

GOD STORIES

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GOD STORIES

The Calvary Chapel movement began in the late Sixties when a little Pentecostal church opened its doors to the hippies of Southern California. The result was a great harvest among the “Lost Generation.” The meetings must have been a strange sight to newcomers: hippies lifting holy hands and singing the great old hymns of the faith; men in suits and ties standing shoulder-to-shoulder with men in bell-bottoms and tie-dyes; bare-foot girls sharing Bibles with Pentecostal grannies in cotton-print dresses. This was a new thing under the sun!

Preacher isn't talkin' 'bout religion no more
He just wants to praise the Lord
People aren't as stuffy as they were before
They just want to praise the Lord
And it's very plain to see
It's not the way it used to be
They're talkin' 'bout revival and the need for love
That little church has come alive
Workin' with each other for the common good
Puttin' all the past aside
Long hair, short hair, some coats and ties
People finally comin' around
Lookin' past the hair and straight into the eyes
People finally comin' around
And it's very plain to see
It's not the way it used to be
(“Little Country Church” by Chuck Girard/Fred Field, ©1971, Dunamis Music)

That was a half-century ago. The movement is now a worldwide fellowship of over 1000 churches and the Age of Innocence is long over, but Calvary Chapel is still reaching the unreachable and uniting people from all walks of life.

God Stories is a collection of testimonies by a rather odd assortment of characters. Some of us were raised in church; others were products of Pagan America. Some were addicts and outlaws; others were quite respectable. By a variety of paths we have all arrived at the same place. The aim of this little

book is to *proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.* (1 Peter 2:9)

You will observe that these are *God Stories* rather than *Religion Stories*. None of us weighed the options and made calculated decisions to become Christians. No, salvation just sort of befell us. We did not “find God;” He found us. (Luke 19:10) He initiated; we responded. (Ezekiel 36:27) We love Him because He first loved us. (1 John 4:19) We chose Him because He chose us. (John 15:16) We came to Him because He drew us. (John 6:44)

"Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness I have drawn you." (Jeremiah 31:3)

Some of our testimonies include accounts of child abuse, pedophilia, violence, drug addiction, and occult phenomena. Why would we want to put these dreadful things in print? To give hope to the hopeless; to testify to *this* Lost Generation that even the bottom of the abyss is not beyond the reach of God's grace. People who think that the message of God's love is too good to be true will see that it is too good *and* true!

The stories are not arranged in any thematic order but in the order they were received.

We anticipate a *God Stories II* in the not-too-distant future. If you want to share your story, let me know.

Wayne

***The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,
Upon them a light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)***

JEANNIE

Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. (John 8:36)

I begin my story with this scripture because that is what the Lord Jesus has done for me — He has set me free!

My earliest childhood memories are of hiding under the bed, fearful of what my father was going to do next. He was an angry and cruel man — a man who would flush my kittens down the toilet if they were born black, because he believed black cats were "bad luck."

One of the worst things I remember my father doing was beating my brother with a razor strap until he bled, and then pouring salt onto his wounds. I could never express how horrible it was to listen to my brother's screams.

I would watch as my father beat my mother and my brother, and call the police. The police would come and make him leave the house, but as soon as the police left he would come back even more enraged.

It was so hard to have to watch this and be so powerless to do anything to help. I would pray that my father would disappear so that the beatings would stop. I didn't know God, but I believed that there was something out there. One night my "prayer" was answered — my father died. I remember the night the hospital called and told my mother the news. I watched as my mother hung up the phone and, without a tear, she told us what had happened. I was seven years old at the time.

While all this with my father was going on, I was also being molested by other members of the family and was told to "keep it a secret." I was probably four years old when this started — I really don't remember — and this continued until I was about nine.

The pain from this alone created great problems in my life. First, it caused me to believe that I deserved to be treated this way. And it caused me to turn inward and to want to hide. I felt that if people knew my life and my

"dirty little secrets" then they wouldn't like me.

I cannot express the shame and the guilt that I carried for many years. But I can tell you that if this has happened to you or to someone you love, Jesus can heal those painful scars! He wants to give you beauty for ashes (Isaiah 61:3). He loves you and He knows the pain that you are in. He knows what has happened to you at the hands of another. Cry out to Him and ask Him to heal you, to take away the bitterness and anger that you are feeling. Tell Him all that is hurting you, and then tell someone who can help you. It is not your fault — please believe that! You did nothing to cause this to happen to you.

After my father died, my mother started going out to bars and hanging out with abusive men. And she started smoking and drinking. She would leave me at home alone for days at a time. I was so afraid! She would bring these abusive men home with her, and climb into bed with them. I can't begin to express how terrifying that was!

Soon my mother met my step-father, Frank. I thought I'd had problems before but now it started all over again — the arguing, the beatings, the fear of what would happen next. My brother was about fifteen by this time. He would get into fistfights with this man trying to protect our mother.

Frank was a horrible man. He would throw away all the food in the house so that my brother and I would have nothing to eat. He and my mother would go out to the bar at night after I had gone to sleep. Before they left Frank would blow out all the pilot lights on the stove and turn on the gas, hoping to kill me. But God had other plans for my life! (Jer. 29:11) I would wake up and open all the doors to allow the gas to dissipate.

There were so many other horrible things that happened during this time in my life which I won't relate here. I will say that Frank tried to do other things to harm me, but God protected me each time. Still, it was so hurtful when I tried to tell these things to my mother and she called me a liar, and said that Frank would never do anything like that. From this I learned not to say anything to anyone anymore — no one would believe me anyway.

At age eleven I ran away from home. I just couldn't take it anymore. And at the age of twelve I found Frank and my mother dead. My aunt had come over and asked for the keys to mom's house, as she hadn't seen my mom for several days and was worried. So we went to my mom's house, and when

we opened the door we were met by a strong smell of gas. We called the police and the fire department. My mother and Frank were in the house dead. The pilot lights on the stove were out and the chimney was clogged with soot, so the house had filled with gas. This was an extremely hard time in my life. It didn't help that my aunt blamed me for mother's death. She said that if I had stayed at home instead of running away, I could have been there to save my mother. That is something that I carried for a long time — if I had been there could I have saved my mom?

After my mother's death I went to live with my grandparents. My grandmother at least was a good lady. She'd had a hard life, but it was the life that she chose for herself. Her parents had told her to stay away from my grandfather because he did not love the Lord. But she didn't listen, so her disobedience to her parents caused her a lot of pain in her life. You may say that your parents don't know anything, so why listen to them? But do you know that there is only one commandment in the Bible for children? It says:

Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. (Colossians 3:20.)

Note that the Bible says here that this is well pleasing to the Lord! How many of us won't listen to our parents, much less to the Lord! But back to my story.

My grandmother was the only one that would ever pray for me or teach me verses from the Bible. I never really saw her read the Bible, but she did know some Scriptures like the Ten Commandments (Exodus chapter 20). You could never bring anything stolen into her house — if you did she would chase you out with a broom! I knew that she was the only person that loved me. She was there for me to the best of her abilities. She had a hard life, and her only escape was through reading romance novels. I bet she had a thousand books in her house!

About this time, when I was twelve years old, we moved from Hamtramck to Royal Oak. It was really hard for me. I didn't know anyone and I felt even more alone than before. I started attending Helen Keller Elementary School that fall. I hated that school. I didn't fit in and the other kids would tease me. I had been raised with black people and spoke their dialect, and the other kids would just rip me apart about how I talked. So it was at this time in my life that I really started to shut down. I kept to myself most of the time. I did

manage to make a few friends however. And you guessed it — they were the kids that didn't fit in either.

One thing I did not mention earlier in my story was that I started drinking at the age of nine. My older brother would buy me my own bottle of wine. I thought I was big stuff! I drank on and off then, but after my mother died I didn't drink again until I was about fourteen. And I can tell you, I liked the way it made me feel. I could be anyone I wanted to be. And I could hang out with anyone. I started drinking more and hanging out with the other kids that did the same. And I would go to the bars with my friends. When I drank, it seemed to give me some kind of special power.

