be involved. It is God’s gift

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of a living and vibrant faith, hope, and love experienced in an intimate relationship with Him that changes everything.”

Sarah watched as Charlie began to assemble the tent he brought. Then a profound thought hit her. She thought to herself that this is probably why she clung so close to the preacher. Maybe God was speaking and guiding her closer to Him through the words of the preacher. Something deep inside kept her close. It worked to draw her nearer to God. Through the preacher’s words Jesus was calling to her. She recognized His voice. It was Christ calling to her all along.

Hearing noise she looked up to see the preacher at the top of the hill next to the bridge. He was giving his family kisses and hugs. She watched as the young boy clapped his hands and jumped up and down after getting his hug.

He began walking in the opposite direction of his dad and the two young girls joined him in a line. They looked like three jumping beans in a row.

The Preacher gave his wife a kiss and slugging his makeshift podium on his back he began making his way down towards her.

She noticed his wife was a beautiful woman. She looked so happy. Sarah couldn’t remember the last time she saw such happiness in a person. When he reached the bottom of the hill Sara felt embarrassed about her behavior in the park. All she knew was that she couldn’t look him in the face. She felt if she did she would just start balling her eyes out again. Who knew why she felt this way. Suddenly it dawned on her.

Joseph reaching the bottom turned and waved a final goodbye to his family. He didn’t notice the young man putting a tent together under the bridge until he set the wooden crate down. He recognized him as one of the Seminary students. He wondered what was going on.

Sarah wouldn't look him in the face and kept shifting her eyes scanning the ground around her. He knew she was upset and felt he needed to say something to her, but what? He simply spoke her name, "Sarah."

That was all it took for her. When she heard his voice call her name the tears began streaming down her cheek again. She covered her face with her hands and went into uncontrollable sobs.

Joseph made his way to her and put his arms around her. He suddenly realized that since that first night six months ago this was the first time she showed any sign of frailty. He also realized that this was the first time he showed her any outward affection. "What's wrong Sarah?"

"I just realized why your wife and your kids looked so happy." She spoke into his chest between sobs.

Joseph understood how obvious it must have been. He didn't know why she was taking it so hard, most of the time he felt like she couldn't wait for him to leave. He wondered if she only stayed with him to torment him. "You're right Sarah. She's coming back for me in two weeks. I'm going home."

Sarah became angry. She backed away from him and wiped the tears from her eyes. She knew why she was angry. She looked him in the eyes. "That's fine for you preacher, but what are we supposed to do? You talk about being a follower of Jesus and forsaking all for God, but how are we supposed to understand you now. Have you been lying? What about what you have been teaching? What about scripture?"

"I guess we were naïve in letting you fill our heads with your crazy notions about becoming Poor Houses who witness the reality of the character of God and His kingdom to others. What am I supposed to feel and think now?"

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Sarah looked at him expressing her hurt. In a whisper she said, "You didn't even tell me you were married and had children."

Joseph was dumbfounded. Her words were shocking. He didn't know how to respond. Then she snapped!

Sarah began to kick at anything in her way. She picked up rocks and began throwing them in a flurry. She found one big rock and smashed Charlie's tent to the ground.

Charlie stood motionless in a state of shock.

This was typical of her life. Everything always crashed around her. Everything seemed as if it existed to undo her. She was tired of having her hopes smashed. Why was he doing this? Why?

Joseph backed away stunned at her reaction. He watched as Sarah released her frustration on everything around her. He looked at the young man who joined them and they both seemed to be thinking the same thing. In unison they rushed and grabbed her flailing body bringing her to the ground as gently as they possibly could.

"Listen to me Sarah," he cried out as they pinned her safely down

"No!" Sarah screamed and spit in the preacher's face.

He wiped his face of the saliva. "Please Sarah; just listen to me for one moment." Tears began to fill his eyes at the thought that he had hurt her. He hadn't meant to hurt anyone. He never really thought she was taking him seriously. He couldn't understand why was this happening?

Sarah watched as the tears formed and rolled down the preacher's face. At the sight of the trickling streams a strange peace entered her. She quickly calmed down ceasing her struggle.

His tears meant more than a thousand words. His tears meant that he cared for her. It wasn't about whether or not he was

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telling the truth. She knew in her heart he believed in what he said, but now she knew the sincerity of his love was genuine for her. No one ever cried for her before.

Not only did she believe the preacher was a poor house, but she knew in her heart that he had the right motive of love. She had encountered God. She had assurance that Christ loved her and had set her free. It was then she knew she would never be alone, imprisoned, or afraid again.

The words rolled from his mouth, "Sarah, by faith Abraham left his homeland and wandered in the wilderness on a promise from God that was never fulfilled in his lifetime. It was a promise that God would set His people up as a nation to bless the earth. Sometimes he settled for a while in one place, sometimes in another. Each place he went it was by faith believing that God sent him and would fulfill His promise.

Through faith Noah built an ark before the flood came, but God didn't call him to remain on the ark forever.

By faith the fisherman of Galilee followed the One whom called them to follow Him. They remained faithful to the call with no place to lay their head at times.

Not all of them continued on this path of discipleship after Jesus ascended into heaven. Some settled and some went. God called others, and others passed on.

It was meant for a time and a season that I follow Him like this. I have felt the call of God to end my journey on this path for now and to return home. My work is done here, but it doesn't mean it is finished." Joseph thought that he babbled Bible to her and wondered if it meant anything to her. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Sarah calmly smiled, "I love you too preacher and I understand."

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Hearing those soft words and realizing that she quit fighting Charlie and Joseph let her go. Both of them cautiously released her at the same time.

Sarah watched their reactions as they let her go. Both of them looked as if they were expecting her to go off into a wild fit again. When she was free she reached up and hugged the preacher around his neck as hard as she could and whispered into his ear, "Thank-you for loving me, and thank-you for showing me how God loves me. I'm a Poor House now."

After a few moments Sarah let go of her embrace, stood to her feet, and slowly walked over to the stream to wash her face.

Joseph still shocked looked over at the young man who assisted him. "I appreciate your help. I know your name, but I'm embarrassed to say in this excitement I can't seem to remember it right now."

Charlie reached his hand out. "I'm Charlie Packard."

"Charlie, that's right." His faced mimicked his recognition of the young man's name. Charlie stood and helped him to his feet.

"I take it that you and Sarah have already met."

Charlie smiled. "Yes we have and we've already shared in some exciting times together."

They all laughed.

"What are you doing here Charlie?" Joseph asked.

"If you wouldn't mind, I would like to talk to you." Charlie asked with a look of suspense on his face.

"Pick a rock, any rock, and make yourself at home."

The three of them stayed up talking most of the night, but Joseph exhausted from the day's activities and a horrible head ache eventually left to lie down in his tent.

Sarah waited for the preacher to zip up the tent before she spoke. "Are you tired Charlie?" she asked.

"Not really, I'm too excited to sleep."

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“I had a good nap today, so I’m wide awake.” She responded.

In his best Humphrey Bogart impression Charlie responded, “Then it looks like it’s you and me kid.”

They both chuckled at his botched, but recognizable impression. They stayed up talking about the prospects of their new life together in the reality of God’s kingdom on earth.

Chapter 9

His Will - His Way

That night the Preacher dreamed.

Before him stood an old man with a bent back, his body was quivering, and his hand was out.

“Do you remember me?” The old man asked.

He did remember him. It was the old man he met one day long ago in the drive through line of a fast food restaurant. It was the night of his seventh year wedding anniversary. That day he prayed to God for a miracle. This man brought that miracle.

“Yes, I remember you.” Joseph responded.

“Do you remember what I said to you?” The trembling old man winked at him.

The memory of the encounter was stamped in his head. How could he forget? After work that night he went and cashed his check up at Clark’s corner store on the top of his street, because all the banks were closed. He owed Clark money for the items he purchased on credit during the week, so Clark cashed the check and took what was owed him.

It left him with barely enough to survive the upcoming week ahead.

He then drove to pick up an anniversary dinner at the wonderful low price of \$3.98 a meal at a fast food restaurant. It was all he could afford. He watched in the drive-thru line as the old man walked from car to car extending his hand and asking for money.

One car, two cars, three cars and no one gave him a dime. When the old man reached his car he could barely understand him as he talked. He got the gist of his words and realized that he asking for twenty five cents for a cup of coffee.

Joseph remembered how angry he became when he realized that no one in the cars ahead of him gave the poor man any

change. Just one look at him told you the guy was off in a bad way. He also remembered looking down at the remainder of his measly earnings lying in the passenger seat. He decided to give the old guy a dollar despite the fact he didn't have enough money to make it for the week himself.

When Joseph handed him the dollar the old man did something that broke his heart. He tried to give him change back. "All he wanted," Joseph thought, "was a quarter for cup a coffee." He wanted nothing more and nothing less. This upset him even more.

Joseph looked the old man in the eyes and said, "You keep the change. You need it more than I do." After saying this the old man's appearance changed right in front of him. His posture straightened, he stopped shaking, and in a voice as beautiful and clear as a cloudless summer day he asked, "Do you want to know something?"

Joseph's first gut reaction was to think this guy just chiseled me out of a dollar. He needs to be on Broadway. To think I felt sorry for him! But despite these thoughts he decided to keep playing along. "Sure, tell me." He responded.

"You will remember what many have forgotten. Do you want to know something else?" The old man questioned again.

Joseph began to think not only has he chiseled me, but he's crazy. He continued to go along with the game, because this was getting interesting. In the end he was glad he did. "What?"

"God loves you."

Tears formed in his eyes as they did the first time he heard those words. When the old man said this it struck the inner depths of his soul. They imparted something to him. He encountered God through them.

He looked at the old man before him once again. "I remember what you told me. You told me that God loved me. It changed my life. It was my miracle. Thank you."

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Before him, once again, the old man's appearance changed and he smiled like he did in the drive-thru line. With a smooth penetrating voice he spoke. "No need to thank me, I just told you what you already knew. I helped bring it to the surface of your being." The man walked towards him and placed his outstretched hand upon his shoulder. "Do you remember what else I told you?"

Joseph tried to remember, but those were the last words the man spoke to him. All he could remember is by the time he wiped his tears the old man had already disappeared. Then a question popped in his head, "Have I talked to him at some other point in time?"

"Think harder Joseph." The being pushed his voice deeper into his being.

The tone of his voice reverberated deep within him. He remembered. It wasn't at that original encounter, but another one. He remembered he heard a voice like this once in his dreams. It was at the time he was seeking to understand what God was calling him to do with his life. He knew God placed a calling on him, but he didn't know the direction of it. The same voice of this old man at the drive-thru, of the old man standing in front of him, was the same voice in the dream.

It wasn't just one dream he thought. It was three dreams altogether in succession. He remembered in the first dream the voice said, "You must teach them." He ignored it and forgot about it. The next night he dreamed the same dream. The same words, "You must teach them," were heard. When he woke up that morning he remembered his previous night's dream and he thought God might be trying to tell him something. The whole of the next day he asked God in prayer, "Teach them what Lord?"

The third night he dreamed that he was lifted up to heaven. He remembered the sensation of flying and how real it all

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seemed. He was set down at one of the great gates entering into heaven. Guarding the gate was a tall shining warrior whose head was covered in clouds. Lined up outside the gate and winding down miles of a long and winding road were people.

The people were colorless in contrast to himself, the color and radiance of the great city, and the guardian of its gate. Joseph also knew in the dream if he wanted to enter the city that he was allowed, but in his heart of hearts he knew the colorless people could not enter the city unless they found life, unless they found color. He knew they were the living dead.

It took him a month to realize what the dream meant. He was called to teach the colorless, lifeless people how to enter the kingdom of God.

He looked at the old man. "You told me to teach people how to enter the kingdom of God."

The old man smiled. "Yes. You do remember. I have another question for you."

"What is it?" He asked.

"Are you ready to face your worst enemy?"

"My enemy? Who's my enemy?" Joseph thought about the question and then answered. "I am."

THE TEMPTATION OF THE PREACHER

The Preacher was led by the Spirit to a place under a bridge to be tempted by the devil. And when he fasted from all that the world placed before him, the devil came to tempt him and the devil looked just like him. The Preacher was not surprised.

The Tempter said, "Not everyone who says to Jesus 'Lord, Lord, I have forsaken all to be a Poor House for the kingdom and live under a bridge is going to be saved. It is only those who know Him that will be saved.'"

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The Preacher answered, “It is written that the righteous of God shall live by faith. It is by faith and not works that I trust in Christ for my salvation and know Him. That is God’s will Tempter. It is by the Spirit of God I received new life in the kingdom, and it will be this faith that I cling to until I take my last dying breath. I know that not everyone who says, ‘Lord, Lord will be saved,’ but I know the Lord and I know He loves me and He lives in me.”

Then the hindrance said, “You speak of love, but isn’t it also written, ‘and though I have faith, so I could remove mountains and have not love, I am nothing.’ And isn’t ‘the greatest commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength’ with the second commandment equal to it. ‘You must love your neighbor as yourself.’ Didn’t Jesus go even further in explaining what this means when he says, ‘a new commandment I give. Love each other, as I have loved you?’ Tell me why do you need faith when love is all you need?”

The Preacher said, “It is by faith that I believed and received the greatest love that exists. By faith God’s love set me free. It is by faith that I am able to accept that God loves me, and by faith I love with the love that God has poured into my heart.”

“I see,” the Devil sneered as if he were about to strike into his heart, “but by following this path you accepted in faith you have forsaken love. Is it not written, ‘How can you love God, when you have failed to love yourself and even your own family?’ You love yourself by feeding yourself, clothing yourself, and caring for yourself when you are sick. You were supposed to love your family by doing the same for them.

You have forsaken love for your family to follow what you think is God’s will. Even now sickness is at your door and pain will reside in the heart of your loved ones because of all your choices. You whined that your wife hurt you, but you’re no

better. You are as guilty as she. You have forsaken the commandment of love. Your faith has led you astray.

Face it; you really don't know Him. Do you?"

The Preacher was becoming annoyed. "It is written, 'Don't worry about what you should wear, or what you should eat. But first seek ye the kingdom of heaven and His righteousness and all your needs will be provided for. Look at the birds of the air, they don't reap or store in barns, but your Father takes care of them. How much more so will he take care of you? Are you not more important than they?'

God's love has provided for my loved ones. The Lord said that if I leave wife, children, home, and fortune for the sake of His Kingdom that I will receive a hundredfold in this life and the life to come. I have faith in this. I have faith in God's love to sustain myself and my family in this call.

According to your accusation each commandment of love has fulfilled evil one. Even now God's love is at work bringing us to life because we believe and follow this path of faith to which we were called."

The Opponent continued his attack. "Poor Preacher, you place so much emphasis on faith. Faith isn't even eternal. What will you need faith for when you see God's promises fulfilled and the object of your hope before your face? God is love and God is eternal, then love is eternal, so love is essential only. Your poor so called faith has turned you into a babbling fool that has taught you to believe in lies."