At age eighteen I met the guy who would become the father of my daughter Tricia. I really didn't know what I was getting myself into with this man. He had lots of girlfriends. If I caught him with another girl he would beat me. At one point I allowed my friend to move in with us and, in no time, he was sleeping with her. Three years into the relationship I got pregnant with Tricia. He told me that the baby couldn't be his. And when I was nine months pregnant he married my friend. So at the end of my pregnancy I was living on the street. My brother told me that I should have had an abortion and that he wouldn't help me. Some people at the bar took me in until I was finally able to get my own place. I had my baby Tricia alone. No one came with me to the hospital.

About two months after I'd had Tricia I got pregnant again. This time I had an abortion. I couldn't take care of me and the baby I had, so how was I going to take care of another one?! Tricia's father would come around every once in awhile to be with me, and then he would go home to his wife. Finally I'd had enough. I went into hiding for awhile so I could stay away from him.

After I had Tricia I started working at a bar. I would drink six day a week, rest on the seventh day, and then start all over again. It was at the bar that I met a young girl. She was only sixteen and needed a place to stay, so I took her in. Two weeks later she asked if her brother could stay with us, as he had nowhere to go. I told her yes and that he could sleep on the couch. His name was Steve, and when I first met him I thought I was in love and that I had to have him. So I went after him, and we became great drinking buddies. No one ever told me that he was in trouble with the law. About a year later the police showed up at the door and took him to jail. I thought I was going to die — they had just taken away my god!

Steve ended up doing eighteen months at Jackson State Prison. I would go visit him at least once a week. When Steve got out of prison, the conditions of his probation were that either we had to get married or he would have to go back to live at his mother's place. Well we couldn't have that, so we got married. I don't think I would have married him otherwise — I thought marriage was a bad thing because of the poor examples I had seen growing up.

Things soon got so crazy. Steve started doing cocaine. I wanted nothing to do with it, but he convinced me it would be okay. I was about 23 years old at this time, when I had a really "bright" idea — I would have Steve's baby and that would make everything "okay". It took me eight years to get pregnant, then along came my son Stevie.

While I was pregnant Steve started doing more and more drugs. I would cry a lot. I didn't know what to do! But in my crazy thinking I thought well if you can't beat them then join them. Soon Steve was doing crack cocaine. About two weeks after Stevie was born, Steve went back to jail. This really broke my heart. How could Steve do this? And then I started doing crack. If he didn't care then why should I?

Steve went to jail for about six months. He was allowed to come home on the weekends and this is when I got pregnant with our second son Joey. I did crack while I was carrying him. It would tear me apart but I didn't know how to stop. Only by the grace of God was Joey born in good health!

Soon afterward I got caught shoplifting at the K-Mart. Of course I felt it was everyone else's fault, not mine. As part of my probation I had to start attending recovery meetings. At one of these meetings the speaker was talking about how we needed to forgive our parents; that they are just people too. And I started crying. I had been so angry at them for such a long time. If only they had just loved me! Now I know that it wasn't true, and this was the beginning of my recovery.

I would beg Steve and the people we lived with to stop doing drugs, but the weekend would come and I was off again. I would stay gone for three or four days doing crack. I hated it, I hated myself, but I didn't know how to stop. I would hit the crack pipe and then kneel down and beg God to help me. Well He did — we moved away to Florida. I thought yes, now I could be happy and life would be great. One thing I forgot though was — I had to take me with me. I started drinking more than ever before, as much as a

gallon a day. I could not function. I was a mess!

At this point I had a nervous breakdown. I learned some things that tore my heart right out of me. And so not too long after this I finally got into therapy and went to Alcoholics Anonymous every day. Steve kept on drinking and drugging, so in my mind that meant he wanted his freedom.

I went about thirty days without drinking or doing drugs. At an AA meeting we were holding hands and saying the Lord's Prayer when suddenly this feeling came over me — love, warmth, light, a sweetness that I had never felt before, and I had this vision of being wrapped up in a cocoon so that all I could see was my face and my hands — and I was shown that if I never used again I would be turned into this beautiful butterfly.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2nd Corinthians 5:17.)

From that day forward I never wanted another drink.

About this time I met the man that would be my daughter Aleah's father. He had all the right words to say, and I just knew that Steve didn't want me, so I started doing things with this man that I shouldn't have done. I kicked Steve out. He found another woman. We should have gotten a divorce, but God had other plans. At this time I got pregnant with Aleah.

I was still going to the A.A. meetings, and people would tell me that I should start going to church. I would tell them that it was good for them but not for me and no thanks. So the Lord had to break me again. I was at one of the meetings crying, and this big guy named Doyle said, "Jeannie, you need to come to church. You would fit right in." So I finally agreed to go, and the next day I went to church and I got saved! I went home and called Steve and told him all about this church. He told my daughter that he would never believe in something that he couldn't see. But God is bigger than Steve! In a few weeks Steve called and asked about the church, and that he wanted to attend with me. "Yeah, right!" I thought. "I'll believe it when I see it." But Steve did come over and we went to the church together. The pastor put out the altar call and Steve went up and accepted Christ! I started to cry. I couldn't believe what I was seeing! I asked Steve what he had just done. He said he didn't know, but that his heart was pulled to go down and accept the Lord.

God still had a lot of work to do. I was still living with this guy that I thought really loved me, (my idea of love, not God's), and Steve was still living with the other woman. Our lives were a mess.

Things started happening. I lost the place where I was living and the boyfriend wouldn't help me. I went to the church and asked for help. They got my van fixed so I could make it back to Michigan. I didn't want to go back to Michigan — that was where my old friends and the drugs were. And I would have to leave all my friends at the church in Florida. But God had bigger plans. I remember crying and thinking that I would never have friends like these again. But once again, God knew best. I now have some of the most beautiful people in my life, and I can never thank Him enough.

When I left Florida I lost everything I owned. I came back to Michigan with Aleah's father. He met my old friends and started drinking with them, and told me he wanted nothing to do with me anymore. Oh I was so broken, what was I going to do now? I was living in an attic with my kids, and I was now six months pregnant with Aleah. The people I was living with were ungodly, and were having parties all the time. But God helped me to stay sober.

I needed help, so I called Steve and begged him to come back to Michigan and he said that he would. He left everything and moved back — not for me but for the kids. Steve loves his children. And Steve told Aleah's father to leave Michigan or he would kill him, so he left.

It wasn't easy living with Steve again. He was very angry at me. We hardly talked. But he got a job and we finally got a small house. And Steve said that when the baby was born he would raise her as his own.

Aleah was born in October, and the following January I found our church, Calvary Chapel Oakland County. I started attending regularly. I loved it there. It was small but the people were wonderful. I felt like I fit right in, and I started reaching out to people and making new friends. The best thing of all was that I would tell these people all the things I had done and they didn't judge me — they just loved me. I loved to go and be hugged by these sweet people. I remember when I first started attending, there was a lady named Sandy who would just hug me and not let me go. I remember everything inside of me screaming, "Don't you know how bad I am?" It was hard for me to stand there and be loved like that, and I would just smile on the outside. Today I wouldn't trade her hugs for anything. That was the

beginning of all the healing the Lord was going to do in my life. I would go to church and cry and think that I was never going to stop.

One day I told the pastor I wanted a divorce. I couldn't handle all of Steve's drinking and being out all the time. All we did was fight. It just seemed like we hated each other. But the pastor asked me to pray and wait to see what God can do. I told him I didn't think that God could ever change this man of mine. He laughed, but I meant it.

I kept attending the church and started to see God working. He was using my husband to change me. The more I would trust God to do things the more peace I had. Don't get me wrong — there were still a lot of tears in the midst of this, but somehow I hung on.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28).

Now, after all is said and done, I can look back and see how Our Heavenly Father had His hand on our lives. My marriage has been healed, and my life has been changed. He says He will restore what the locusts have eaten (Joel 2:25), and I can tell you that He truly has!

I have been through a lot in this walk of faith. One of the hardest things is getting over my fears of rejection and always worrying about how to make others happy. I came from a long line of rejection. But one day as I was seeking the Lord, just as you and I are having a conversation, I could hear the Lord say, "Jeannie, I was rejected. Who are you not to be?" I started reading about Jesus. He really went through a lot just to teach me how to live. He didn't come here to make friends, but to save lives from burning in hell. He made a lot of people angry, so much so that He was beaten and hung on a cross. I have never known such a love as this!

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

There is so much in God's Word, the Bible, that if only we would get to know it and apply it in our lives He could do wonderful things for us.

STEVE

Until I heard the Gospel in 1993, I was totally godless. My mother was Buddhist. My father had Christianity forced on him as a child and rejected it as an adult. He was more like a buddy than a father to me. As soon as I was old enough we started partying and going to bars together. A prison psychiatrist told me that my behavioral issues were the result of “social ostracism and a lackadaisical father.” My mother was Japanese. In those days a lot of kids had grandfathers who fought in WWII and there was animosity toward anyone with slanted eyes, so I used to get teased quite a bit at school. My mother told me not to fight. “If someone picks a fight with you, run all the way home!” she said. So I got chased home from school everyday, sometimes by kids half my size.

I finally fought back one day when I saw a kid beating up my brother. It felt so good to pummel this guy who had bothered us so much! After that I got into a lot of fights — fought my way all through school. The more people lashed out at me, the more I lashed out at them. I became a very angry person and felt it was me against the world. By the time I reached high school I was 6’2” and 225 pounds. I studied martial arts books and developed a devastating power-punch. I prided myself on my “two-hit fight” technique: I hit you and you hit the ground.

I started drinking at age 13 and doing drugs at 14. I fell in with a rough crowd. Almost everyone in that crowd came to a bad end. Chris was only 18 when he was killed in a police chase. Matt died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at the age of 20. Steve overdosed on Oxycontin. Paul committed suicide. Rick died of cardiac arrest after years of substance abuse, but he died saved and sober. [*See Carol’s story for more about Rick.*]

My own life was a whirl of violence, drugs and constant trouble. I did two stints in prison, several in county jail and visited city jail on a revolving-door basis.

In 1980 I was on the run from the law and moved in with my sister and her friend Jeannie for a few weeks. The plan was to get some money together and escape to Florida. But that never materialized. Instead “a few weeks” turned into 35 years (and counting).

A year after meeting Jeannie I was arrested on outstanding warrants and sent to prison. Jeannie stuck with me through it all and visited me in Jackson every other weekend for a year-and-a-half. When I got out, we got married. She worked in a bar and I earned money pool-hustling and selling cocaine.

In 1993 Jeannie and I were separated and both living in Florida. She called one day to tell me that she had gotten saved and invited me to Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale. I joined her for a Sunday morning service. I did not understand the sermon, but when the pastor gave the altar call, something just drew me, like strings pulling at my heart, and I went forward. They led us new converts into a room lined with volunteers. Each one gave us a hug and a gospel tract. I came out the other end of the room carrying a stack of new believer literature and wondering what just happened!

That evening I ran out of gas on Alligator Alley with my children in the car. The newspapers regularly featured horror stories about what happened to people whose cars broke down on that dangerous stretch of road. I left the kids in the car and started walking. I had gotten about a hundred yards down the road when a lone car approached. A young family pulled up beside me. They looked terrified but offered to give me a lift to the gas station and back. The driver started talking to me about the Lord.

“You're not going to believe this,” I said, “but I just accepted the Lord today.”

“You're not going to believe this,” he said, “but it was the Lord who told me to pick you up!”

My life did not change right away, but whatever happened that morning was definitely real because it stayed with me, always at the back of my mind, nagging me. There were years of trouble ahead before I started following the Lord, but the seed was planted and things began to turn around.

We moved back to Michigan and got involved with Calvary Chapel Oakland County. I held back at first because I had never met people like this before and did not feel like one of them. The kind of people I knew loved you as long as they could get something from you. This was my first encounter with Christian love, and love eventually roped me in.

My drinking slowed down. I quit using hard drugs but continued smoking pot and hanging around with my party buddies. I was arrested on a marijuana charge and sentenced to community service, which I fulfilled by doing volunteer work at the church.

Jeannie's daughter broke up with her boyfriend and I went with her to get her stuff from his apartment. The boyfriend stood behind the screen door and bad-mouthed me. He found out the hard way that a screen door is not a reliable security barrier, and I was arrested for assault. We had no money for bail and none of my buddies would help, but Pastor Dave posted the \$500 bond. It impressed me that a man who hardly knew me cared about me that much. This was a big turning point for me. From then on I was a part of the fellowship, learning the Word of God and growing in grace. I helped with the kitchen, food pantry and youth ministries. I loved going on men's retreats and missions: missions to Detroit, missions to Colombia, a mission to New Orleans after Katrina. I joined the worship team as a drummer, which fulfilled a childhood dream — I always wanted to be a rock star!

One day at the grocery store an old lady was pushing her cart in my direction. She glanced up at me. Her eyes widened in fear. She turned her cart and hurried away. I felt sick. Soon after that I cut my hair and stopped dressing like a Hell's Angel. This indicates what a change had taken place in my life. I had always cultivated intimidation, but now it sickened me that someone might see me as an object of fear. Throughout my years of drugs and violence I had no conscience and felt no remorse. Now I had a heart for helping people instead of scaring them. This can only be explained as a miracle of grace.

My favorite verse is Romans 12:1-2. *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

One evening, though it was nearly midnight, the Holy Spirit prompted me to visit my mother, who was dying of cancer. I was surprised to see a cross hanging on the wall over her bed. She had never shown an interest in the Christian gospel. She said Steve Jr. had given it to her as a Christmas present. I started to talk to her about the Lord. She looked at me and said,

“The God who could change you is the God I want to know.”

On the last day of her life she was in a morphine-induced coma. I sat by her bedside and played gospel songs on my guitar, then read to her from the Book of John. I told her about the thief on the cross, because she had previously said that it was too late for her to be saved. She thought you had to do a certain amount of good to get to heaven. I pointed out that the thief on the cross had no opportunity to do anything good or undo all the bad things he had done, but he still had the choice to accept Jesus and inherit everlasting life. That is what he did, and Jesus said to him, “Today you will be with Me in paradise.”

I said, “If you truly believe that, can I get an Amen?”

She woke up out of a dead coma, sat up, looked me in the eyes and said, “Amen.” Then she laid down again, closed her eyes and went back to sleep. She passed away a few hours later.

The Lord prepared my heart for my mother’s passing, and I was okay with it because I knew I would see her again in heaven.

That was 14 years ago. My Christian life since then has not been a fairy tale, but God has poured out His grace on me in spite of my failings. I am not wandering anymore. I once meandered from bar to bar, dope house to dope house, living for the next high, like a lost sheep without a goal or a purpose. Since I’ve found Christ I have meaning in my life.

And my mother was right: the God who changed me can change anyone.

WAYNE

If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The first big event took place in my third year, when my mother left my father on account of his chronic drinking. After the divorce they set out on two very different paths.

Dad bought the Rustic Cabins Bar in Grosse Pointe — a loser bar where lonely men came to drink. The walls were plastered with pornography. The barflies were loud, foul-mouthed and boring. Hanging around the barroom as a child, I came to fear the power of alcohol and vowed that I would not be a drinker when I grew up. Every summer my brother and I would travel from Georgia to Michigan to spend a month with Dad. I could hardly wait to get back home! Our Mom and Stepdad were Christians. There was no profanity, porn or drunkenness in their home. The house was sunny and wholesome and the walls were adorned with scripture. The lives my Dad and my Mom lived were as different as night and day, and I preferred the day.