The preacher shook his head as if sorry for the tempter. "Your argument is weak and twisted in every form you hindrance. There is a time to reap and a time to sow, a time to live and a time to die. There is a season for everything under the sun. Now, on this earth, is the season of faith, hope and love with love being the greatest of these. All else is pointless on

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your behalf. All other arguments in your case are a chasing after the wind.”

The Devil tempted the preacher for the last time. “You’ve lost. You agreed to go back home with your family. You’re forsaking the Poor House you have become. Your game is over. Your actions contradict your words. Even now your love is forsaking your faith calling. Your path is wide and winding leading to destruction.”

The preacher smiled, “If this were so, then you wouldn’t have bothered with me at all. Go tell your lies to someone else. For God is able to finish the good work begun in me. Even my choice to return to family was a decision to follow my faith in God’s love and call.”

The devil sneered and left him. An angel came and ministered to him.

Joseph momentarily opened his eyes and thought he was looking into the eyes of an angel, but it was Sarah who was perched over him smiling.

“It’s O.K. Preacher. You’re sick and you have a fever. Charlie went to get an ambulance. We’ll get you to the hospital and you’ll be better in no time. Close your eyes and rest everything will be O.K.”

Joseph closed his eyes. Sarah’s words comforted him and he had a strange assurance that everything would be fine. As he dozed in and out of consciousness he heard other words. He couldn’t tell if it was more of his dream, or if it was real, but it sounded like Sarah was praying for him.

“Dear Lord, take care of him. He loves you so much. Heal him, and use him. Finish the good work that you have began in him. Make your promise to him come true. Amen.”

Sarah could faintly hear the sound of sirens in the distance.

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Joseph blacked out and when his eyes opened again he asked, "Where am I?" He spoke, but his words didn't seem to come out right.

"You're in an ambulance sir. I'm John. I'm an EMT. We're going to take care of you. We need to get some information first. Do you have any allergies or are you allergic to any medications?"

"No. Not that I am aware of." Again his words were mumbled, but the medic nodded as if he understood him.

"Are you currently taking any medications?"

"No."

"Do you have any existing medical conditions that I should know about?"

"No."

"Can you tell me your name?" John knew that question wasn't going to be answered. Maybe he should have asked this question first. "Finish him up, would ya?" His partner nodded in response.

Opening the back door of the ambulance he caught sight of Sarah. "Sarah I need to know his name, where he lives, or if he has any relatives close by."

Sarah realized for the first time that she didn't know his real name. In fact she hardly knew anything personally at all about him. It suddenly dawned on her that someone over at the Seminary might know his name and how to get in touch with his family. The Seminary was connected to the church he used to serve and the preacher mentioned he knew the dean prior.

"All I know is that we call him the preacher. He lives under the bridge with me. His wife and children were here this morning. Maybe they're staying in town. I can check around and see." Sarah thought if they were still in town, then there were only a few possible places they could be staying.

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John shook his head in disbelief. “Well, as soon as you find out Sarah you need to get in touch with the hospital.”

Sarah turned and yelled to Charlie who was standing by a police officer answering questions. When he heard her call he excused himself and ran to her.

The officer got into his cruiser and left.

“Charlie I want you to go to the Dean’s house and see if he can tell you anything about the preacher’s real name, where he lives, or if he can get an address or phone number of some sort. The preacher told me that they knew each other and belonged to the same denomination.” Charlie quickly nodded and was off running towards the Seminary campus.

Sarah decided her best bet was to run down to the strip. The strip was off the highway and was where all the hotels and motels in town were located. If the preacher’s family stayed the night, then it was likely they would be there.

She turned to leave and search for them, but stopped. Turning halfway around towards the ambulance she yelled. “John, which hospital are you taking him to?” She was glad she remembered to ask this question before she forgot. It would be terrible to find his wife and not know where to take her.

“We’re taking him to Memorial Hospital.” Looking at Sarah reminded him of the much younger Sarah he used to know when they played together as kids. He heard about her new life under the bridge. Heck everyone in town knew. He was also aware that she probably didn’t have any money.

Memorial Hospital was too far away for her to reach on foot. Digging into his pocket he pulled out all the loose bills. “Here’s some money for a cab in case you need it. You can pay me back when you hit the big time.”

Sarah approached the ambulance and took the gift. “Thank you John, God bless you, tell the preacher I will be there as soon as I can.”

“Sure thing Sarah.” He wasn’t sure if he was going to have the chance to tell the preacher anything at this point. John closed the ambulance door and gave his friend the O.K. to drive on. He could see Sarah watching the ambulance as it sped away. He looked down at the monitor for a quick second to check the patient’s vitals and by the time he looked back in her direction she was gone from sight.

Charlie ran hard. He ran up the drive and down the road in between the Seminary buildings and past the library. It dawned on him that the Library was the largest building on campus. It was even larger than the chapel. He was sure that there was something wrong with this, but he didn’t know what.

He was nearly out of breath when he reached the house of the Dean at the end of the campus lot. He rang the doorbell and knocked on the door over and over again. Finally a light turned on in one of the upstairs windows. He gave the doorbell a few more rings and waited.

He watched through the window of the front door as the upstairs hallway light flicked on. A few seconds later he could see the Dean in his robe and night clothes descending the stairs. Hearing the lock click the door opened a crack just enough for a tired, straining eyeball to glance out.

“Charlie? Can I help you with something?” The Dean yawned.

“Sir there is an emergency.” Charlie watched as the he opened the door the rest of the way to usher him in.

“Come in. Come in then. What’s wrong?”

“It’s the preacher.”

The Dean’s face turned from concern to a look of annoyance.

“They didn’t say, but I think that he might have had a stroke. They need to find out his name and any information concerning his family.”

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“Let me get out my old conference journal. The preacher’s address wouldn’t be the same as in the journal, but I can call his last District Superintendent and see if a forwarding address was given. He may have to run to his office real quick, but I don’t think he’ll mind. This is an emergency.”

The Dean walked down the hall adjacent to the front door and straight into his den. He moved to a tall shelf behind his desk and shuffled around through some books pulling one out. “Here it is.” He said. He sat down at the desk and began to leaf through the journal. “Didn’t he have a driver’s license on him or some form of identification?”

“No sir. Sarah said that he had a wallet, but we couldn’t find it anywhere. He must have put it somewhere for safe keeping.”

The Dean looked at him and shook his head trying to think. “I can’t for the life of me remember his name, or the church he served. It’s been too long and my old brain forgets.” He strained to remember.

The Dean continued the conversation as he searched. “I take it that Sarah is the young girl that accompanies him around.” He then inquisitively asked, “Is Sarah mentally challenged Charlie?”

That question shocked Charlie. “No she isn’t. She’s very intelligent; a college graduate. Why do you ask?”

“I just wondered why she follows him around everywhere, that’s all.”

Charlie became defensive. “I’ve decided to follow the preacher now Dean. Does that mean you’ll think that I’m mentally challenged too?”

“I’m sorry Charlie. That didn’t come out the way that I intended. It’s not what I meant.” The news of Charlie’s decision startled him. “I am shocked that anyone in their right mind, in our society, would choose to live under a bridge. I hope this doesn’t mean that you’ll be living under the bridge too?”

Charlie nodded his head yes. "I made that decision tonight."

"I wish you would have come to me first before making up your mind about this. What the Preacher is doing is not for everyone. He was under a lot of strain when he made that decision. He was trying to find himself and work out his faith issues. In all sense of the word he needs therapy not followers.

You should think hard before taking his Poor House path upon yourself. People can learn to surrender themselves to Christ and still live normal and productive lives."

The Dean found the name he was looking for and picked up the phone and punched the numbers. It took some time before someone on the other end answered. The Dean then smiled and spoke, "Hello Bill! Guess who!"

Charlie thought he spoke with a strange new enthusiasm. He recognized the tone and manner of the speaking. It was how he heard church people talk to each other. To him it was insincere politeness. The person on the other end of the line seemed to have recognized the Dean's voice by his response.

"I know it has been a long time. Hey listen; sorry to call you and get you up at such a late hour, but we have an emergency here. Our common friend the preacher has possibly had a stroke. He didn't have any identification on him and we need to get in touch with his family. For the life of me I can't remember his name." There was a short pause before the Dean continued. "I appreciate that Bill, and I'm sure his family will too." The Dean looked at Charlie and whispered. "Which Hospital did they take him to?"

Charlie's heart sank and he just shook his head. "I don't know."

"Yeah, Mike. I'll do some searching and we'll be here waiting for your call." The Dean hung up the phone, reached into his bottom drawer and pulled out a phone book. "I have his

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name at least. I guess we'll have to call around to the hospitals and find out where they took him."

Sarah's adrenaline was pumping. It only took her ten minutes to run to the strip. She was glad that the hotels and motels were all huddled up in the same area, but that's how it was when you lived in a small town off the main interstate.

She entered the front door of the first motel she came to and approached the front desk. It suddenly dawned on her that she didn't know the name of the preacher's wife. Hopefully they wouldn't think she was crazy.

The motel clerk behind the counter didn't look happy to see her at all. Sarah recognized her as someone she attended college with. Before she could say one word the young woman started barking at her.

"Listen Sarah," the young female spoke as she put her hands on her hips. "There aren't any free hand-outs here for you."

Sarah just ignored her presumptuous nature and continued. "I'm looking for a woman with three children. Two of the children are girls and they are twins. Have you seen them?"

"I won't have you begging or disturbing our customers at this late hour of the night, so why don't you just leave before I call the police."

Sarah lost her composure and screamed, "Listen you clod. Her husband was just carried away in an ambulance. They think he might have had a stroke. So shut your fat mouth up and tell me if they are here or not!"

A look of fear came over the girls face. "I knew you were crazy. That woman didn't arrive with a husband. She checked in alone with her kids. I suggest that you better run off, because I'm calling the police Sarah Brannigan." The clerk picked up the phone and dialed 911.

Sarah realized she was at the right motel and was getting nowhere fast with the clerk. She needed to do something quick. She ran out of the office and began knocking on the first motel door she came to. She knocked and knocked. If it was the wrong room, then she just went to the next one. After about the third door she could hear sirens blaring. The clerk definitely called the police.

The police station was just down the road a few blocks. Of course it would be her kind of luck for all the police on duty to be a few minutes away. She was beginning to feel stupid about losing her temper with the clerk. Maybe if she would have handled it another way this might not have happened.

She ran to the fourth door and pounded. She heard a female voice on the other side say something and hoped this was the right room. A woman came and spoke through a small crack without opening the door completely.

“Who’s there? What do you want?”

“Are you the preacher’s wife?” Sarah asked frantically.

“No I’m not, but I’ll get the preacher for you.”

The man with her must have been standing close by, because she moved her head and his appeared.

He looked at Sarah and gave a sigh of relief when he failed to recognize her.

“I’m a preacher can I help you.”

Sarah looked at him in disgust. “Some preacher you are.” Sarah’s heart dropped and she turned around at the sound of two police cars peeling into the parking lot. She was right, every police car in this town was right in front of her. She saw no point in running.

The doors shot open on both cruisers and the officers jumped out behind them with weapons drawn. They ordered her to raise her hands and not move.

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The sirens caused some of the others who were sleeping in their rooms to wake and look out their windows. Sarah thought, even if the preacher's family looked out the window they probably wouldn't recognize her. If only she stayed in the park and talked to them.

One of the motel doors on the second floor opened up and a young boy that resembled the one she saw at the park and bridge appeared. Sarah yelled to him. "Are you the preacher's son?" Sarah prayed silently, "Please God let this be the boy." The young man entered back into the room as one of the officers grabbed her and led her over to the hood of his car.

As the officer frisked her she saw a woman come out of the motel room door where the young boy had stood. She was sure it was the preacher's wife. Sarah yelled, "Please! Your husband was taken to the hospital. I need to speak to you."

"Shut up Sarah!" the police officer said as he stood her upright. "I knew when I saw you tonight at the bridge we would eventually have trouble out of you."

Sarah watched as the young boy and mother said a few words.

She called down to the police officer. "Hold on a minute, I believe that I may know this woman." She ran down the steps and made her way over to the police cruiser.

Sarah began to thank God over and over again out loud.

The officer turned Sarah to face the woman as she approached the cruiser. At the top of the steps the young boy and his sisters stood at the rail.

Sarah began to ramble. "Charlie and I were up talking and the preacher began mumbling in his sleep. I went in to check on him and he was burning up. The whole side of his face looked limp and I knew something was wrong, so I sent Charlie to call an ambulance. Please they took him to the hospital and he needs you."

Once the preacher's wife heard the whole story she gasped placing her hand over her mouth and ran up the stairs quickly to her room.

The police officer realizing the reason for the situation released Sarah. "I'm sorry Sarah. There seems to have been some misunderstanding. You have to look at it from our point of view. We were just doing our job." The officer spoke.

Sarah looked at him in anger. "I thought a person was innocent until proven guilty. Oh yeah, that's not how it works nowadays. Nowadays in our society you are guilty until proven innocent."

The mother moved quickly. Within a few short minutes she dressed her children and herself and was ushering them down the stairs. The family made their way to the bottom of the landing where Sarah was now standing. Rushing past her they entered a new SUV a few feet away. The Preacher's wife looked at her as she opened the vehicle's door. "Are you coming Sarah?"

Sarah began making her way to the passenger side of the vehicle. The young boy had walked the long way around to the passenger door. Without glancing in Sarah's direction he cut her off jumping into the front seat of the vehicle.

"I've got the front seat; you sit in the back with the girls."

Sarah, startled at the young boy's actions, moved to the back door on the passenger side. She opened the door to see the young girls had already buckled themselves in on each window side leaving only the middle of the back seat open.

Their eyes gleamed, and their legs bobbed at the idea of having someone new join them in the back seat. After Sarah climbed over the girl nearest her and buckled herself in-between the two, each girl grabbed one of her arms and hugged it tight. There was so much love in their eyes and in their squeezes that Sarah thought they must be little aliens. They weren't like any

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children she knew. She never saw anything like these two cuties in all her life. One of the little girls whispered to her, “We prayed for you when you ran away from us at the park.”

“Both of you?” she asked the young girl.

“No. All of us!” She responded back.

The preacher’s wife turned around in her seat. “Where are we going Sarah? You lead the way.”

“Pull out and make a right.” Sarah began to take in the seriousness of what was happening and tears began to fill her eyes. “Excuse me I don’t even know your name.” She said to the preacher’s wife.

“My name is Tanya. This is Joseph Jr. next to me...” before she could finish the girls popped in.

“My name is Camille.”

“My name is Camry and we prayed for our daddy already, so don’t worry Sarah.”

There was a burden on Sarah’s heart and she needed to tell Tanya. It was something that consumed her thoughts as she ran her way to the strip. “Tanya, whatever comes of this, I want to promise you that your husband’s life will not have been lived this way for nothing.”