But the God I learned about in church seemed to belong to the dark side.

We attended a traditional church where religion was a grim business — a dim, windowless sanctuary, a pipe organ playing haunted house music, robes, candles, chanting. My conception of God was of a gigantic old man sitting on a throne in the sky, frowning down on sinners and punishing us for our sins by making us go to church. I tried to believe in this unbelievable God because he said he would throw me in hell if I didn't, but at an early age I began to doubt his existence.

As a teenager I agonized over the Big Questions: *God? Truth? Meaning?*

And then one rainy night in Georgia, I accompanied Mom to a Bible study at Calvary Chapel Stone Mountain. At the time Sandy Adams was a young hippy preacher and the tiny congregation met in a loft called the Upper Room. The atmosphere was heavenly. The music was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard. The preacher spoke of a God who he knew as a Friend,

nothing like the distant Thundergod of High Church theology. The people had a glow about them. They had something that was not of this earth, and I knew, without further inquiry, that Jesus was the Answer.

So I got baptized and joined the Jesus People. I threw myself headfirst into the Movement — witnessing, leading Bible studies, bringing kids to church and never missing a meeting.

After less than a year at CCSM we moved back to Michigan. The search for a new church was long and fruitless. Compared to what we were used to, Southeast Michigan seemed like a spiritual wasteland and the churches a network of catacombs. I hung on to the faith for a few years but like every teenager I felt the pull of the world. Life was passing me by while I devoted myself to a joyless religion, and I decided it was time to take a break. I ceremoniously put my Bible on the shelf and vowed to “try everything that’s out there.”

I joined the high school party scene, bought a hotrod and started drinking, drugging and chasing girls. I also started hanging around the Middle Earth Bookstore and studying the occult. One day I brought a friend along. He bought a copy of *The Satanic Bible*. Soon afterward he became demon-possessed and was committed to a psychiatric hospital.

Shortly after I made a shipwreck of the faith (1 Timothy 1:19) my Dad died. It is worth pausing here to describe Wayne Kraus Sr.

To me, he was an alcoholic tragic figure. I felt sorry for him, but the world admired him. He was a type-A personality with a screwball sense of humor. He cheerfully rejected his family’s Catholic faith and delighted in sinning for the sake of sinning. He was always studying what new sins there were to commit and joked about the roof caving in if he ever went back to church. If we were running through a rainstorm and lightning struck nearby he would look up at the sky and shout “You missed!” He consulted psychics and astrologers, not because he believed in that junk but because it was against church law. During a rare bout with sobriety he had a moment of clarity and removed the porn from the barroom walls. The atmosphere changed and business boomed. The loser bar became a hotspot and Dad became a local celebrity. He golfed with the Grosse Pointe elites and hobnobbed with the Detroit Tigers. But addiction followed him like a black cloud all his life. In his last two years he checked into detox seven times. He died at 43. Over 1500 attended his memorial service. For years after his

death Grosse Pointe Park hosted the Wayne Kraus Memorial Golf Tournament. His epitaph reads, “To know him was to love him.”

It seems that as soon as the addiction demons made an end of Wayne Kraus Sr. they came for Wayne Kraus Jr. I suddenly found myself unable to drink in moderation and had to be carried away from every party I attended. By the time I finished high school I was a full-fledged stoner. (Note to young people: bad choices made in adolescence can have devastating long-term consequences.)

Tripping on LSD one morning I had a hallucination which I am sure was no hallucination. I was sitting on the lawn, hallucinating peacefully, when suddenly a hideous witch with green hair and a torn white gown erupted from the ground. In a crouching position she shot across the yard toward me, arms outstretched, screaming with demonic laughter. Chunks of sod flew as her feet tore through the lawn. She grabbed my throat with iron claws, put her face to mine and shrieked “YOU’RE MINE! YOU’RE MINE!”

From that day forward I was a slave to narcotics, and my interest in the occult became an obsession. My mind was so unhinged that I actually began to practice the dark arts, casting spells and conjuring spirits. I began hearing voices in my head. Our sunny, wholesome, consecrated home became the scene of demonic manifestations. To protect my younger brothers from my influence, my parents kicked me out of the house.

I enlisted in the army, but on the day I was to report for duty I showed up at the induction center stoned and informed them that I had converted to Wicca and become a conscientious objector.

By the age of 21 I was living in my car, friendless and half insane. One night, sober for once, I was watching the Northern Lights and thinking that I must have made a wrong turn somewhere. Then a radiant thought crossed my mind: *What if I was wrong? What if Jesus is the Way?* At that instant a shooting star lit up the sky and a light went on inside. I didn’t want to get high anymore. I didn’t want occult power or arcane knowledge anymore. I just wanted to be clean again. Next day I bought a New Testament and a *Maranatha!* songbook, went to my parents’ house, dusted off my guitar and started singing praise choruses. Seeing that a change had taken place, Mom invited me to come back home. She handed me a list of 21 Rules. I eventually broke every one of them. Nothing had changed. This was not

repentance; just a fit of nostalgia. I heard the call of the Spirit, paused a moment, and kept running.

Then it happened again. I was sitting on a barstool in a strip club, when suddenly I was seized by a longing for holiness. I wanted to be far away. I wanted to be back in the fellowship of the saints. I wanted to be “*clothed in white linen, fine and clean.*” (Rev. 19:14) I looked around at the pole dancers and drunken spectators and was struck by how dull it all was. I had the singular insight that *sin is boring.*

Then it happened again. I came home from work high on mescaline. My youngest brother wandered into the room. I thought about the rotten way I had always treated him and an avalanche of condemnation crashed down on me. I spun off into a “bad trip.” I locked myself in my room and thrashed around on the floor. I found myself with a Bible in my hand and said, “God, if you’re there, answer me!” The Bible fell open to the Book of Jonah:

*I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction,
And He answered me.
Out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
And You heard my voice.
For You cast me into the deep,
Into the heart of the seas,
And the floods surrounded me;
All Your billows and Your waves passed over me.
Then I said, “I have been cast out of Your sight;
Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.”
The waters surrounded me, even to my soul;
The deep closed around me;
Weeds were wrapped around my head.
I went down to the moorings of the mountains;
The earth with its bars closed behind me forever;
Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God.
When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD;
And my prayer went up to You, Into Your holy temple.
Those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy.
But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving;
I will pay what I have vowed.
Salvation is of the LORD.*

It was as if the Lord had stepped in and said, *Peace, be still!* Music from

the Upper Room in Stone Mountain rang through my mind like an echo from Eden. The drug wore off, the sun rose and I went to work. That day I renounced drugs forever. That everlasting resolution lasted about a week.

Then it happened again. Parked outside a house where a friend was inside scoring some weed, words from Psalm 137 came to mind: *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Jerusalem...how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?* I was wrenched with a feeling of homesickness. I was a fugitive from Zion, a lost traveler in a strange land.

At a “signs and wonders” conference a prophet stepped down from the platform, came straight to me and said, “You’ve been looking for a cause; something to live for, something to die for. Now you’ve found your cause: God has called you to be a minister the gospel. Now turn to the lady behind you, put your hand on her head and ask God to give her what he has given you!” I followed his instructions and suddenly a powerful electrical current surged through my arm — and the lady *looked* like she was being electrocuted! She convulsed violently and collapsed into her chair, sobbing. I laid hands on another lady. She crashed to the floor. I had received power to “slay in the spirit,” just like Lonnie Frisbee! That was the beginning of my odyssey in the Apostolic Restoration Movement (aka The Third Wave). I found no peace there. For 7 years I careened between the church and the liquor store. At times I led a devout life; at times I was totally dissipated. I had “power for ministry” but no power over sin. When the Toronto Blessing broke out and the movement ran off the rails, I concluded that we had all fallen prey to “*deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons*” (1 Tim. 4:1) and fled the scene.

Now I was alone again, and hit the bottle hard. Under the depressive influence of alcohol, I began reading existentialist philosophy, lost faith altogether and collapsed into darkness. I spent the next 15 years in and out of rehabs, hospitals and recovery homes, and getting fired from one job after another. I tried to escape isolation by joining the Mensa Society and the National Scrabble Association, but alcohol overshadowed everything and rained on every parade. I tried a variety of spiritual paths — everything from the Carl Jung to AA — but in those 15 lost years I never managed to stay sober for more than 21 days.

The world calls alcoholism a “disease,” and it is *like* a disease in that it is chronic, progressive and fatal. At the age of 44 I knew that I was near the

end.

Mom dragged me to a Baptist recovery meeting — a roughneck fundamentalist KJV-only Buzzcut Baptist meeting! I cannot remember anything from that meeting. I cannot remember why I kept going back. I cannot remember why I started believing again. But I stayed sober for 9 months, an all-time record.

When I joined Calvary Chapel Oakland County I was no longer an everyday drunk but a binge drinker. After a terrible relapse I crawled into a Wednesday night Bible study, confessed my transgressions and was shown forgiveness and unconditional acceptance. One of the elders sat by my bedside all night as I went through withdrawal. Still I drank again. My last bender was the worst ever — a six-week drunk!

Then, in September of 2013 a mysterious thing happened. There was no dramatic spiritual experience, no new revelation of gospel truth, but suddenly and unaccountably the craving for alcohol left me. It has never returned.

But this was only the first step out of darkness. I still lived under a cloud of alcoholic guilt and shame. Sometimes the cloud was black and intense, sometimes gray and hazy, but shame over my past sins and guilt over my present unholiness were constant. I tried to become more holy, more loving, more prayerful, because I thought that I could get free from guilt by improving my performance, only to find that *a clean conscience is a gift from God and cannot be earned.*

*...how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your **conscience** from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:14)*

*Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil **conscience** and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:22)*

This was the beginning of my education in *the all-sufficiency of grace*. I am learning to rest in God's grace instead of trying to earn it. I no longer ask Him to *help* me become a better Christian; I ask Him to *reveal His Son in me*. (Galatians 1:15-16)

Now I look at my life, past and present, and feel not *guilt* but *gratitude*. I do not have to fuss over myself anymore, because *Christ is my righteousness*. (1 Corinthians 1:30) *My righteousness is seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.* (Ephesians 1:20-21) I cannot add anything to that, and Satan, “the Accuser,” cannot take anything away from that.

Satan can hurl accusations, parade my sins before my eyes and remind me of how worthy of damnation I am, to which I respond, “*Christ is my righteousness*” — and that is the end of that.

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony. (Revelation 12:11)

DWIGHT

Save some by snatching them as from the very flames of hell itself. And as for others, help them to find the Lord by being kind to them, but be careful that you yourselves aren't pulled along into their sins. Hate every trace of their sin while being merciful to them as sinners. Jude 23, Living Bible

That's my life verse, just the way God gave it to me many years ago — Chapter, verse, and version. I know it is a paraphrase, but it still strikes home closer and with more power than any other translation of that verse. In any case, I think that the opening sentence of this verse in the Living Bible — “*Save some by snatching them from the fires of hell.*” — kind of nails it, because that's what He did for me. I was that close. Close to the flames, close to the pit, however you want to put it. My clothes must certainly have smelled of smoke.

This verse lays out how I got saved, step-by-step:

- (1) Save some by snatching them from the very flames of hell itself.
- (2) Save others by being kind to them.
- (3) Be careful you aren't pulled along into their sins.
- (4) Hate every trace of their sin
- (5) While being merciful to them as sinners.

It's also a safety manual to protect the believer in Jesus from the person they are witnessing to — a person so lost that they are a danger to themselves and others without intending to be. I was that bad. I was a lost, blind, sinner and desperately needed God's love.

The woman who led me to the Lord did all these things for me. She:

- (1) Saved me from imminent deadly danger (drug overdose).
- (2) Consistently showed me kindness (in the face of tears and many questions)
- (3) Was careful to avoid being pulled into my sin (although I was at the end of my rope and sin at that point is never attractive)
- (4) Hated every trace of my sin. (she was hard on sin).
- (5) Being merciful to them as sinners. (she saw beyond my hurt to see my need).

About the drug overdose: I had taken about forty hits of Mescaline (which

I knew were good because I had taken a few and was already selling them to friends), and called my best friend to ask him to write a piece of music about me (he was a gifted musician) because I was checking out. I hung up, then went downstairs to have my own, personal, (and I don't mean this to be irreverent in any way) "last supper." I remember looking at my parents and brothers and sisters at the dinner table and thinking "This is it. This is the end. I'll never see any of them again."

In less than 20 minutes, when I had just finished eating, my best friend appeared at my house in Detroit from Rochester, told me to get my coat, then twisted my arm behind my back to force me out of the house for a "walk." We proceeded to walk around the local park and other places for about the next 5 hours, while unbeknownst to me, the lady who eventually led me to the Lord was following us in her van at a distance with her lights out, ready to take me to the Emergency Room if I started to flip out, and praying for me the whole time. What happened was...nothing. I felt like I had smoked a joint, kind of mellow, no insanity, no death, just a mild buzz. A miracle. I knew how good this stuff was. When I first scored the Mescaline I dropped a tab at work and my work buddies had to hide me in a back room for the last 2 hours because I couldn't work due to the fact that the individual cinder blocks in the walls were "breathing" in and out. I should not be here talking to all of you today.

It was as if I had jumped off the cliff and God reached out, caught me, and said "Not now, not today." Now I truly believe that I will die at the time that my Heavenly Father has ordained, no sooner and no later. There's a kind of comfort in that.

My rescuer opened her home to me. I met her husband and young son. I would like to thank God right here for husbands and wives who recognize that their spouse has a gift from God and share them with the congregation! I owe my salvation as much to her husband and his patience with me as to his wife. Joseph, the step-father of the Lord Jesus must have been a remarkable person, too, to follow God's commands and not put Mary away quietly as he planned. (Matt. 1:19)

Just about the time some people were ready to give up on me, saying (as I found out later) that I was just too messed up to be saved, guess what? I got saved! The prayers and efforts of a handful of faithful people finally paid off!

However:

It wasn't at a church service. It wasn't even at a church. It was in a house. An empty one. Except for me. And a telephone. It happened like this:

At 2 or 3 AM I called this lady in tears, a drunken, sloppy mess. She talked to me for a minute, then said I was too messed up to talk right then and to call her tomorrow at 9 AM (knowing that I rarely woke up before noon).

“That would take a miracle,” I told her.

“Just call me,” she said.

The next morning, I woke up to the phone, which wouldn't stop ringing (this was before voice mail picking up after 5 rings). It was someone for my mother (who strangely wasn't there). I took a message, and looked up to see the kitchen clock strike exactly 9:00 AM. “I'm up,” I thought, “so I might as well give this woman a call!”

I called her and said, “You like to believe in miracles, well here's one: I'm up before noon.”

We talked for a moment, then she asked me: “Are we really friends? Am I your friend? Have I done enough for you to consider me a friend?”

I thought for a second and said, “Yes, if anyone has, you have.” (This woman had ministered to me for months).

“In my book, friends do favors for each other,” she continued.

“Mine too.” I interrupted.

“Good,” she said, “then we agree. Would you say I've done you any favors since I've known you?”

“Several”, I replied. (This was true).

“Well, I'm only going to ask one favor of you, and I'm going to ask it now, *will you try God?* And by 'trying' Him I mean you try Jesus like you've tried everything else you've tried for the answers — drugs, sex, rock n' roll, eastern mysticism, etc. You try Him 120%, no holding back. Would you do

that favor for me, as a friend?”