Tanya looked at Sarah in her rearview mirror and she could see her wiping her eyes.

“Your right Sarah,” she said trying to hold herself together, “God has promised him a hundredfold in this life and I believe that he will live to see it fulfilled.”

Sarah wasn’t sure Tanya understood what she meant, but she wasn’t going to say any more at this point. She just wanted to get to the hospital and get there quick.

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Chapter 10

Into All the World

Three Years Later

Mark noticed the cool and serene atmosphere that hung over the conference room. The only noticeable sounds were the breathing of a heavyset individual towards the back of the room and the cool air pushing its way through the vents in the walls.

When he surveyed the dozen or so people around him he recognized many of them. He had seen their pictures and read their articles in many of the psychological journals and magazines. They were all prominent professionals well respected in the field. He supposed they, like him, were waiting to see what was next.

The question now bothering him was why was he was included in such a collection of noted psychiatrists. He felt that he was not only out of his league here, but was playing a different sport altogether. One thing is for certain, whoever gathered and hired all these professionals had influence and that meant a lot of money was involved somewhere down the line.

He watched as Martin Bartow, the Lawyer who obtained his services, walked into the room. Following him was a beautifully stiff, middle-aged woman in fine and expensive clothing. By the way she carried herself it wasn't hard to figure out that she was the reason they were gathered here.

By her demeanor, apparel and posture he quickly concluded she had money, status, and education. He thought it was funny how these three things can give people the impression that they are somehow elevated above the rest.

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It was unfortunately this way in the church too. It seemed the more a person acquired or learned the more valuable they thought they were in the greater scheme of things.

He had trouble dealing with these individuals in the church. For him they were out of touch with the Christianity of the scriptures. He knew his attitude was probably wrong towards them, but their lack of humbleness made it hard for him to repent for his feelings.

Mark gave a silent chuckle when Martin, in a very polite gesture, pulled out a chair for the polished woman who accompanied him into the room. He watched as the lawyer laid his briefcase on the table, opened it, and removed file folders that he then passed around the table for everyone to take.

Martin flipped a switch at the head of the table and a white screen lowered at the far end of the room opposite him. A panel in the center of the ceiling opened and a projector lowered casting its light onto the screen.

“Show the first image.” Martin sent the command to the person in charge of the multi-media presentation.

The machine displayed its first image and the person in the picture was a face well known to everyone sitting at the table. For the past two days it had been plastered all over the news stations. It was the portrait of Brandon Steele the business tycoon.

Once Mark saw the picture of Brandon Steele his heart sank and fluttered at the same time. From the news stories he was beginning to piece together why he was here.

The woman at the head of the table was obviously Brandon Steele’s wife Susan Steele. This meant the psychiatrists were probably assembled to determine the mental status of Mr. Steele. This left him with his only reason for being here. It was because of the *Followers of the Way*.

According to the stories on the television, Brandon apparently gave half of his billion dollar fortune to this new Christian movement that had spread like a wildfire across the United States.

For the past six months he was commissioned to study this movement in hopes of understanding its effectiveness in reaching and transforming the culture at large. It now made sense why they called a Christian Psychologist into this crowd of the secularly prominent. Mark's thoughts were interrupted as Mr. Bartow began to speak.

"I think you now understand why we were so secretive about the topic of your employment. Since this will be a very controversial and public case I am going to ask you to take a few minutes to consider whether or not you would like to continue.

I would also like to remind you that because it is such a high profile case it may turn out to be very beneficial for your careers and our most gracious benefactor will definitely make sure it will be beneficial to your pocket books." Martin laughed, but no one laughed with him. Apparently they didn't find his joke as funny as he did.

"Take your time ladies and gentleman. There's no rush." He wanted to give them ample enough time to weigh the pros and cons of becoming involved. From the looks on all their faces he could tell they were all in deep thought.

Mark began to wonder if his involvement was such a bright idea. Depending on his input he and his denomination stood a chance to gain merit, or lose face amongst the masses that have embraced this new movement.

He also stood in a position to be seen as supporting it, which would cause him to lose the respect of some of his peers.

Weighing the consequences he decided that these things didn't matter as much as his responsibility before God to be an

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ethical Christian influence on this panel. He felt he should remain, if for nothing more, to fight for the rights and welfare of Brandon Steele.

If Brandon should prove to be unstable or brainwashed by this new movement, then he stood in a position to help Brandon receive proper care. He might even be able to help in salvaging Mr. Steele's Christian faith.

He was jerked from his thoughts as Mr. Bartow began working his way around the table seeking responses. Reaching him he asked whether or not he wished to continue. He answered, "Yes."

He couldn't help but notice that Mrs. Steele looked extremely pleased that all agreed to move forward from this point.

Mr. Bartow cleared his throat and continued. "We are all aware of some of the back ground information in this case from the leaks and probing of the press. Inside these folders you will find additional information concerning the case. We are not so much interested in you knowing all the facts and details as we are in your evaluation of Mr. Steele's mental status.

Is he in control of all his faculties? Is he able to make sound and rational decisions? Are there signs of cultic brain washing, and how is this determinable?" Martin then let out a laugh. "Listen to me! I'm telling you how to do your job. Anyway you know what you need to do.

With us today is someone we hope will provide essential information for all of you. Rev. Mark Stanton is a Christian Theologian and Psychologist. He has been studying this new Christian movement that Brandon Steele has found himself associated. Mark can you give us a brief description of this group?"

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Mark nodded and stood to his feet responding to the request. “I hadn’t planned to make a formal presentation concerning the *Followers of the Way*, but I will do my best.”

Mark thought about where he should start. He decided from the beginning would be best. “From what I have learned this movement was started by a pastor in a main line denominational church. He viewed his denomination as coming under the same stagnation that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, saw in the Church of England in his day.

To break this down for you I could say he basically saw his church as a lifeless institution that lost its relevance and passion for the mission of Jesus Christ. He believed that the church he served had ceased being a movement of the Spirit of God and had become a movement of men and women.

He felt it was out of touch with the scriptures in many ways and that it was too wrapped up in its own existence to be of any heavenly use.

He was disenchanted not only with the Church, but with the pervading American culture that he believed influenced it.

Because of these things he acted to begin a movement alongside of the church. He did this while continuing to proclaim a firm connection to it. In other words he was following John Wesley’s lead in trying to reach those the church was failing to reach.

The other viewpoint I have heard is that he snapped when his wife cheated on him and left him.” A few chuckles were heard.

“He called himself a *Follower of the Way* and took residence in the streets forsaking everything; including his own family. He became a sidewalk evangelist that we have all seen in movies that stands out on street corners while they collect money.”

Mark paused because his comments stirred a laugh around the room.

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“He felt that it was essential to work for change in the church from this vantage point, because according to him few ears could hear and few eyes could see what was really going on inside.

His main purpose was to live in such a way as a citizen of the kingdom of God on earth, that by his example, he might help those within the church see they were living a lifeless religion. He wanted them to recognize they had unchanged lives and needed to enter God’s kingdom as Poor Houses.

A Poor House Christian is one that has surrendered all things to God, has a living faith, lives a life motivated by God’s love, and naturally produces transformation in the world around them.

By doing this he believed that the true intentions of the Christian Way would be renewed. The Christian Way was something he felt the western church lost, because of its cultural and enlightenment influences.

For him it meant more than just giving money or materials to meet people’s needs. It was about establishing vital personal relationships with people. This was done in order to provide for what he saw was the greatest need in society. It was a spiritual need, or to put it more plainly, a reconciled relationship with God through Christ.

This vital relationship is where he believed the greatest evidence of the present Kingdom of God on earth could be seen.

It was this movement that impacted the life of Brandon Steele.

Even though his approach to forsake all for the Kingdom is based in the New Testament, it wasn’t widely practiced throughout the church’s history, especially protestant history. It has become the cornerstone of this movement and seems to be a major catalyst for change in Western Christianity and the

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American culture today. In some sense he succeeded in what he felt called to do.

Not all of those who call themselves *Followers of the Way* live like its founder did. There are rumored to be a dozen or so people who have forsaken home and family to live this itinerant lifestyle. They believe this type of sacrificial life is the greatest example and witness to the Kingdom's reality.

It is interesting to note that the true success to this movement doesn't lie with its founder, but with two disciples that he obtained before he incurred a devastating stroke that left him, from what I am told, immobile and unresponsive. I have tried to find the whereabouts of the one they call the preacher, but my attempts have been unsuccessful.

All church records concerning his true identity and whereabouts have been mysteriously misplaced or concealed. I have even tried to locate and interview the two founding disciples, but without much luck. The Followers I have interviewed are as secretive to the whereabouts of these individuals, as you were Mr. Martin about the topic of this meeting."

Marks comment once again drew some laughter from the small group.

"This is all I can tell you other than the term '*Followers of the Way*,' was a phrase used to describe the people who were followers of Jesus before they were called Christians."

"Very good Mark! I hope you don't mind me calling you Mark?"

Mrs. Steele spoke to him as he sat down. "Yes Mrs. Steele that will be fine."

"Please call me Susan; all of you." Mrs. Steele specifically aimed a wink to him.

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Mark was becoming increasingly suspicious and uncomfortable with Mrs. Steele. He also knew better than to trust his instincts.

Martin pushed to finish up business. "Initially you each have three scheduled appointments to meet with Mr. Brandon Steele. If you need more appointments to make your evaluations we will schedule them for you, but knowing all of your qualifications and your expertise we doubt that will be necessary.

You will each be expected to write a report on your findings that can be presented to the court. If possible we would like at least a few of you to be available for the hearings."

Martin with a big smile on his face said, "And always remember that it's good to get a second opinion." The stale pun resulted in groans and smirks. "At this time we will let Mrs. Steele, Uh Susan, say a few words."

Mark watched as she stood to her feet with every move seemingly graceful and perfect.

"You all know or have heard about the great accomplishments of my husband. His success was not a fluke by any means. My husband is a textbook Genius on all levels. This, of course, will not make him an easy subject to handle.

There is not a person on this earth who knows him better than I and I will help you in any way possible. I know with certainty that the man who is now in that hospital ward is not the man I once knew.

I'm afraid there are those who have taken advantage of him. When his mother passed he began acting different. His mother was involved with this group. They were the ones who presided over her funeral. I feel they took advantage of a grieving man who was having an existential break down caused by the loss of a parent. I believe they did this in order to persuade him to hand over a large fortune.

Whatever the case may be, this changed him from the respected businessman that the world once knew to the religious vagrant he has become.

My intentions are purely for the regard of my husband. To find help, if that is possible, and to help keep alive the legacy and kingdom that he worked so hard to build. It is a kingdom which is now falling apart without his guidance. For his well-being, for his namesake, and for my great love for him, I am doing what I am doing.

I know you will do what is possible, and I look forward to showing you our appreciation and gratitude when this is all over." Mrs. Steele looked towards Mark and maintained a soft gaze as she sat down.

Mark almost felt that her last words were meant as a bribe. His comfort level was becoming increasingly worse. Looking away and back towards Mrs. Steele he noticed that she was still watching him. Her eyes held contact as others asked questions to Mr. Bartow. Breaking again from her soft glare he noticed that others were aware of her actions by their reactions.

Martin then ended the meeting, pulled out Mrs. Steele's chair as she stood up, and escorted her to the door.

Mark, looking around, watched as some gathered their things together and others gleaned the information provided to them in the folder. He looked up in time to see Mrs. Steele nodding good-bye to him as she gave a small folded piece of paper to Mr. Martin. The piece of paper came with some instructions as Mrs. Steele whispered into Martin's ear. Mr. Bartow glanced back and forth at him while she spoke, and then she was gone.

Mark couldn't help but think at the basis of her actions was an unhealthy personal motivation, but what could it be? He couldn't help but feel she was up to no good. Scooping up his folder he stood and made his way towards the door. Mr. Bartow

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approached him and tucked the folded piece of paper into his suit pocket.

“You lucky devil, she wants to have a private dinner with you at her hotel to talk over details of the case and help you in any way she can.”

Mr. Bartow smiled slyly. “She wanted me to assure you that the meeting would be worth your effort and time.” He then snickered making his way over to the table to talk with some of the others.

Mark thought to himself that if the devil has luck on his side, then we are all in trouble. Good thing there’s no such thing as luck.

Mark reached into his pocket with his free hand to remove the note. Passing the trashcan he dropped it inside. He didn’t even want to know what it said. It didn’t matter. He had been hired to do a job and he was going to do it. Tomorrow afternoon was his first appointment and tonight he would need to think hard about how he was going to question Mr. Brandon Steele; Super-Genius.

Brandon Steele

Brandon didn’t want hear it. He didn’t want a lawyer and he didn’t want this wet behind the ears kid representing him. Then he began to think. Maybe there is another reason this kid is sitting here. Maybe he isn’t just court appointed, but divinely appointed

“I tell you what my friend. I know you want this case. I know it will look good on your record and do wonders for your reputation and career. It gives you the motivation to do the best job that you can for me.

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You might be in over your head though, especially if you fail to understand the power of greed involved. If you're going to represent me, then what you will need is something greater than the both us."

"What is that Mr. Steele?"

He watched as the excited young lawyer snapped at the bait waved before his nose. "Sit back and relax young Mr. Lawson, this may take awhile." Brandon laughed knowing it was going to be a long night.

Mark and Brandon Steele

Mark pulled up to the gates of the State Mental Hospital and wondered why Brandon had been sent here. Surely he wasn't a danger to anyone, so why put him in a place like this filled with dangerous people? Why close him in with tight security and barbed wire fences?

He figured with all of Mrs. Steele's money and the great love she proclaimed for her husband that she could have afforded a more comfortable and private atmosphere for him. Even the state must have other facilities less threatening and more accommodating.

Mark drove up and handed the guard at the front gate the pass he received in his file at yesterday's meeting. The guard waved to a fellow co-worker located at a second gate positioned twenty feet behind the first. The second guard pressed a large red button on the side of the guard house opening the barriers, so he could enter.

Mark took back the pass from the guard and clipped it to his lapel. Driving his shiny new sports car through large gates he followed the arrows pointing to visiting physician parking, as the instruction sheet explained.

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He counted three parking places at the front of the building specially designated for visiting psychiatrists. Mark also noticed an ugly, baby blue Beemer already parked in one of the spaces.

He gathered all his things that were spewed out on his front and back seat into his brief case and closed it. As he closed his car door his eyes were drawn to a man exiting the front door of the Hospital. He was waving at him.

It was one of the other psychiatrists present at the meeting. He was also probably the owner of the ugly sports car. Mark recognized him as Dr. Walter Haden. He also saw complete frustration on his face. He wondered what he wanted.

“Good afternoon Dr. Haden.” He said.

“Nothing has been good about this afternoon Dr. Stanton, and that is to say the least. I see what Mrs. Steele meant when she said her husband could prove a difficult subject. He twists your words and analyzes what you are saying in a way that leaves you stumbling over your own thoughts and intentions.