I stopped on the other end of the line. *What have I got to lose?* My only plan was to kill myself by the end of that day if things didn't get any better. It would have been my fourth — and final — attempt.

Right now I need to pause to explain the condition of my heart back then, so I can explain something else. When I started out in the world, my heart was like an open hand, fingers spread out. Then one finger would get burned and it would curl in for protection. Another finger would get slammed in a door, and it would do the same until, one by one, my open hand had turned into a rock-hard, tightly-clenched fist because life can hurt you too much if you give it a chance.

Back to me hanging from the telephone line: What happened next explains my illustration about my heart. My “official new friend” had just asked, in the name of friendship, life's most important question. I thought for a moment, then, sincerely, said, “Yes, I will.” From the uttering of those words, my heart began to change...

It slowly, quietly, from the inside out, began to unclench from a fist into a soft, open hand again, even softer than before. I felt it all over. My heart and I were changed.

I got saved and filled with the Holy Spirit, just talking to a believer over the telephone in an empty house that normally on a Saturday morning would have been full of people! Talk about God doing logistics! (It turns out that my parents were angry with me — no surprise there — and had decided to take the family to a neighborhood picnic that morning, leaving me behind as a punishment.)

P.S. — About the filling of the Holy Spirit: I knew when it happened, but didn't know what it was until a couple of months later. God showed me in a wonderful way. For one example, I was drawn to seek out water baptism by immersion without having read a single scripture on it. Imagine my thrill to read that it was the Holy Ghost Himself drawing me to do this — I was really hearing from God! Several other times scriptures about the Holy Spirit just lit up when I read them. God just quickened them to my heart. My honeymoon with the Lord was a sweet time. I don't know why I was saved and filled with the Holy Ghost at the same time — I guess God knew

I had been so deep in the enemy's camp that I needed that Power in my life to withstand the enemy's attempts to take me back.

Many things have happened in the months and years that followed. Many were and are wonderful. Some have been devastating, but the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of my wife and children and faithful friends have gotten me through it all.

I'm now a balloon riddled with shotgun holes that remains inflated and floating anyway by the Spirit of God. You're looking at a walking miracle, kind of like the man of the tombs who stands before you now clothed and in his right mind. (Luke 8:26-35) I just want to follow and be more like Jesus every day. Praise the Lord.

PAM

Thinking back to my childhood I don't remember my parents specifically teaching my brothers and I about Jesus, who He was, and why He came. Going to church on Sunday wasn't one of the structural pillars that defined our family life. Although I never heard discussions, I gathered from my mom that my dad wasn't interested in attending church. He and my younger brothers found other things to do on Sunday mornings. Despite this fact, my mom would visit churches from time to time, taking me along with her. My first memory of one of those church outings was at the age of 3. As my mom walked me in to the Sunday school room, I noticed there were little tables and chairs my size and a very big picture of Jesus on the wall. His eyes were looking down into the room and His hands were outstretched toward the tiny audience seated around Him.

As I stared at His image, one of the Sunday school teachers noticed my wide-eyed gaze. "This is Jesus", she said. "He loves little children and He loves you very, very much." I remember being immediately infatuated, feeling very safe, secure, and happy. This moment in my life continues to be one of my most precious memories. It was my first introduction to the One whom I would come to know 18 years later.

I KNOW YOU'RE IMPORTANT, AND I KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE,
BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW TO FIND YOU....

I can't tell you how often I attended that little Sunday school class, but I do remember acquiring my first Bible at the end of second grade at a different church. On the Sunday I received it, I rushed home and immediately cleared off my dresser. I built an altar on it's surface. I placed my Bible on one of my mom's linen runners between two of her candle sticks. I was so proud of that composition; I sat on my bed and stared at it, satisfied I had placed my Bible in an honorable space.

Although there was no one to show me how to read my Bible, no one to share its knowledge with me, somehow I knew it connected me to God. I needed it and I wanted it next to me. I desired to know more, and my parents smiled at my willingness to please God by this act of innocent reverence. Even so, I had no help to move forward. I don't know why but we stopped

going to church after that Sunday. Eventually my bible moved to the top drawer of my dresser.

Throughout my childhood I began to observe a sobering recurrence that played itself out over the course of my formative years. In my family, being a girl proved to be somewhat of a disadvantage. My family's pride and satisfaction seemed to lay in the fact that there were 2 sons. Perhaps it was a cultural thing or a generational thing. The reasons were unknown to me. Without getting into a lot of detail this reality was hard on my heart. I hungered for my mom's companionship and affection. I longingly noticed other mother-daughter relationships wishing I had the same in my own life. I even prayed for a sister. Alas, ribbons in my hair, tender mother/daughter affections and a sister would never come to pass. I yearned for them often.

I had a best friend named Maggie. She was like a sister to me. One summer night as we camped out under the stars in my backyard, we had a conversation about God. As we lay on the ground looking up into the starry universe, I wondered out loud, "Do you believe there is a God?"...where is He up there, and how in the world do you find Him?" Maggie was one of my many Catholic friends. I thought after all those years of catechism classes she'd have some answers, but she had as many questions as I did. "There's got to be a way to find Him", I said. "I know", she said. The crickets chirped in the hot July night. We lay there not speaking for a time. The black sky was enormous and full of stars. The Lord's creation was declaring His glory but we couldn't figure out where He was hiding. That night we never came up with any answers to our questions. We hoped one day we'd figure it all out.

KEEP GOING, I THOUGHT...JUST KEEP GOING...

As the years progressed into teenage-hood, my family life disintegrated into divorce and grew more dysfunctional. Sadly, after my dad left, he ended any serious involvement with his children. The relationship between my mom and I was disruptive and painful. We could not get along. It was hard to live at home. I put my energy into school and took a lot of bike rides. I kept myself busy with friends, music and art. I did as much as I could to keep my mind off my crumbling family life. I tried, but any hope that I had continually got dissolved into sadness. Friends became my family. Much to my dismay, I didn't find the stability I longed for in my friendships either. All around me I saw my generation experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and sexual behavior. I saw pregnancies, addictions, and drug overdoses. I heard about abortions and suicides. Unwise choices surrounded me in my circle

of peers. I saw no solutions for my problems in any of these areas. I kept working and moving forward. Despite the fear and discouragement I felt at home, I began to build on future expectations.

At 17, I met the one whom was to be my future husband. By 18 we had fallen in love. The summer I graduated from high school, my mom informed me I was to move out. Part of me wanted to leave because of the constant turmoil, but part of me was gripped with fear. I wasn't ready to leave home. I felt unprepared for life and unprepared for the world. Denny found a flat, and much to his parents' dismay moved in with me. As that year moved forward I would try to go home, but each attempt grew less hopeful. I was beginning to feel real depression about my relationship with my mom. My friends began to go their separate ways. Denny and I were beginning to have troubles of our own. Things were a mess.

I had gotten aid for college, and during my first year at Wayne State University, in the middle of all that mess, we decided to get married. This didn't help us.

THERE ISN'T ANY PLACE TO RUN TO...EVERYTHING IS POLLUTED...

During my second year in college on the last day of my ecology class, the professor showed us a film about the sealing industry. It was gruesome. Men clubbing white pup seals to death is a bloody business. For my sensitive personality it was a horrible thing to watch. After the film was over, our professor gave us a parting remark. "Just remember, he said, there isn't one place left on earth that man hasn't polluted, not one; have a nice summer." Needless to say I cried all the way home.

Sitting in a parking lot, I looked out the window of the van at the street below. Beneath a bent street pole, I saw broken glass, gravel, litter, and dusty, sunbaked dirt. I thought about the professor's parting remark. "He's right", I thought, "there is no clean, pure, place left on earth." I thought about my own humanity and how much I was missing the mark of being a decent person. I knew very well on the inside I was just as dirty and broken as that street composition that lay below. Everything at that moment seemed unclean, exposed, and raw. Little did I realize on that day that the Holy Spirit was showing me the human condition of sin. I didn't know what to do. I had come to a brick wall. I never thought to look up because God was too far out of reach for me to ask for help. I didn't know where to look or where to find Him.

IT'S HARD TO LIVE ANYMORE...AND THERE AREN'T ANY ANSWERS.

The following year I existed in a raw, exposed world with no clear answers to calm my declining darkness. My life was full of fighting, turmoil, depression, and hopelessness. My early marriage and friendships couldn't co-exist together, my family was non-existent, my marriage was painful, and art had become the bane of my existence. Art had always defined me as a person and now it only demanded from me my mind and my time. It was a jealous and possessive relationship that only took from me and controlled me. I began to resent it and the art world that seemed to dictate to me how I should think and live.

I observed that Alcohol and drugs proved to mess up people's lives. I knew I'd find no solutions there. False religious movements of the day and philosophical world views had too much of man's ego in them. Often I contemplated the thought of ending my life. There were no solutions to sooth the deep ache that had become my world. I was 21 years old.

HE EXISTS

It was 1977 and an old acquaintance from high school reconnected with me through a mutual friend at work. She had changed dramatically from what I'd remembered. I began to observe her behavior and as I observed I asked questions. Her answers all revolved around one figure...Jesus Christ.

Because I knew so little about Him, I had a lot of questions. One day she ended one of those question/answer sessions by handing me a small booklet. I read it's title, "The Four Spiritual Laws." I put it in my purse; I didn't read it. A month later I was at home on a day off. Denny and I had just finished having an unsettling argument. He went to work and I sat in our bedroom thinking about how meaningless and miserable my life was.

The little booklet seemed to be calling my name from the bottom of my purse. I looked for it and began to read....*Just like there are physical laws that govern the universe, there are spiritual laws that exist between God and man...*

Law 1- For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Law 2- Man is sinful and separated from God, (I certainly could relate to this), therefore people can't know and experience God's love and plan for their lives. Everyone has sinned and falls short of God's glorious standard (Romans 3:23); the wages of sin is death, eternal separation from a holy and perfect God. (Romans 6:23) What a light bulb moment; it wasn't the starry universe that separated me from God, it was me!

Law 3- Jesus Christ is God's only provision for sin...Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6)...(But how do I come through Him, what does that mean?)

Law 4- We must individually receive Christ as Lord and Savior of our lives, only then can we know God's love and plan for our lives. The Scriptures tell us that all who believe in Him and accept Him, He gives the right to become children of God. (John 1:12) You can't take credit for this, it's a gift from God. Your salvation isn't a reward for the good things you've done; none of us can boast about it. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

This little book went on to describe repentance from our sinful lives, turning away from that way of living and turning to God, trusting in Him and accepting His forgiveness through faith in Jesus.

I began to understand what these terms finally meant in full definition. This was marvelous news to me. My eyes could see, my ears could hear. What a relief to know that God was real, that I could talk to Him and He could hear me because of what His Son Jesus did for me and the whole world upon the cross. He cared about me and I wasn't alone any more. Best of all, I could see that I really needed Him because of who I was without Him. I had an Advocate. I wanted to climb on my roof and tell the whole world. In my bedroom that day Jesus answered all my questions, soothing that deep ache that had plagued me for so long and had almost driven me to the point of suicide. I got down on my knees and gave my heart to Him on that May afternoon. A very difficult year later, my husband surrendered his heart to Jesus. Nineteen years ago, my dad surrendered his heart to Jesus as he lay dying from cancer, laying down that sin that had been such a burden to him his whole life. My mom has since surrendered her life to Jesus as well. She is learning that she is deeply loved by the One who has created her. As you can imagine, I was and am very grateful.

HE LOVES ME

Well here I am full circle. The words, "He loves me", mean more to me than any love I have ever experienced or will ever know. From that day until now

He has never let me down nor proven Himself unable to hold me. Learning to be conformed to His image has been a long climb for me. As I turned away from a life without God, there were immediate changes that took place in my life. However, there was still a lot of emotional damage to sort through and Jesus has been faithful to heal and carefully clean in areas that were too muddy for me to diagnose or repair. Inner work takes time and it's always in his time because He is Sovereign. He is the Wonderful Counselor and the perfect healer. He has shown me that I need to let go of all those expectations I had desperately held onto during those painful years. The days of controlling my life and finding my own solutions and happiness to calm my wounded heart are over.

To be quite honest things have not played out the way I'd pictured it. Denny and I have had many things to work on in our marriage. It has been Jesus who has taught us and continues to teach us the true art of marriage and how to love one another. Because of our faith, extended family members have made our lives painful at times. I've lost friends who could not accept my love for Christ. I've seen carnality creep into Christian friendships, churches split and weaken, Christian brothers and sisters fall away from their first love, Pastors who preach their own agendas instead of God's Word, and the Body of Christ hurt one another through selfish behavior, allowing themselves to be used as messengers of the evil one instead of followers of the gentle Savior. I've experienced carnality try to creep it's way into my own life. This always happens when a Christian is at his weakest. Despite these things, Jesus has remained true to all that He is. Man always falls short, but the Savior never will. I don't trust in man, but I do trust in Jesus.

What an incredible, undeserved blessing it is to know that God exists and wants to know me, care for me, and love me personally. I have been given a cup of the living water and I do not thirst for anything else. My search for the truth has ended at the marvelous, merciful cross where my Savior died for me and for you. He has truly delivered me. I wouldn't be here without His intervention. Thank you Father for my life and all the blessings I have experienced from Your hand. Thank you Jesus for having mercy on me and protecting me. Thank you Holy Spirit for growing me up and lifting up my head. Thank you Savior for loving me all the way to the cross.

BARB

My story is one of loneliness. I grew up in a nice middle class family, the oldest of four sisters. I had friends and achievements in my life, but I always had a gnawing sense of loneliness. Each year it seemed to grow. Following high school I went to the local Community College. Then the bottom fell out.

The stable family that I knew started to break apart. My parents began the road to a divorce. I was being taught all kinds of “ologies” in college. Sociology said that we are products of our environment (surroundings). Anthropology said that I was just an animal descended from an ape. Psychology said that I was ruled by the deep psychoses in my brain. As a result of this overload, I began to explore the occult. Extra-human experiences such as hypnosis, astral projection, esp and auras fascinated me.

Most of us struggle with what our purpose in life should be. I was no different. When a man I worked with started to pay attention to me, I considered a relationship even though he was married. I so wanted closeness with another human being. Everyone I knew had their own problems going on. That is when the Lord started to work on me.

God used all of these confusing thoughts to cause me to seek help from my girl friend’s pastor. I went to see him to ask if maybe God had made a mistake when He made me. That night this kind and gentle man showed me that I was lonely and that Jesus could be my closest friend. I asked Jesus to be my Lord and Savior. I immediately felt loved. I didn’t need the married man; I didn’t need the occult; I didn’t need to believe all of the “ologies” to fill my life. I only needed Jesus. I was a clean vessel waiting to be used. We prayed that night that the right person would come into my life. Three weeks later I met the man who would later become my husband.

Twelve years and 3 children later, I was full and happy. My husband and I had moved to Philadelphia, PA where he was working for a Christian record company. We were trying to serve the Lord whenever we could. After a couple of years, my husband said that he wanted to leave our marriage. The gamut of emotions flooded my soul, but none like the feeling that I was an utter failure. I felt that God could never use me again.

God started to use Isaiah 54 to pick me back up. His Word was so specific to my needs.

Isaiah 54: 5-8 “For your Maker is your husband”

The Lord showed me that He knew how I felt. The rejection and helpless feeling that I felt, He understood and promised me His kindness.