I felt like I was the patient and he was the one analyzing me. You would think that he would be a little more cooperative considering the circumstances.”

Dr. Haden began to move past Mark towards his car when he turned around, “Oh, by the way, before I forget again in my frustration. There is something that I needed to talk to you about.”

Mark turned towards him to listen.

Dr. Haden gave a sigh and allowed both his hands to message his temples. He couldn't believe that he completely forgot the very reason he waved Dr. Stanton down. Brandon Steele had pushed all his buttons.

“I had lunch with a few of the others this afternoon. Of course they are dear friends of mine. They looked at the schedule and were aware that you were to follow me. We

wondered, at this point, if we could get a little assistance from you.”

“How so Doctor?” Mark asked.

“Some of us are not, as you might say, very religious Dr. Stanton, and many of the terms and subjects that Mr. Steele discussed with them and with myself are as foreign as an elephant sitting on our desks at 3:30 in the morning.

We planned to meet together this evening for casual conversation as friends, not really to discuss the case, but I see no harm in talking about religious terms and concepts. We thought it would be nice if you could join us for this purpose. I think we all would like to better understand Mr. Steele’s religious positions compared to main-line church stances.”

“I would be glad to be of assistance Dr. Haden.” Mark replied. “Just tell me when and where.”

“Good. We are meeting at the Trident Restaurant downtown at six.”

Mark smiled. “That fits fine with my schedule. I’ll see you there.”

“Wonderful Mark! I will call the others and let them know that we are going to have a guest for dinner.”

Mark nodded and closed the gap between them to shake hands, but Dr. Haden turned and rushed to his baby blue Beemer. He started it, backed up, and sped off without even looking at him.

As he turned to enter the hospital sounds of thunder were heard in the distance. Mark looked up to see dark clouds moving in quickly from the west.

He entered the building and came face to face with a large clear partition and a secured second door. Behind this clear barrier sat a guard behind a desk. He wondered if the clear wall was bullet proof, or if it was just a thick shatter resistant material.

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The guard's voice came through a small speaker adjacent to the inner door entrance. "Do you have an appointment?"

"Yes I am Dr. Mark Stanton. I am scheduled to meet with Brandon Steele."

A buzzer was heard and the door unlatched.

Mark entered in and a young woman dressed in a doctor's smock met him.

"Can I see your pass?" she asked.

Mark lifted up the security pass on his lapel.

"Follow me Dr. Stanton." She continued.

He was led up and down through a maze of hallways and security doors. Mark joked with the young woman leading him. "I hope you don't expect me to find my way out of here?"

The woman turned her head as she kept walking. "That was funny the first time I heard it this morning Dr. Stanton. Since then it has become a bit redundant."

He responded. "I see." Apparently she wasn't polite in the least bit. He was amazed that it took almost ten minutes to work through the maze of security gates and check stations before they arrived at their final destination.

She led him to a room with a one-way mirror and a sophisticated array of electronic equipment. This made him curious. He noticed the computer being used as the brain of the operation was conference connected to some other location. The thought of Mrs. Steele watching the entire process over the internet seemed to be the best bet.

"Is Mr. Steele aware that you are recording him?" He asked one of the young men working the equipment. The young woman that led him to the room answered his question.

"Yes he is, and he signed a waiver giving us permission."

Mark wondered what advantage Mr. Steele had hoped to gain from allowing this.

In the other room he recognized Brandon Steele immediately. Sitting to his right sat a tired looking young man who appeared by his apparel, briefcase, and notepad to be a lawyer. They weren't speaking, or moving. They just sat there staring at the door, as if they were waiting for the next victim to arrive.

One of the two equipment technicians spoke to him, "We are ready when you are Doctor."

Mark was led out of the monitoring room to the door of the adjacent room where the prying eyes of Brandon Steele and his young companion were fixed. He was beginning to feel uneasy and began doubting his decision to accept this case.

The woman who accompanied him from the main entrance unlocked and opened the door to the room.

He quickly nicknamed the room in his head, "The Lion's Den." Entering he tried to not show his nervousness.

"Good afternoon Mr. Steele I'm Dr. Mark Stanton." Mark extended his hand to Brandon.

Brandon watched as the slim young man entered the room. He accepted his formality of a handshake extending his hand in return. "Good afternoon Mark. This is my Lawyer Mr. Ronald Lawson."

Mark offered a handshake to Mr. Lawson and sat at the table directly across from Brandon Steele. It was then he heard the sound of the door being locked. It sent an unsettling feeling over him.

He noticed that he was becoming increasingly nervous. To calm himself he offered a silent prayer as he opened his briefcase. He again began to question the motives behind such extravagant security for a person who didn't seem dangerous or threatening.

Did they think Brandon was dangerous to himself or to others? Did they think he would try to escape somehow? Was it

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because of the high profile nature of the case? Then it dawned on him that maybe the motive was to not keep Mr. Steel in or safe, but to keep others out and away from him.

“I wanted you to know Mr. Steele that I am not only a psychologist, but I am a Minister.” Mark felt that it might be good to let Brandon know that he’s a Christian. He also thought it might be a good idea to plainly state his intentions. “I am not only a minister, but I am here for your sake Mr. Steele and your sake alone in the name of Jesus Christ.”

“You are here for my sake in the name of Jesus Christ.” Brandon repeated the words of the man before him. “What you actually mean Mark is that you are here to analyze me according to scientific criteria, even though many do not accept psychology as a pure science, because of the various un-measurable and subjective variables involved. Then by using this criteria find me fit or failed or somewhere in between and act on my best behalf as ethically as you are able. Isn’t this what you mean?” Brandon inquired with a smile on his face.

Mark didn’t flinch. “Yes sir. I guess you could word it in those terms, but the fact that I am minister and my loyalty is to my Lord also means that I will approach our meeting through the lens of faith, hope and love.”

“Which you believe makes you qualified to beneficially assess my situation?”

“Yes Mr. Steele. I believe I have one advantage over the others in examining your case and that is faith.” Mark wasn’t just saying this to gain Mr. Steele’s approval, but because he was sincere.

“Let’s give this a shot then shall we. Here is my situation Mark. Did you think it strange that a man like me, even though I am considered only a harmless religious fanatic, should find himself locked up in a State Hospital for the mentally unstable and extremely dangerous?”

Mark responded, “Yes sir, I did think it strange. I wasn’t aware that you were considered a danger to yourself or others. Are you going to share with me why you believe you are here?”

Brandon laughed and his eyes twinkled, “I thought you would never ask. My wife is a selfish woman Mr. Stanton and at one time I was very much like her.” Brandon turned towards the two way mirror and waved. “Hi honey!”

Mark noticed when Brandon turned back around towards him that his expression revealed he took a great pleasure in this action. Mark realized that he enjoyed it as well. It took great effort not to smile.

“I was a selfish and greedy man. We have never loved each other. Love is not what kept our relationship together. Greed was the bond of our marriage covenant. My wife will never settle for half of my estate and net worth. Her Greed will not let her settle for anything less than all of it, because money is her god and she serves her god faithfully.

People change Mark. If you are a Christian, then you believe this. A transformation occurred in my life through God’s help. People make changes in their lives all the time. They change their career, their hair color, and their facial or body features. They change where they live, whom their married to, and even their names at times. These changes do not constitute that they have lost control of their mental faculties. No, we consider this human nature. So the question we must ask is, ‘Why is my change so different?’

The simple answer to this question is that wealth and status is what I have changed in my life. Who in their right mind today would give up the kind of status and wealth that I had? Look in the scriptures Mark. You know exactly who would.

Personally I feel that I am literally being held prisoner here because I broke our marriage bond of Greed. I have been cut off from all communication from the outside and any of those

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whom I feel led to call upon to assist me. The fact of the matter is that you can help me Dr. Stanton. You and Mr. Lawson can leave this hospital today and you both can help me.”

ANTHONY PERRY JR.

Chapter 11 An Old Friend and A New Sister

Sarah, Minnie and Martha

Sarah removed her bible from her jacket pocket pulling out the tattered piece of paper tucked away within. She unfolded it and read the handwritten words.

April 29th Journal Entry

Sarah learned about my family today. Finding out I have a family unraveled what she came to trust in for security. I think it sent her world crumbling. I had no idea she placed trust in me, or found security in our living arrangements. I am glad she lost whatever faith she had in these worldly things. When those things were removed from the picture she was able to see her faith in Christ. I just hope that when her world was crumbling she fell onto the faith already established in her heart through Christ, rather than grasping the first thing that came to mind that could keep her from falling. Only time will tell. Only she will be able to discern the truth. Why does it matter how her faith was established in Christ. It exists now. That's the important thing.

The Preacher

Her eyes welled up. This piece of paper aroused so many memories, thoughts, and emotions. It would be devastating for her to lose it somehow. She placed it onto the copier, as the teller closed the lid and pressed the copy button.

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Sarah grabbed the duplicate, folded it, and placed it in the spot of her Bible where the original had resided for years. She then took the original and inserted it into a special enclosure a friend made for her. She handed it to the teller who set it into the lock box. Together they walked into the bank vault to store it away for safety.

“Thanks Minnie.” Sarah offered.

“It’s no problem Sarah. I would do anything for you.” Minnie forced a smile as she walked with Sarah to the bank door. “You’re really going to see him?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow after I visit Brandon in Chicago. It’s a genuine miracle from God. It’s an answer to thousands of prayers.”

Minnie took a small envelope out of her pant pocket and placed it into Sarah’s hand. “We felt this was important enough for you to get there as fast as possible. It’s your bus ticket, and also a plane reservation with a little money for the trip.”

Sarah hugged her. She knew the way would open up for her to get to Cleveland. “Tell everyone thanks for me Minnie! I was wondering how I was going to get there. Do you want me to say anything to Brandon?”

“If you see him tell him we love him, God is with him, and our prayers are covering him.” Minnie was fighting to hide the tears. She did everything possible to keep from bawling, because she wasn’t sure she could stop once she got started. Brandon and Sarah had helped to change her life and she would never forget it.

Sarah didn’t say good-bye. She didn’t believe in saying good-bye anymore. She lowered her head, turned and left. She thought of how much she was going to miss everyone as the bank door closed behind her. Turning towards the bus station she could hear a voice from across the street giving her a word of encouragement.

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As she walked a store owner peeked his head out of the door of his shop and yelled. "God speed Sarah!"

A teen girl from an apartment window above her softly, but audibly, whispered, "God be with you Sarah."

Many people in this town knew who she was and knew where she was going. She could already feel the prayers offered on her behalf. It made her feel as if all the new friends she had made in this place were traveling with her in some way.

Guilty feelings were aroused in her because she wasn't going to stay with Brandon in Chicago. He was fighting powers and principalities that were more than human and he needed all the support he could get.

His wife might as well be the devil. She laughed at the thought that she may very well be.

Her thoughts moved to Tanya's words on the telephone a few weeks ago. Her heart couldn't even find words to pray and thank God. "He's talking and alert, he's awake!" Those were words that echoed in her head ever since.

For so long he lived in that semi-vegetative state and now he was fully conscious and able to talk. It was a miracle. Since then she has asked herself many questions. Will he be happy with the work we have done? Sarah smirked. Maybe she needed to ask the Lord that question instead.

She, Tanya and Charlie followed his lead after his illness. She had only spent six months with him, and Charlie heard him speak only a dozen times, but his journals were full of his thoughts. They followed the scriptures and read his journals that reflected upon them.

They tested Joseph's understanding and their motives many times. They would constantly ask if they were laboring in the love of Christ, or if they were laboring for the man they greatly loved and admired. They always assured themselves that they labored in love for the Christ they met in the man.

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Charlie was going to meet her in Cleveland. She was so happy that the Followers in Seattle purchased a plane ticket for him. God always provided. Looking at her plane ticket she realized that their planes would arrive within a half an hour of each other. From there it was a forty five minute drive to see Joseph.

She had visited him numerous times over the past three years. She would tell him what they were doing, and how the good news of Christ's love was being spread in word and deed.

She told him of the bondage free and life revealing faith that many people from all walks of life had experienced. She told him of the kingdom's blossoming reality breaking into the darkness of this world. All the time he just lay there quietly. She didn't know if he was listening or understood, but she shared the joys anyway.

She reached the station and the bus terminal was empty except for the ticket agent. She walked up to the counter and handed the agent her ticket.

"Do you have any luggage that you would like to check in?"

The only luggage she carried with her was a knapsack that contained a few days worth of clothes, soap, deodorant, feminine products, a toothbrush and toothpaste. "No thank you. This is small enough for me to carry on the bus."

"I will need to look in your baggage." The agent added.

Sarah handed her the bag.

"You're lucky. The bus should have been here fifteen minutes ago. You might have missed it if it would have been on time." Recognizing that there was nothing that could do any harm to anyone in the bag, she quickly zipped it up and handed it back to the young woman.

Sarah finished checking in and smiled at the ticket agent. She sat down in one of the hard green plastic chairs in the terminal.

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The chairs were old and scratched and must have been there for decades.

Only God knows how many others had sat here. She wondered how many Christians had sat in these chairs. She wondered how many were not. Lastly she wondered how many more would pass this way again.

Sarah opened her bag and took out one of the Gideon Bibles she carried around with her. Of course, she always taped a little message inside for anyone who would find it, open it and read. She laid the small New Testament down on the seat next to her and repeated verbatim the message attached inside its cover.

“When you get tired of trying to find something to believe in, and you want something that doesn’t fail, look to Jesus. I have found that He will never fail, or give up on you.”

The message reminded her of a time when she didn’t believe what it said.

Within minutes the large bus rolled in and came to a stop. The sound of escaping air could be heard. The doors of the bus opened and Sarah grabbed her bag. Heading out the door of the terminal she passed the bus driver.

The driver spoke. “I’ll be right back. Do you have any luggage?”

“No, just my little sack.”

“Good, just get on board. We’ll be leaving in about five minutes.”

The driver entered into the station. “Hey Martha, how are things going today?”

“I’m fine Sam. You’re late you know.”

“The strangest thing happened. The bus died on me. For fifteen minutes I tried everything. I finally called in for backup

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and a tow crew, but when I decided to give it one last try it started right up. It's been fine ever since.

The garage told me to drive it as far as I could and if it broke down again they would swap it out. I sure hope it makes it to Chicago." Looking at the empty countertop he asked, "Where's the sign-in board?"

Martha handed him the board and Sam put down the time and initialed it. She initialed next to it. "I wish you luck."

"Thanks. See ya tomorrow Martha!"

"Have a good one Sam." Martha followed Sam to the door and locked it behind him. She waited until the bus headed back onto the road. It was the last bus scheduled to stop. She turned and did a quick check glancing into the bathrooms and around the terminal to make sure there wasn't anything that needed cleaning before she went home to make supper. She noticed a small book on one of the chairs.

"Hmm? What's this?"

Sarah

Sarah was glad the bus wasn't very crowded. As it pulled away from the station she noticed the seats were old and ripped and the interior gave off a peculiar odor. It smelled like the second hand shop her grandmother used to own in West Virginia.

The ride was tolerable and she was able to get comfortable and sleep. It seemed like she had just closed her eyes when a bump lifted her up from her seat. Looking at her watch she realized they were probably only a half an hour from Chicago.

She wondered if they would let her in to see Brandon before she had to catch her plane. Excitement was building in her. She

hadn't seen Charlie in months and she hadn't seen Joseph in over a year.

Up two aisles she noticed a small boy staring at her over the edge of his seat. She knew it must be hard for a little child to remain still on a bus, but at least the kid wasn't screaming, or yelling, or running up and down the aisles.

She began playing a game of peek-a-boo with him. He would peer out over the top of the seat and she would turn her head quickly towards him. This sent him giggling and back behind the cover of his seat. Children his age didn't have the motor skills to do anything gracefully. He clumsily flopped back into the seat every time.

Sarah looked away and she could hear him moving in his seat. It didn't take much sometimes to keep the small ones happy. She quickly turned back towards the toddler when she was startled. The mother yelled in a loud voice, "Quit it!" A horrible slapping sound sent the toddler crying and wailing.

Anger welled up in her triggering a memory from her early childhood. She was amazed at how clearly she could see her mother and the restaurant in her thoughts.

She remembered tasting her food and how bad it was. She told her mother she didn't want to eat it because it didn't taste right. Her mother's hand shot up grabbing her throat. She squeezed as she silently choked her.

So many people were there. She wondered why no one had helped her.

She could hear her mother's words whispering into her ear. She whispered to avoid drawing too much attention. "You're going to eat that food whether you like it or not. I paid for it and you're going to eat it." It was unfair. It was wrong. Sarah found her connection between the two events. The little guy didn't deserve that slap. It was unfair and it was wrong.

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That mother never warned him. She just told him to stop and hit him at the same time. She didn't even look to see what he was doing when she reached over and hit him. Her head never left the magazine she was reading.

Remembering her own mother was unpleasant for her. Her mother was never patient. She was never kind. She was always physically and verbally abusing her. Sarah knew her mother hated her. It's one of the reasons she never told her that she loved her.

She knew her mom regretted having to take care of a child on her own. Her favorite words were, "I wish you were never born!" Anything she ever needed or wanted was her infringement on the quality of her mother's life.

Continuing the memory Sarah remembered how she ate the food and gagged on it. Later that night she was rushed to the hospital for food poisoning. She thought becoming sick from the food would show her mother, at last, how wrong she was. But when she returned from the hospital she was punched on the back of the head as she walked through the door of her house.

She could remember her mother's words. "You stupid little girl! Do you realize how much you just cost me? I won't be able to buy my shoes for my high school reunion now. I wish you were never born."

Sarah throughout her childhood was her mother's punching bag. She always took the blame for her mother's failures.

The little boy's whimpering once again took her back to the memory of the restaurant. She remembered being so embarrassed by the incident. When she looked around to see if anyone saw what happened she noticed one man in particular. She believed he witnessed the whole scandalous event. He looked at her sadly shaking his head. She remembered that he

formed the words, "I'm sorry" with his mouth, as if he were the one responsible.

Later when she grew older and thought about this she wondered if he was sorry because she had to go through that, or if he was sorry because he was too cowardly or powerless to do anything to help her.

Sarah realized that she was in that man's position now. She saw the whole scandalous event. Would she be sorry? Was she too cowardly or powerless to do anything? Quickly she made the decision that there wouldn't be any ignoring or minding her own business. She would stand up for the innocent child.

She quickly rose up from her place and made her way to the empty seats opposite the row where the little boy and mother were sitting. The mother of the child pretended not to notice as she continued to read her womens fashion magazine.

The little boy smiled when he saw her and wiped the tears from his face. There was a red mark on the side of his face in the shape of a hand, a woman's hand, a mother's hand.

"Excuse me," Sarah said to the mother.

With a polite and kind expression the young woman looked to Sarah and answered, "Yes?"

"A few minutes ago I began playing a little game of peek-a-boo with your son. I know how hard it is for a little one like this to sit still for hours on a long bus ride. He's done so well. I figured there would be no harm in playing peek-a-boo. I thought it would help pass the time away.

It seems however that I got him into trouble and I felt bad because he was punished. I guess his behavior may have been interrupting your reading, or maybe you thought he was disturbing others on the bus. I admit that it was mainly my fault.

I feel even worse now, because I can see his little tear marks running down his face alongside of your handprint there. I

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figured since I was the adult and I played the game with him that the real blame should be placed on me.

It would make me feel so much better if you would consider apologizing to the little guy, and slap me instead.” The mother’s jaw dropped and the little boy looked up into mom’s eyes waiting for her response. Sarah turned her head and pointed to the side of her face for the mother to slap.

The woman struggled for words. “I...I...I didn’t realize.” Her eyes scanned the side of her little boy’s face where a clear red mark in the shape of hand could be seen.

“I’m so sorry sweetie.” She said to the little boy who was lovingly looking back into her eyes. She dropped her magazine and clutched him in her arms and began to cry. “I’m so sorry.”

Martha the Attendant at the Bus Station

“Good morning Martha!” the mailman said as he let the pile of mail fall onto the bus terminal’s counter. Martha wished Bert would just dump the stack of junk mail in the garbage instead of lugging it all the way from the post office so she could do it.

“It’s as good as it’s going to get.” She responded. Martha watched as Bert left the bus terminal. As soon as he was out of sight she snatched the bundle and pitched it into the garbage can where it belonged. She didn’t know why she waited until he left. Maybe so Bert wouldn’t feel that he delivered the mail everyday to the station for nothing. She knew there was no use to even look through any of it, because all the important mail went to the main office.

It was one o’clock and the next bus wasn’t scheduled to arrive for a few hours. It was the only other stop scheduled for today. She grinned at the thought of going home early.

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She had already finished all her daily cleaning, so the only thing left to do was answer phones and wait to see if anyone would purchase a ticket.

The terminal didn't really need cleaning. The only person that had come through here in a week was a young woman this morning and she wasn't here long enough to make a mess.

Martha opened the small Gideon Bible the young lady had left in the terminal. The inscription that someone wrote on the inside of the front cover kept going through her head.

“When you get tired of trying to find something to believe in, and you want something that doesn't fail, look to Jesus. I have found that He will never fail, or give up on you.”

She felt it was too risky to place your faith in something or someone. She learned the hard way and gave up trying long ago.

The reality of life for her was that it is a vicious cycle. You get ahead and something comes along to push you back down. It was the pattern of her life and she had learned to accept it. She was tired of trying to find something to believe in. She was comfortable at the bottom and destined to never get ahead. It was her place in the world.

As far as Jesus was concerned she wasn't sure. She went to church as a little girl, but that didn't do her any good. It would be nice to have something that could lift her up without pushing her back down.

It would save her from the expense of paying for all her anti-depressant medicine. At least the medicine made things bearable. It helped her to not care. She didn't understand how people believed all those crazy things in the Bible about Jesus anyway.

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When she much younger a preacher told her, “There are some things in life that you will have to accept by faith if you want to find out if they are true.”

He told her that if she spent her life doubting everything all the time, then she would never commit to anything. He also said if she will never commit to anything, then she would never find the true purpose and meaning of her life. She didn't know why she remembered that conversation, but she did.

The preacher said God loved her so much that God sent Jesus to rescue her from her sin and worldly prisons. This made no sense to her when she was twelve. It made more sense now. She felt like a prisoner. She wondered if what the preacher had said was true.

It couldn't be true. Faith never made a difference anywhere in her life. The only faith she had was faith that everything and everyone in her life would fail or change on her. This was the only truth she believed.

She had tried to turn to God when her daughter ran away and became strung out on heroine on the streets of Chicago. Instead of her faith doing any good the drug habit became worse. It continued to the point that her daughter turned to prostitution and became pregnant.

Two months into the pregnancy she heard that her daughter lost the baby from one of the hometown girls. The girl was an old friend that had become a nurse in the Chicago Hospital. People were kind and would always pass on what they had learned concerning her runaway daughter. It wasn't too much longer after that she received a letter from her daughter saying she had AIDS.

Where was God then? What good came from having faith in God? If God heard her prayer, then his answer was a tombstone and a grave. Her baby was too young to die. She wanted God to

help her daughter quit doing drugs, but death wasn't what she meant.

Tears fell from Martha's eyes at the thought of her baby girl, only eighteen, on the hospital bed, eyes sunken in, with tubes and wires hooked in everywhere. She looked more like a skeleton than the beautiful baby girl she once knew. She prayed a lot then and all she got in return was pain and sorrow. She didn't know if she would ever pray again. She saw no point in it. If there is a God, then the only question she had was why?

The bus arrived on time and had departed. She quickly locked up the terminal and headed in the direction of home. She kept her head down and her pace steady. She then remembered that she needed to stop by the bank to cash her paycheck.

She reached the bank door and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw no lines at the teller stations. The bank was completely empty except for the employees. Behind one teller window was an old friend of hers, so she made her way to her. "Hi Minnie, how has your day been?"

"It's been a long day, but aren't they all." She responded jokingly.

Martha placed her purse on the counter and began unloading its contents as she looked for her deposit slip and paycheck. "I don't understand it was right here."

The small Gideon's Bible was one of the items that found its way to bank counter.

"I didn't know you read the Bible Martha." Minnie said as she watched her frantically search through her purse. She picked up the small Gideon's Bible and flipped it open to the front cover. When she saw the inscription inside the front cover she knew it came from a *Follower of the Way*. It made her smile.

"Here it is! My mind is playing tricks on me, because it wasn't here a minute ago." Martha looked at the bible in

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Minnie's hand, "Oh that was left by a young lady at the Bus Terminal today. The inscription is what caught my eye. I haven't read the Bible since I was a kid. I didn't understand it then and I'm sure I wouldn't understand it now."

Minnie knew Sarah was the young lady to whom she was referring. "Someone once explained this inscription to me. It's really neat; as a matter of fact it changed my life. If you ever want me to share the meaning behind it with you, then just let me know." She set it back down with the rest of the pile and took Martha's check and deposit slip.

A funny notion struck Martha. "Hey Minnie we haven't gotten together in a long time. Why don't you come over the house for dinner tonight, then we can catch up on things."

Minnie had plans to attend her Christian Accountability Group at a neighbor's house that evening, but something inside told her God was opening a door that she needed to walk through.

"That would be great Martha. What time?"

"Let's eat about 7:00."

Minnie smiled, "Sounds good to me. I'll see you then."

The Dinner

The doorbell rang and Martha rushed from the kitchen to answer the door. Minnie stood there with a side dish in her hand and large smile on her face. She opened the screen door to let her in.

"Where do you want me to put this Martha?" She asked.

Martha grabbed the dish and said, "I'll take that. Follow me into the kitchen."

Minnie surveyed the living room of the small lower level apartment as they passed into the kitchen. On top of the

entertainment center was a picture of Martha's daughter that passed away a few years ago. It was surrounded by flowers and lit candles. Her heart broke. It was a shrine echoing a mother's unending love for a lost child.

It reminded her how the Cross of Jesus was also a shrine today that echoed God's unending love for His lost children.

Minnie recounted the turmoil surrounding Martha's daughter. She must still be carrying a heavy burden from her loss. She felt guilty that she hadn't done more for her. Here was a need right in front of her face and she couldn't see it. She should have been there every step of the way for her. She wondered if Martha would have let her.

Inside the kitchen Martha had prepared a place for two and set the table up with a delicious smelling home cooked meal. Minnie watched as she went to a drawer pulling out a large spoon for her casserole.

"I even made us strawberry shortcake for desert Minnie." She chuckled and pinched a roll of flesh on her waste, as if to say, 'like I need more.' "I'm hungry. Let's eat."

The two quietly sat down at the dinner table and Martha grabbed a fork to dig in, but noticed Minnie's head was down. She figured that she must be praying. She was respectful and waited for her to finish. When Minnie lifted her head the two ate.

Throughout the meal Martha enjoyed Minnie's company. She hadn't talked and laughed like this in a long time. It was amazing how many things Minnie remembered from their youth. She couldn't believe how much she had forgotten.

"It's been so long since I laughed like this Minnie. I can't even remember the last time I laughed." She became silent and her face took on a look of deep, hurtful reflection.

"I guess I do remember. It was before...it was before our fight over the drugs I found in her room. I remember telling her

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that no daughter of mine is going to do drugs and bring them into my house.

She said, 'Well I can take care of that.' I didn't think she would run away. I thought her anger would blow over and we would work things out. I was wrong."

Minnie looked at her and felt compassion. "I know it's been hard for you. I'm sorry that I haven't been there for you Martha."

"Yes you were Minnie!" Martha interjected.

Minnie was covered in doubt. She didn't know what Martha was talking about.

"You called me all the time and asked how things were and how I was doing. You even helped me look for her one night after someone called and told me they'd seen her. You came to her funeral and stayed with me for a few nights after it was over. That meant more to me than you will ever know." Tears began to fill Martha's eyes. "I'm so sorry. I didn't think I would do this." Martha broke down. She felt so embarrassed.

Minnie came around the table and placed her arms around her old friend hugging her tight.

Martha gained control of herself and when Minnie released her hug she noticed her friend had been crying with her. For some reason it comforted her. For some reason it made her feel loved and not forgotten. This was something she hadn't felt in a long time.

Then it came. It was the secret. It was the horrible secret that was bursting to get out. It haunted her. It ate away at her. It festered within. "There is something I've never told anyone Minnie. It's been eating away at me for a long time."

"What is it Martha?"

"I think I know why Lizzy turned to drugs and prostitution." She burst forth into a flurry of tears. She grabbed the dishtowel lying next to her plate and buried her face into it.

“What is it Martha?” Minnie’s heart broke and she began to cry with her.

Taking her face out of the towel and through sobs she said, “My ex-husband John, Elizabeth’s step dad molested her. Sitting at her bedside in the hospital I was crying and asking God why. Lizzy took my hand and held it tight. She said, ‘Mom there is something I have to tell you.’” Martha burst forth in a moan and a torrent of tears.

Minnie’s eyes fell to the floor.

“Struggling to talk she said, ‘John molested me from the time I was four years old.’ Oh I just shook my head no. I thought there was no way that could be true. Then an image popped in my head as I sat by her bedside. I remember every time I went to work Lizzy would throw a fit and cry out after me. She would say, ‘No mommy! Don’t leave me here alone!’” Martha struggled to continue.

“‘No mommy!’ It was then I realized it was probably true.” Martha once again sobbed into her dish towel as the horrible secret had finally been brought out into the open. It had lost its grip on her and with every tear she felt more and more relieved. She was finally free from the terrible secret.

After a few minutes she continued. “Elizabeth told me she had recently met some new friends who were counselors. They were people who lived on the streets with her for about six months. Elizabeth said they took care of her, and loved her. They helped her to understand that the life she chose was because of the sexual abuse and that her past may explain her, but it didn’t excuse her.

She told me that she found meaning and purpose in her life and she was learning to deal with her past in healthy ways. She said she was glad they helped save her and that she came to Christ before it was too late. Imagine that Minnie,” Martha said

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with anger, “they saved her before it was too late. But it was too late, because she was dead the next day.”

Martha shook her head over and over again. “Tell me Minnie. How can I ever find a reason to live? I feel my life is pointless without her. I don’t have any reason to live without my Lizzy.”

Minnie thought for a moment wondering whether or not she should respond at all. Something within nudged her to say something. “We all have a reason to live, even if it’s our pain we live for.

Some find their reason for life in their careers, others in family, or a relationship. They place their faith in these things and build their lives on them thinking they will never change and will always stay the same.

When they do fail, or change it leaves them stranded and their lives shipwrecked. That’s why some choose to place their faith in nothing, but nothing can fill the empty void in their hearts.

Martha cried. “That’s my life! I have faith in nothing. I gave up on life a long time ago.” Tears flowed down her face. “I’m so empty and lonely.” She burst into a moan.

Minnie continued wrapping her arms around her. “I’ve learned that everything in this world can fail us, because everything in the world changes. Change is inevitable. That’s why building your life and trusting things to not change is pointless.

That’s what the inscription in the Bible you found is all about. There is only one who is truly reliable and never changing. That’s God. Through Christ we have the choice to place our faith in the only unchanging One in the universe; The Absolute of all certainty, God.”

Martha shook her head. “I prayed to God Minnie that he would save my little girl. He never answered my prayer. Why

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should I place faith in a God who ignores prayers and lets children like my Lizzy suffer and die?”

“We all make choices Martha. Sometimes they are good and sometimes they are bad. Today you made the choice to get up, get dressed and go to work. Things get very difficult in life when we don’t make right choices. People have trouble accepting that God lets us have the freedom to make wrong choices.

God even let’s us live in the consequences of us choices. God didn’t make your little baby run away from home. It was her choice. God didn’t tell John to molest her. That was his decision. He didn’t tell your daughter to take those drugs to hide her pain and her past. She placed her faith in those things to take care of her pain and they tricked her and failed her.

Everything that happens in this world is not God’s will. We want to blame God, but the truth is we are to blame.

You may find this hard to believe, but I believe God answered your prayers. God would never enter Elizabeth’s life and snap his fingers to make her do what you prayed for her to do. He did send people into her life to help her find her way. It seems Elizabeth found what she was looking for in her despair.”

“She was just a baby. How can I trust in a God who let’s babies suffer?” Martha asked.

“God doesn’t want anyone to suffer. Sin is all the things we as humans do to cause suffering, and all the ways we as people ignore suffering. Sin entered into the world and is constantly at work turning us away from God and His good, perfect and loving Way for us.

Suffering is humanities consequences of its actions. The Bible says every human is guilty before Him and that God chose for Jesus to die for those sins, so we won’t be held accountable for them.

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He died for our sins Martha. One day the Bible promises suffering and death will end. God is waiting patiently for all of those who will accept the gift of salvation. That time will come, but for now it has to be this way. We may not like it, but if we believe in a good God, then we have to have faith that God has all the people of the world's best interest at heart."

"What about people who never heard about God's plan?"

"I have the faith that the Lord knows all circumstances and knows all truth concerning all things. I have faith that every person is given a chance. In the end God will be the true loving judge."

Tears rolled down Martha's face. "I want to believe, I want to have faith. I want to have something that will never fail me. I want to feel that I have a reason to live."

Minnie quickly responded, "Then pray to God and He will fulfill the desire of your heart."

"I wouldn't know where to begin." Martha wept.

"Don't worry, I will pray with you walk with you every step of the way. Besides God knows what it is like to lose a child. He watched His precious, sinless Son suffer and die. He can help and heal, because He has made a Way."

Martha answered between sobs. "What should I do?"

"Believe. Surrender your heart, mind, and soul to Him. Lose your life in Him and He will help you find new life in abundance."

ANTHONY PERRY JR.

Chapter 12

Charlie

Charlie walked into the hospital room where the young man lay. His head was bandaged and his eyes were swollen. The nurse that led him here introduced the two women to him. The young man's wife and mother stood supporting each other at his bed side during the introduction.

The young wife looked tired. Charlie heard that she had been sleeping in the waiting room for days waiting for a miracle or waiting for the worst to be affirmed.

The nurse that asked him to come told him the story behind the young man. Apparently a week ago, drunk and high, he responded to a dare from his friend.

Apparently the friend watched a movie where people played Russian roulette. Sitting on the table in front of them was a pistol and six rounds. The bet was for him to take one bullet, place it in a chamber, spin it, and pull the trigger.

In front of his children, in front of his wife, and in front of his friend, the young man in his foolish bravery accepted the challenge. He won the bet, but it may have possibly cost him his life.

The young man's wife spoke to him. "No one thought he would do it and before I could finish yelling at him to stop he pulled the trigger."

Charlie thought to himself about the horror of that moment and how that memory of those images would haunt them for the rest of their lives. He thought about that horrible images now stained in the children's heads.

The Mother spoke, "They said that you have prayed for people and they were healed. Can you heal him?"

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Charlie hated this. Did they actually believe that he could come here and wave a magic wand and make this man better? Who did they think he was? Did they think he was like Jesus?

Charlie always reminded people that Jesus healed many people during his ministry, but nowhere does it say that all the people in Judea were healed.

Even the bible witnessed this fact. In Acts the Apostle Peter passed a man who had sat at the temple gate for years, practically all his life. Jesus passed this man many times going into the temple and never stopped to heal him.

The Bible says Jesus' healings were done to fulfill prophecy to show that He was the chosen One of God. If anything people should realize that God never planned for us to live in these imperfect mortal bodies forever and has no desire for us to remain in them.

Besides, if every time some Christian prayed for healing and their prayer was answered, then they would never die.

If every time a Christian prayed for healing and his or her prayer was answered, then everyone would jump on the bandwagon of Christianity.

People would be looking to God, as some kind of Miracle Pez Dispenser, instead of coming to him by faith in free will to the knowledge of God's love and plan for their eternal life.

He looked at them both. "Listen, I know that many have claimed that healing has come to them because I prayed to God on their behalf, but you need to understand that if a miracle doesn't occur that I, nor God, is the cause.

God does choose at times to let us humans reap what we sow, but the Lord isn't to be blamed. This young man made a choice, not a smart one, but a choice nevertheless. It is a freedom God gave him and one he abused.

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He may reap what he has sown, or God may choose to be merciful, but whatever God chooses to do, it is God's choice and done for reasons that are above our own understanding.

The terrible thing is this young man has caused pain and suffering for those nearest to him. It is a terrible consequence of his actions. It is unfair to all of you, but the chance for pain is inevitable when we love other human beings. For him this act was a failure to see the full consequences of his actions; your pain. Do you understand what I am saying?"

The mother and daughter in tears both responded as best as they could with a yes.

Charlie bowed his head and laid his hands on the young man. "Let us pray... Father, whom has knowledge of all things, who understands our human weaknesses and frailties, who knows all the circumstances that led up to this young man making this fateful decision, be merciful.

You, who are true judge and know the very reasons behind all actions and know our ignorance in doing them, we pray your grace be granted.

If healing from your hand is this young man's portion, if there is a chance for faith, hope, and love to be birthed from his healing, then be understanding and show us mercy, as we pray the only way we know how, for a miracle Lord.

Be with this family, let them taste of the blessed hope and promise of your Spirit, so that they may know you and love you, as all who are truly blessed do. In the name of Christ and for His glory let it be done as you will. We give you thanks. Amen."

The woman and mother sobbed uncontrollably. They watched and waited. As moments passed without a change in the young man's condition they wept even more. Charlie recognized they were expecting him to just wake up right away and were quickly losing hope.

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“God works on God’s own time ladies. If the Lord has acted it can be instantaneous or it can happen over a length of time. Don’t give up hope, keep the faith, and keep praying.”

The young wife was assured by these words. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” said Charlie, “But many thanks should be poured out to God. Do it as if God has answered our prayer for him already.”

“I will.” She responded.

Charlie turned around and exited the room. He headed to the nearest elevator. Many of the nurses, aides, and patients on the hospital floor were of “The Way.” They were lined up at their doors and by their stations. When Charlie passed they spoke, “God speed,” offered hugs, pats and affirmation of their prayers offered for him. He felt the Spirit of God moving all around.

The elevator whisked him to the first floor. A cab was waiting in front of the hospital for him. He entered it and as he drove away he looked behind to see a small group waving. God had amazed him once again. He wondered what God had in store next.

The trip to the airport took only fifteen minutes. There weren’t a lot of people there. He was glad it was a slow day. This made going through the check in and airport security a breeze. He only waited a half hour before the stewardess called for passengers to board.

Charlie walked down the aisle of the plane and placed his carry-on bag in the storage compartment. He sat down in his seat and began dreading the flight.

He couldn’t help but think of that young wife and mother and young man who lay in the hospital bed.

He felt so cramped on planes. He wished they designed the seats in these flying cans to make room for tall people. They were so unbearable. The idea of a four-hour flight made him cringe.

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His mind moved to thoughts of the preacher. When Tanya moved him to Ohio he visited many times, but the preacher over the years never responded in anyway. He truly believed Joseph would be like that until he died.

Talk about not having faith and being hopeless. Charlie didn't expect him to live, but he did. He lasted in that state for almost three years and now praise be to God he's awake.

Tanya said they were already working to build his strength to walk again. The therapist told him that the Preacher was recovering at a miraculous rate.

Charlie couldn't wait to talk to him. He had tried to call, but it seemed every time he tried, Joseph was always somewhere else, in some kind of therapy, sleeping or visiting with his family. Sarah said she encountered the same trouble in trying to reach him.

He couldn't wait to talk to the man he had come to know through his journals. He found so much transforming reflection and insight into the scriptures. Reading the journals alongside the scriptures became one of his many daily disciplines.

There were so many questions he wanted to ask, and so many things he wanted to clarify. He didn't know if Joseph would be up for it, but he wasn't going to leave Ohio until he found the opportunity to ask all the questions he had gathered over the years. He wondered if Joseph would have the ability, strength or desire to answer them.

It's amazing how some people have the uncanny ability to go to the Bible the same way any other person does and come away from it with treasures for the soul that blesses everyone else.

Everyone brings his or her own background and learning into that interpretation. What made the preacher special was that he never grew up in the church. He never had any religious

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instruction until later in life. He also grew up in a poor and dysfunctional home.

The preacher had read God's Word since the time he was a child without the doctrines and institution of the church shaping his understanding of the kingdom.

All he knew was God, the Bible, and life experience, but Joseph's simple experiential interpretation was the same as those he had read and learned over the years. The only real difference and genius in Joseph's writings was in how they connected to people in deep and meaningful ways.

It's exactly the same thing that Jesus did. Much of what He taught was the same things the Jews had taught and believed for centuries, but Jesus was able to connect it to people's hearts.

He was sure the Holy Spirit of God had a lot to do with it.

Charlie thought it was a shame that some Christians can educate themselves right out of God's grace to receive the truth from Him. Without God revealing anything to us we are just flying by the seat of our sinful reasoning pants.

He wondered what it must be like to wake up after three years and realize the whole world has changed. Joseph probably didn't even recognize himself when he looked in the mirror. He changed without even knowing it. This wasn't so remarkable. People and things are changing all the time and we are wide awake when it happens. And we don't even realize it.

The Foolish Young Man

The young woman and her mother sat quietly in chairs by the young man's bed. His vitals remained stable. The doctor's decided that today they would lessen the medication, so her

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husband could be allowed to gain consciousness. They would know the true extent of the injury at this point.

During surgery the doctor's removed half of his brain, at least what was left of it, and they weren't sure what condition he would be in once he regained consciousness.

She stared blankly at her husband while she prayed and thanked God just as the Christian healer Charlie Packard instructed. She then saw a movement out of the corner of her eye.

Looking, she realized one of his eyes had opened. After that she saw his hand rise up and grab the bed railing. She jumped up from her chair and looked into his face. She prayed to God he would recognize her. She watched as his eye scanned her face.

Her mother-in-law realizing something was happening joined her side.

She watched as her husband's eye moved over his mother's face.

In a slurred voice using only the part of his mouth that seemed to work he said, "Hey baby, hi mom, what happened? Where am I?"

They both wept as they held his hand tightly.

CHAPTER 13
Mark & Sarah

Mark was with Brandon Steele for an hour when the sound of the door being unlocked abruptly ended the visit. The large steel door opened and a guard motioned to him. It was obvious that he came to escort him out. "Sorry sir your time is up. Please follow me."

Brandon looked at him and smiled, "I look forward to speaking to you tomorrow. Maybe when all this is settled we will have the chance to talk about other, more important, things. Things like what you are really looking for Mr. Mark Stanton."

Mark was puzzled. What could be more important right now to Brandon than his freedom? "What would that be Mr. Steele?"

"Why Mark, I know who you are. I know why you were hired by my wife. You have been relentlessly chasing after the Followers to find out their secrets. I also know that you're trying to find the preacher, Sarah and Charlie. In fact we know a great deal about you."

The fact that Brandon knew so much was disturbing, but he tried not to show it. "That still doesn't tell me what it is you think I am looking for Mr. Steele."

"Doesn't it Mark? Don't you know what you are looking for? Maybe you'll soon find out."

Mark smiled and gathered up his things. He really didn't understand what Brandon was saying. If Brandon was talking about God, then he was barking up the wrong tree. Mark believed.

It did however make him curious enough to want to ask more questions. Curiosity is probably what Brandon was really trying to inspire with his mysterious comment in the first place.

The guard escorted him back through the confusing labyrinth. As he followed, he thought about the conversation.

He hoped those listening and watching hadn't figured out what he was about to do for Mr. Steele.

How could they know? Their entire conversation was cloaked in biblical passages and meaning. He became convinced of Brandon's intelligent and was amazed at his knowledge of the scriptures. Most of the people watching probably lacked the background to catch on to the underlying gist of their conversation.

Mark began to hope that he hadn't gotten himself in over his head. When they reached the door another psychiatrist was waiting at the entrance. They exchanged formal greetings, as he was let out and the other was led in.

Outside the storm he noticed earlier had rolled in and flashes of lightning filled the sky. The rain was coming down in sheets. He hadn't seen a storm this bad since he was a kid. He used to love sitting on the porch with his grandmother when it rained like this. It was times like these that he really missed her.

He fumbled through his briefcase for a small compact umbrella that he always carried with him. On the count of three he ran towards his car. Mark hit the button twice on his remote and the two beeps confirmed that the alarm was off and the door unlocked.

He jumped inside throwing his briefcase in the back seat. Fumbling he placed the keys in the ignition and started his car. With a simple twist of a knob he turned his wipers on full blast, but that didn't help him see things any better. The rain was coming down hard.

As he drove up to the gate his windows began fogging and impairing his vision even more. When they opened the gates Mark carefully inched his way through and came to a full stop at the street.

There was no way he could possibly tell if any cars were coming because of the fogged windows. A little rain shouldn't

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bother his leather interior too much. He rolled down the driver's window and quickly rolled it back up after he noticed no traffic coming from his direction. Then he rolled down the passenger window. There wasn't any traffic, but he spotted a single figure kneeling on the ground outside of the hospital fence apparently praying.

This must be a *Follower of the Way* who came here to pray for Brandon. He couldn't just let the person sit out there in that downpour. He yelled out, "Hey, you can pray for Brandon in my car, as well as you can out there in the rain."

The individual heard him, looked at him, and looked at the gates he just drove through. The person grabbed a small bag and quickly jumped up off their knees and ran to his car. The door opened and he was able to see the person was a young woman.

"Have you talked to Brandon?" She asked frantically.

"Whoa! Calm down and take it easy Miss."

"Is he alright, how is he doing?" She interrogated demandingly.

Mark looked down at the water that was dripping off of her onto his interior and cringed. "He's doing just fine. There is nothing to worry about. He's in good hands.

Right now I think you need more care and prayer than he does." He watched as the woman began to shiver. "I think we need to get you somewhere so you can change your clothes before you get sick."

Sarah didn't say another word. She felt that there was a reason for God leading her and this man to cross paths. What it was she didn't know yet. She would just let the Lord reveal it in His own good time. She began to pray for Brandon again.

Mark watched as the young woman lowered her head and closed her eyes. Was she praying again? He looked at the car dash and noticed that it was almost 5:30. Suddenly he remembered the dinner at the Trident with the psychiatrists. It

quickly became clear that a great opportunity had landed right into his lap.

Who better to explain the religious terms and phrases that Brandon uses than another *Follower of the Way*. Not only that, but whom better to fulfill Brandon's plan. This was perfect. If he asked the right questions in front of the others and she knew the answers, then they could be witnesses to the truth.

If Brandon is right about his wife's motives, then Mr. Steele could be a free man soon. He turned to the young girl and said, "Listen, how would you like to help Brandon?"

Sarah looked up and smiled. The Lord certainly doesn't waste any time. "It would be my pleasure."

"I'm one of the persons hired to evaluate and help Brandon. A few others in the same position as I am in are having dinner tonight at a little seafood place downtown. It seems they're having trouble understanding some of the religious terms and phrases Brandon uses, and since we only have a short time with him we don't have the chance to ask him the questions we would like answered concerning the *Followers of the Way*. Would you be up for it? I'll pay for your dinner. I think you could be a big help to Brandon if you would."

Sarah looked deep into her heart for the answer and it came. "Yes, I'll do it." She responded.

Mark was pleased. "We need to get you out of those wet clothes first."

"Stop at a gas station on the way and I'll change."

As he drove the rain gradually stopped and a small opening appeared in the clouds allowing gorgeous streams of sunshine to poke down. He thought it was as if God's glory was shining through.

A beautiful deep colored rainbow formed ahead of them. He could hear the young woman next to him make a sound of awe.

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It reminded Mark of God's promise related with the rainbow in the scriptures.

As he drove he thought about how different the way this young woman and he chose to live out their faith, but like the rainbow they believed in the same promise.

Mark pulled up to the door of the women's room at the next gas station. The young woman flew out of the door of the car. Within minutes she returned with her wet hair brushed back into a pony tail and wearing a dry outfit.

Mark had retrieved some paper towels from the men's room and wiped down the interior of his car before she returned. When he looked up and saw her he realized she was a remarkably beautiful woman.

"By the way I didn't introduce myself. My name is Mark."

Sarah smiled taking the hand that he offered and shook it. "I know." It dawned on Sarah in the restroom why he looked so familiar to her. She saw his picture many times before. She knew he was one of those sent to study the Followers.

"You know my name! Then what Brandon said is true. The Followers can see me coming. Well, then I am at a loss because I don't know your name."

"Yes you do," She said. "You can call me Mrs. Christian."

Mark laughed. "O.K. Mrs. Christian, let's go to dinner." He held the door open for her as she entered the car.

He had to admit that he admired the Follower's dedication in living their life sold out to Christ. Biblically there was nothing wrong with their level of devotion. It was just different than what the modern world was used to and understood.

A few minutes later they were pulling up in front of the Trident Restaurant.

Mark parked and ran to the other side to open the door of the young woman. He led her inside to a private area in the back of

the restaurant. Four of the other doctors were there. They stood up as they approached the table.

Mark nodded to them and said, "Gentleman I have a very special guest with me. This is," Mark coughed to highlight the name the young woman chose to give, "Mrs. Christian and she is a *Follower of the Way*. She has agreed to answer any questions that we might have concerning the Followers."

Dr. Haden laughed. "Mrs. Christian?" And then he looked at Mark suspiciously. "Do you think that this is wise Mark?"

"I told Mrs. Christian that we are here to help Mr. Brandon Steele, and as long as we don't discuss anything that should be kept confidential, then I don't see the harm in it. I am sure she will be able to answer your religious questions concerning the Followers far better than I ever could."

The others nodded in silent agreement and sat down.

Dr. Haden understood Mark's words as a warning to keep quiet about any of the specifics of their findings. He also saw a great opportunity to gain some information for Mrs. Steele.

Within minutes the waitress took their orders and introductions were made with the others at the table. As they waited for their food to arrive Dr. Haden didn't waste any time with his questions.

"Tell me Mrs. Christian; Brandon said he was a *Follower of the Way*. What is a Follower?"

Sarah smiled, "Every Christian is, in some sense, a *Follower of the Way*. The real question is what is the Way?"

The Way for us is living in a loving relationship with God and neighbor as Poor Houses for the Lord.

It means living everyday in the reality that we are a part of the Kingdom of God. This reality directs and shapes our life's relationships and actions.

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It means living everyday under the Lordship of Christ in the will and presence of our King, as we offer support and care for others.

Being a Poor House means surrendering ourselves to the point that we feel no shame or awkwardness in inviting people to become a part of God's kingdom through repentance, forgiveness, and baptism.

Ultimately, it means doing our part in fulfilling the Great Commission of the church. It is why we exist. This, in part, is what we mean by the Way."

Mark jumped in to ask the next question, "In talking to some of the Followers they have mentioned the greater sacrificial service that some amongst you feel called to live.

Could you explain this for these gentlemen since Brandon is one of those who responded to that calling?" In asking this question he knew what was about to come next, but he asked for the benefit of the group.

"In the New Testament there are many passages concerning leaving all, forsaking money and possessions. These were calls from Christ to certain individuals to become all sacrificing disciples. They learned from Him, as they followed Him. These individuals were literally called to leave all and follow Him.

Jesus traveled as He taught His disciples and shared the news of the Kingdom of God. We shouldn't forget this is probably the reason he called some to sacrifice in a greater way than others. He literally had nowhere to "lay his head" on this earth. Neither would they.

This was unlike other stationary teachers of this time who taught in the temple or synagogues.

We believe that the Lord knew His time on earth was limited, and that when He began his ministry He was aware of the challenges and hardships of following and learning from Him. We believe He even knew the challenges and hardships for the

continuation of the kingdom ministry after his death and ascension into heaven.

To these particular disciples were all those difficult passages of forsaking life, land, father, mother, and children mainly applied. They were not meant for all the disciples who believed in Christ, because not all were asked to leave their homes, families and work.

Some Christians believe that Jesus calls all disciples to forsake all and that it is more of a spiritual call to a spiritual reality than a physical call to a physical reality.

We don't deny this, but we also believe that Jesus calls for certain disciples, even today, to literally and spiritually follow Him in this fashion.

These are the ones to whom we refer to as called to a greater sacrificial service. This is the form of discipleship that only a few of the Followers have ever felt called by God to take. This is the path Brandon Steele was called to follow.”

Dr Haden asked, “Do these all sacrificing disciples then receive a greater reward in heaven?”

Sarah smiled. “That’s not the point. God gives all followers eternal life no matter when they come to Christ, and no matter how they serve him.

Eternal life is the greatest gift given to all who believe. We don't see it as a reward though. All God desire is for us is to be faithful to what we have been empowered and called to do.

Some are given one talent, some five, and still others ten and our faithfulness to our talents is our love response to God's love for us. It's how we wrap our arms around God and others and show them we love Him.”

One of the other doctors then spoke up, “So what makes the Followers so different than other Christians?”

“Followers exist in every denomination. We're not a church like you may understand. We are more of a movement of

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Christians who have crossed lines of separation to love God, each other, and the world in the example of Christ.

We see ourselves as the Church universal that exists beyond human boundaries. The only difference that can distinguish a Follower from other Christians is the Way we live out our faith in life. We live with a specific worldview of God's kingdom on earth and support one another in that purpose.

It's a little more fanatical than what many Christians in the United States are used to, because it calls for complete surrender, accountability and commitment."

"What is it then that you believe?" Mark asked thinking that this might further help them to understand their structure.

"We let each believe according to what their own faith and church body sets forth, and believe that no one should act outside of their faith, or the foundational beliefs of Christianity.

We also see dissension is a tool of the devil, so we would agree to disagree for the sake of love and unity and pray God's forgiveness for those amongst that are wrong.

Besides I doubt that any Christian will have all their beliefs in perfect order when they die. Our goal is simply to follow Christ's example, what God has revealed, and to walk as He walked.

Don't get me wrong. This doesn't mean that many of us don't take a firm stance on many issues confronting our society. By the nature of our firmness on certain issues some of us do come into conflict with others that have differing beliefs, but the choice to love and serve Christ following in His footsteps despite our differences is the path we choose.

We recognize that each one of us will stand before God as individuals and answer for ourselves and each one of us will plead the blood of Christ. What happens after that is up to God."

"What do you believe about Jesus?" Dr. Haden asked.

“God reveals to each one the real truth concerning Jesus.”

At that time the waitress and a busboy brought their dinners to the table.

“How about we eat and finish our discussion after dinner.” Mark asked.

Everyone nodded and spoke in agreement.

After dinner the conversation continued.

Mark was the first to ask a question. “Why do you think your movement is so appealing to the masses?” Mark asked realizing he was avoiding the question he really needed to ask. He needed to ask about the money, but his curiosity concerning this question overpowered him.

“I’ve thought about that a great deal. In part I believe it’s because we are a lay movement like all the great Christian movements of the past. We are just common people like the early Christians, and even the early Methodists.

I also think that people are tired of talking. They are tired of meaningless routines that have lost their significance. They hunger for meaning and action. They hunger for others who have the same devotion and passion they do in Christ.

This is why most of the Followers are made up of that core group of Christian workers in every church that seem to do everything. These are the people who want to act in Christ’s love when the opportunity arises. They are more willing to not be distracted by the things of the world. They are devoted to loving God with all they are every day. It is the ultimate desire for us behind all things.

Sarah looked directly into Mark’s eyes as she leaned towards him on the table. “Can’t you see why we are doing what we are doing Dr. Stanton?” she questioned. “You are surrounded by Followers every single day of your life. Surely you must be able to see why. Don’t you see their love for one another? I think this is the greatest reason why it has become so influential.”

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Mark responded. “You would think if people around me were *Followers of the Way* they would have told me by now. I also know from my research that a Follower is so different in their behavior it would be obvious to recognize them by the way they live their life.” He laughed at the idea that anyone he was close to could be a *Follower of the Way*.

Then it dawned on him what a profound statement Mrs. Christian was making and what she was actually saying. His response to her comments made it even more clear.

She wasn’t talking about the *Followers of the Way*. She was talking about all Christians. She was talking about the Universal Church. Jesus taught that Christians should reflect the reality of God’s love in their relationships to those around them. She was saying the essential reason the movement is so influential is because people can see the love they have for one another.

Mark looked at her with an expression of wonder. Sarah realized he understood what she was really saying. She continued, “Jesus said by the love that you have for one another, the world would know that you are my disciples. You will know them Dr. Stanton by the fruit that they bring forth. They are witnesses of the kingdom of God on earth. They are salt and light. God’s reality pours out of them.”

Dr. Haden seeing room of opportunity finally butted into the conversation. “What about the hundreds of millions of dollars that Brandon Steele gave to your organization? You have to have some system or structure in order to handle the receiving and dispensing of those kinds of funds.”

Mark smiled. Here it was. I’m glad Haden asked the question. It saves me from asking Mrs. Christian the question on Brandon’s behalf. He then wondered why Haden was so interested in the money. Maybe he was a plant for Mrs. Steele!

“We don’t store in barns Dr. Haden. We trust in God for our needs. Besides all of Brandon’s money was gone before he

decided to follow Christ in the greater sacrificial way. Only he and God know where that money went.”

Mark surveyed the faces of all at the table. If Mrs. Steele wasn't convinced of this fact now, then she soon will be. If she was able to prove that Mr. Steele was incapable of sound judgment, then she could pursue her goal of getting the money back from the Follower's.

But who was she going to approach even if she did? Who was she going to sue? There were no official record books, no official membership roles, and no official state or government paperwork making their organization a recognized entity. There was no one but Brandon who handled the money?

He decided to help flesh this out some more in case they didn't get it. “Mrs. Christian, you mean no one was in charge of how the money was dispersed?”

“Mr. Stanton, like I said, that was between God and Mr. Steele.” Sarah laughed. “Those of the Spirit are like the wind, they can't be grasped and no one knows what direction they will turn next?”

“What does that mean?” Mark inquisitively asked.

“I'll let you figure that one out on your own Dr. Stanton.” Sarah looked up on the wall at the clock and noticed it was almost time to catch her plane for Cleveland. “I'm sorry I can't stay for dessert gentleman, but I have a plane to catch. I hope that I have helped all of you and Brandon in some way.”

“Can I drive you where you need to go Mrs. Christian?” Mark offered.

“No thanks, I have a Way. Good-bye gentleman. Thank you for the meal Mark.”

They all stood and thanked her as she gathered her small bag and headed towards the door.

Chapter 13

The Worst and Best Is Yet To Come

Mark wondered why Brandon hadn't already told his wife about the whereabouts of the money. He could only imagine Mrs. Steel's possible reaction to her husband's humongous deeds of generosity.

As smart as Brandon is, Mark was sure that he took precautions to hide his trail of giving. Mrs. Steele was in for a rude and unsettling awakening. Mark knew what he must do, but it would have to wait until he got home later on tonight.

Through all of this a few questions came to the forefront of his mind. Why didn't Brandon just tell his wife the truth in the first place and save himself all this trouble? Then again maybe he did and she didn't believe him.

This evening also got him thinking about his own understanding of the kingdom and how it compared to the Follower's. More importantly he thought about his denomination's understanding of the kingdom compared to the scriptures.

Mark knew that his church understood discipleship and faith in action, but they hadn't followed or lived their understanding with much passion or impact over the years. There certainly wasn't a kingdom focus. There were those he knew had genuine love for God and people behind their actions, but he also believed there were others he believed who were just following the game plan.

He couldn't count the number of programs that attempted to inspire following Christ in love, but for many of them it was like trying to start a fire with water soaked wood.

Why is it that so many Christians have never understood or grasped the full understanding of the call to Discipleship, or the

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call to live in the Kingdom's reality? Could the Church, as it exists today, be in need of recovering this literal type of sacrificial discipleship, if only to awaken to the truth concerning the Kingdom's reality?

Had the church become a different way to follow?

Could their organized structure be a nesting ground for the too busy and too indifferent?

Has his church become so confining and closed off that it no longer knows the God who cannot be contained?

Has it become so imbedded that it cannot move?

His denominations numbers had been declining steadily for years now. Could any of this really be part of the reasoning behind the decline?

The members of the dinner party finished their dessert and each one finally came up with an excuse as to why they needed to leave.

He decided that he wanted to be the last one out of the restaurant. If there was going to be any further conversation about Mrs. Christian's comments, then he wanted to be there. He stayed until the last one left.

He paid his bill and once outside noticed the storm clouds had broken up completely and the sun was setting. The smell of fresh rain still lingered. This was perfect weather as far as he was concerned. When he walked to his car he noticed a folded note underneath his wiper. He opened it and read.

Mark,

My real name is Sarah. I told you that you knew my name. I hope you found what you were looking for. Sometimes you can miss what you are looking for when it's right under your nose!

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He shook his head in disbelief. “People also miss things Sarah when they are not looking for them at all, or when they don’t really know what they’re looking for.”

He opened the door of his car and noticed a small Gideon Bible. He grabbed it and opened it. Inside was a pasted inscription. Underneath it Sarah had written,

“Ask Brandon what this means. Sarah.”

Tanya and Joseph

Joseph sat looking out the window of his room. The sun was setting and the birds were chirping. A cool breeze flowed in through the window. In the distance he could see storm clouds coming in. It was all so beautiful to him.

Three voices behind him yelled “Daddy!” in unison. He turned his wheel chair around and was frozen in amazement. He still couldn’t get over how his babies had grown. They were so big and grown up. Why did he have to miss those precious years with them?

They all rushed to him and hugged him in the chair pinning him to his seat. The whole time they were drowning him in embraces they were talking a thousand words a minute. He couldn’t understand anything they said.

“Hi honey!” Tanya spoke loudly trying to overshadow the voices of the kids.

Joseph looked at his wife. Three years had not worn its way on her, as it had him. But she wasn’t partially a vegetable either.

“Hello there!” He responded with a look that said help me on his face.

She laughed even though she was on the verge of crying. “You’re looking better every day.” She said. “Your therapist said he’s never seen anyone improve at the rate you are!”

“Yeah, I know. He’s like a broken record. All he says is Wow! Wow! Wow!”

After the kids calmed down he spent the next hour listening to their stories. Joseph Jr. talked about his new girlfriend and his desire for marriage, Camille about her new found love for science, and Camry about her love for animals and desire to be a veterinarian.

“I’ve also decided that I am going to be an all sacrificial Poor House like you dad.” Joseph Jr. popped in.

“A Poor House? Where did you hear that from?” It was a playful term he used in his journals to talk about the surrendering of a person’s desires and life to God.

“Everybody knows what that means dad. I want to be an all sacrificial Poor House like you, Sarah and Charlie.”

Joseph looked at Tanya. “Sarah and Charlie? What are you talking about? Do you still keep in touch with Sarah and Charlie?”

Tanya realizing that her son had ruined the surprise decided that the time had come to tell him everything. She signaled the children to leave with a fake coughing sound.

The children had been instructed and knew what the cough meant, but they ignored her.

“Is someone going to tell me what he’s talking about?”

She had hoped to wait for Charlie and Sarah to arrive before she explained everything to him, but it didn’t look like it was going to be possible. She coughed a second time and they continued to ignore her. Frustrated she said, “O.K. it seems that you’re not paying attention to me my precious little darlings. Your father and I need some time to talk alone. Go into the

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dayroom and watch some T.V. When we're finished I'll let you come back in and spend a few minutes."

"But Mom," Camille whined, "we've only been able to see him an hour a day. We want to spend more time with him."

"Don't worry. You will have more time with your father tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that."

The three of them gave their father a kiss and a hug and then gave him assurance that they would see him in a few minutes.

Joe watched as his children left towards the dayroom. "O.K. what's the big deal. What's this all sacrificial Poor House stuff that Jr. is talking about?"

She carefully chose her words. "I need you to just sit back for a moment and just listen. There is something I need to tell you and I don't know how you are going to respond."

"There's only one way to find out." He said.

Tanya pulled up a chair next to him and held his hand. "When all of this happened three years ago there were three individuals whose lives you touched for God. They made a promise to one another and decided they would not let what you believed in come to nothing. They believed it was what they were called to do for Christ.

I was one of them. Sarah and Charlie were the other two. All we wanted was to glean the most important things and offer them to others for their walk in the Lord.

What happened next we would have never imagined. Not even in our wildest dreams. People began being set free all over the United States. It has changed America and it is beginning to change the world. One changed life at a time is helping the world to live in God's love. And if you look you can see God's kingdom alive and vibrant."

Joseph didn't believe what he was hearing. How could all this take place in three years? He never said or did anything

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someone somewhere in time hadn't already said and done? Then it struck him.

God had kept His promise. When he gave up all to follow Christ the Lord promised he would be blessed and receive a hundredfold. He had received a multitude of households full of Christians, a multitude of brothers and sisters, a multitude of mothers, a multitude of fields to labor and harvest. God kept his promise.

Something else came to mind. One of the last things he remembered was a dream. It was strange. It was as if it was being shown to him, but he actually felt as if he were participating in it. Was it true? Had God revealed the future to him? Had he been used by God to help gather in the last of God's people? Was the end of the world near?

Charlie, Sarah and the Preacher

Charlie trying to find ways to ignore the cramped seating yawned and realized how tired he was. He hadn't slept in 20 hours. He just hoped he could get over the seating long enough to sleep.

Charlie watched as a stewardess walked down the aisle to approach him.

"Sir, is your name Charlie Packard?"

"Yes it is. Why do you ask?"

"A gentleman saw you board the plane and thought he recognized you. He took the liberty and honor of upgrading your ticket to first class. He said with those long legs you would need the legroom. If you will follow me I will take you up front and seat you."

Charlie laughed. "The Lord does work in mysterious ways."

The stewardess responded, "Yes he does Charlie Packard."

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It wasn't long until the plane taxied to the runway and after his initial take off jitters Charlie was able to settle down in his new accommodations, enjoy a meal, and sleep. The next thing he knew he was being shaken by the stewardess and asked to buckle up and prepare for landing.

The few hours of sleep left him feeling refreshed and ready for a new day.

The plane landed smoothly without any major bumps and within minutes they pulled up to the terminal and were ready to unload.

When Charlie exited the plane his eyes caught a hold of her. She was the most beautiful woman he ever laid his eyes upon. Dropping his bag he ran and embraced her.

"How has my wife been?" He asked.

"Just fine! How has my Husband been?" She returned.

"Never better!" When they kissed Charlie could hear a few elderly women next to him offer expressions that displayed their appreciation for young love. He also heard a kid about five feet away say, "yuck."

"That was really nice." Sarah spoke and laughed as they ended their kiss. "But it isn't nice to yuck people out."

Charlie looked at the kid who was now smiling. Looking back at Sarah he said, "Yes that kiss was very nice, but you know Mrs. Packard, or should I say Mrs. Christian, we should probably get moving and grab my luggage. We do have a very important appointment to keep."

They began to walk to the luggage carousel. "How is it that you have luggage Mr. Packard, or should I say Mr. Christian? Whatever happened to that rule of taking only what you can easily carry and is necessary?"

"Well, this luggage is actually for Joe. I'm bringing his back journals and writings that I have."

"I see. And what will you do without them?" she asked.

“Don’t worry I have copies stashed all over the world.” He played jokingly.

“How’s Brandon doing?” Charlie asked.

“I wasn’t able to see him, but I was able to get some information. I have a feeling that even while we speak freedom is ringing. He may be walking out the door of his prison as we speak.”

Charlie looked at her. “Why do you say that?”

“Call it a woman’s intuition, or God’s assurance of a prayer answered, or maybe it’s because of the simple fact that Mrs. Brandon Steele finally knows that what she really wants out of all of this is already gone and out of her reach.”

Charlie nodded his head in agreement. “Brandon made sure of that. Didn’t he?”

Sarah smiled, “Yep!” “Good news. A young woman on the bus ride to Chicago gave her life to the Lord!” she added.

“Praise the Lord!” Charlie said loudly. “And he added to their numbers daily and heaven was given a reason to keep rejoicing. God help us all when heaven stops.”

“I gave her the names of some of the Followers that I knew in Chicago. They will love her.”

“That’s a wonderful bunch up there.” Charlie responded. “They are the kingdom’s shine.”

Charlie and Sarah retrieved the single small suitcase that Charlie checked in and they exited the terminal to the rent-a-car area near the end of the parking lot. From the airport it took about forty minutes before they pulled up to the front of the Nursing Home.

Charlie retrieved the small suitcase from the trunk, and they both hurried towards the double doors that marked the entrance.

They were surprised when Tanya and the kids walked out of the doors. The small family hadn’t seen each other in over a

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year and excitement exploded in embraces and greetings. They had grown extremely close.

“He’s going to be so happy to see you!” Tanya exclaimed. “Take it easy on him you two. I just explained all that’s happened while he was napping. Little Joe sort of let the cat out of the bag.”

Charlie looked at little Joe. “Couldn’t wait, huh kid? Don’t worry we understand. I can’t wait myself. I have a thousand questions.”

Sarah laughed. “Calm down dear. Time for that will come soon enough.”

Joseph Jr. looked at his mother. “Mom, are Charlie and Sarah staying at the house tonight?” He looked at them and begged, “Please, so we can catch us up on what’s going on.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way sweetie.” She answered.

“Sounds great!” Sarah said happily. “We’ll be there as soon as we finish up here!”

They gave each other hugs and kisses again. Charlie and Sarah entered into the nursing home as Tanya and the kids headed to their vehicle to leave for the house.

Sarah approached the front desk. “Can you tell me what room Joseph Perry is in?”

The nurse behind the front desk put her magazine down and scanned her room log, but was interrupted before she could answer.

“No need Jenny. You two will have to forgive Jenny she only started a few days ago and she doesn’t know all the patients last names and room numbers yet.”

The voice came from across the room. They turned to look and saw a skinny form dressed in a bathrobe nestled in a wheel chair. They had failed to see him when they came in.

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Both of them ran so fast to him that they almost didn't have time to stop. Their momentum pushed his wheel chair back, as their arms hugged him tight.

"Ugh...What are you two trying to do; put me out again?" He laughed.

"You have been in our prayers night and day and we visited you every time we could get the chance." Charlie choked the words out while he wiped the moisture from his forehead and then from his eyes. He couldn't believe how nervous he was.

Sarah laughed and cried at the same time. "This is nothing short of a miracle Joe!"

Joseph smiled. "I always knew love and prayers worked. To tell you the truth you two are a big surprise to me. You are the last people I expected to see, but I'm glad you're here."

Joseph became very serious and he knew it probably was noticeable in his facial expression. "Listen; let's go down to the visitor's lounge so you two can tell me your version of what's been going on." In a lower voice that carried with it a mark of mystery he continued. "Then I can tell you what I think may be going on behind all of this."

"What do you mean?" Sarah asked.

"I believe there is something more happening here than we realize." He unlocked his chair and gave a push on the wheels rolling away from them.

Sarah and Charlie looked at each other.

"I can't wait to hear this!" Charlie exclaimed as he and Sarah followed behind him.

Mark, Brandon, and Mr. Lawson

Mark, Brandon Steele, and his young lawyer Mr. Lawson exited the door of the state hospital.

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Brandon looked up into the sky and closed his eyes. “Thank you Lord.”

“Well Mr. Steele,” Mark spoke up, “everything seems to have worked out for the best.”

“Yes Mr. Stanton that is how it seems.” He responded.

The three of them looked down towards the street as flashes of light caught their attention. They could see reporters and television crews lined up outside the facility.

Brandon looked at Mark, then reaching he grabbed his hand and shook it firmly. “Thank you Mark!”

Mark responded. “No problem Brandon. In all fairness though, you already knew that your wife wasn’t going to get what she was after. That leaves me with one nagging question that I have been meaning to ask you. If you knew she wasn’t going to get the money back, then why didn’t you tell her yourself in the beginning and avoid this whole mess.”

Brandon let go of the handshake and looked at him with a sly smile on his face. “I did tell her, but she didn’t believe me. She was holding on to see if I would use the money to defend myself, or if the Followers would use it to hire a powerful lawyer to get me out. Then she could find her paper trail. Then she could find the money.

When that didn’t happen and you and the others came back with the same information, the same information that I gave her, she realized it must be true.

Its funny, all those years I lied to her she always believed me, then when I finally told her the truth, she just couldn’t believe it. How this all could happen in twenty four hours is nothing short of a miracle. God does work in mysterious ways Mark Stanton.”

Mark laughed. “I will say a hearty Amen to that.”

Brandon and Mark began to walk slowly. “Now that this is over maybe we can talk about what it is you’re looking for.”

Mark chuckled. "I look forward to it."

"I have one more favor to ask Mark?"

"Just name it Brandon." He said.

"Could I possibly bother you for a ride? I am afraid it is rather a long one and could take a couple days of your time. I promise that if you accept it will be well worth your effort. You might even be able to meet a few people that you've been trying to find. A few people you would love to talk with I'm sure. Besides this, you will help me get past all those reporters down there."

Mark thought about it for a moment. "How can I say no to a proposition like that?" Mark rolled out his arm and extended his hand in the direction of his car. "Shall we?"

They walked towards the car, Mark hit his key ring and two loud beeps were heard.

Brandon stopped and turned around to observe Mr. Lawson standing there helplessly looking at him.

"Well, Mr. Lawson? Are you just going to stand there or are you coming with us?" Brandon watched as the young man smiled, dropped his bag to the ground, and ran to the car.

Mark laughed and sat down into his car as the young lawyer squeezed into the back of his small sportster from the passenger side.

Brandon flipped the passenger seat back and sat down next to him as he stuck the keys into the ignition. With a turn of his wrist he brought the engine to life.

Mark looking in the rearview mirror said, "Mr. Lawson you can't be comfortable back there."

"I'm fine. I'm fine." He responded nervously. "You can call me Ron."

Looking to Brandon, Mark asked, "Where are we headed?"

Brandon looked at him with a smile. "A little birdie told me about something spectacular in Ohio."

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Mark nodded and put the car in reverse. "Then Ohio it is."

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About the Author

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