Isaiah 54:13 “Great shall be the peace of your children”

My greatest fear as a divorced mother was that my children would suffer emotionally. When God gave me this scripture I clung to its promise that He would be their father and they would grow up healthy in mind, body and spirit.

Isaiah 54:17 “No weapon formed against you will prosper”

When the fear would come in, fears of not being able to pay the bills, or healthcare, I would turn to this promise. His Word sustained me.

Isaiah 54:11-12 “And lay your foundation with sapphires”

The Lord showed me that He would establish my walk; all I had to do was yield to Him. I did not have to struggle at being a Christian. He would make my faith in Him as precious stones.

Isaiah 54: 1-3 “Enlarge the place of your tent”

When my children were grown, I struggled with what to do with my life. Should I move to Florida and be close to my grandchildren or stay in Michigan and continue to work with the children at my church. The answer came again in Isaiah 54! The Lord wanted me to stay, and pour His Word into young lives, building them up in the faith.

God’s Word is so awesome and specific when it comes to meeting my needs. I am never lonely now. He fills my life with joy, love and purpose. I’m glad He can take an old broken vessel and use it to His glory.

KRIS

Hello, my name is Kristopher. I grew up in a Godly home. My mother had given her life to Jesus and was very on fire and committed to Him. She made sure my brother and sisters were at church Sundays and Wednesdays. Sometimes Wednesday night children's ministry was in my own home because we had a very small fellowship then. My Dad knew the Lord but struggled in his walk. He was not a present dad, but moved around a lot. Mom taught us all how to pray and showed us the importance of reading our Bibles. She was a single mom and worked hard cleaning houses to raise us. My Great Grandmother Sprinkle was a great prayer warrior and spent many hours in prayer for her children and grandchildren. Also the people in our church, Calvary Chapel of Oakland County were praying for me.

I knew full well of the blessings of God. Several times I saw first hand how the Lord provided for my family. On Christmas, the Lord would put us on other people's hearts to see that us kids had gifts. We learned that the Lord provides. Mom home schooled us and when we were high school age was able to send us to a Christian school. It was then when I was 17, that I was lured into drugs. I thought that I was in control of the drugs that I was taking at first. They made me feel good. The lack of inhibitions led to some ungodly relationships. But people were praying for me!

For 6 years I was living life my way. All I wanted was for life to be happy and peaceful. There was never any peace or lasting happiness to what I was doing. I was in fear most of the time. Fear of getting caught and going to jail but most of all a fear deep down of going to Hell. Even still God was convicting me of my sin and showing Himself to me. I did go to jail more than once, grieving a lot of people. I ended up in the hospital three times from overdoses. The last time, no one expected me to make it. I found out later that I was nearly brain dead, unable to communicate.

God had given me many chances to turn back to Him. Evil is strong but people were praying for me! One day He opened my eyes and I really saw the evil that I was in. My prayer was just "God forgive me". My mother invited me to come back to church.. There was so much guilt but the joy of knowing that I was forgiven drove me to go. Going to church and feeling accepted by God again caused me to weep often.

The Lord had a plan for me and for my life. Philippians 1:6 says *Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.* How true! There was so much that I had been missing. God has so much for me and our relationship that I had hindered by my sin. Since coming back to Christ I now have peace and joy, that will last forever. He has given me opportunities to serve Him. Jesus has made me able to do things for others that I was unable to do before. He has given me a wonderful family, a lovely wife and four children to raise in Jesus. He has provided a job with like-minded people. He has blessed me with gifts and talents to use to give Him honor and glory.

Who is like the Lord! All my life Jesus was drawing me to Himself. One of my favorite scriptures is Joel 2:25. It says, *Then I will make up to you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the creeping locust, the stripping locust and the gnawing locust, My great army which I sent among you.* Sin tried to swallow up my life, but Jesus rescued me from the pit and I forever praise Him!

MARY

I lived in a house, but I was homeless
I went to school, but I was deprived of learning
I was given food, but I was always starving.

There are those that without, have a house but they are homeless
within,

There are those that spend the day feasting on food, but within they
are never full.

There are those proudly displaying degrees of learning, but within
no knowledge has rooted and grown.

Then came the end of one's life and living;
Nothing left to anchor upon.
Lost hope of home
Lost hope of being nourished,
Lost hope of ever knowing.

O' what hunger, O' what pain,
O' what uncertainty in not knowing
When walking alone in the darkness of morning.....

Writing has helped me sort through my thoughts. It is a release for me. This is the beginning of a poem that I wrote called "Homeless, Unlearned and Starving." My story is one of depression and how Jesus pulled me out.

I grew up in a dysfunctional home as too many people do. There was a lot of arguing and fighting. Some of my earliest recollections are of fear. I began to withdraw, become isolated within myself. The emotional neglect left me lonely, unhappy and unable to communicate my thoughts and feelings to others.

Growing up I struggled with the questions of who am I? and what is my purpose in life?

I carried this on into my marriage. My husband did not like to talk, especially about feelings. But I was very verbal, always trying to reconcile

my feelings with my purpose. He tried, but did not know what to do to ease my tormented mind. In the end, he just retreated and left me alone. I was isolated again in marriage.

One bright spot was in my 6 children. I loved being a mother and homemaker. I did find a comfort and a purpose in taking care of them. I kept a modest, neat home with little time for extra hobbies. Behind a smiling face, was an emptiness though. The dark vortex of depression was still at work on my heart. It was sucking the life out of me.

Unable to talk to my family about it, I turned to doctors. This one said medication, that one said counseling, my priest said to get involved. I attended psychologists, counselors, therapists, and doctors. At one time I was on 11 or 12 medications for my depression. Yet no one had answers. No one made a difference in my life.

Losing hope led to a nervous breakdown, and in 1969 I entered a psychiatric hospital. My emotional bondage had now led to a physical bondage as well. Mental illness can cause a self-hatred. I hated who I was and yet I still hoped for a meaningful life.

I had been raised in a denominational church. I knew the stories, celebrated the holidays, prayed tons of prayers, but on that second night in the hospital, alone and emptied of life I cried out to Jesus. I had my Bible with me at the hospital even though I had never really read it. In my agony, I asked Jesus to speak to me from it. I randomly opened the Bible and read, *Why is my pain perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?* Did God really know my pain? Did the prophet Jeremiah feel like I feel? I read on as the Lord responds to him. *If you return (and give up this mistaken tone of distrust and despair) then I will give you again a settled place of quiet and safety.* (Amplified) * Was God giving this precious promise to me? Yes, I took it for my own. The darkness that covered my soul was losing its hold on me. There was a presence of quiet rest and completeness that I had never experienced before. Jesus was there.

The following evening I asked Jesus to speak to me again. I opened up to the Book of Job. This time it said, *If you set your heart aright and stretch out your hand to God. If you put sin out of your hand and far away from you.....Then can you lift up your face to Him without stain (of sin, and unashamed); yes, you shall be steadfast and secure; you shall not fear.* ** It was years later that I read that God's Word cleanses us like being washed

with water (Ephesians 5:26) That is what I was experiencing. A loving Savior led me out of the pit of despair.

The Lord slowly weaned me off of the medications. He daily fed my spirit and nourished my soul. I could not be healed by external means. True healing comes from the inside, from the Spirit of God. I started this with the first part of a poem. Here is its conclusion:

Then Jesus came, who is the Day of Life!
He restored the nourishment of meat,
He returned the safety of home,
He reclaimed the freshness of knowledge and truth

Wrapped in His arms, filled with His love
Cleansed by His blood, made new by His peace and light
Jesus took off my clothes of the grave, and put on me His garment
of life.

Now I'm turned to others, Now to give refuge,
Now to teach of Him, Now to feed with His name,
Now to know His Spirit, Now to be in the Father's care.

Going on, Going forward, Going upward

Jesus found me entangled and chained,
He freed me, He unchained me;
Never to be lost again! Always to be eternally found!
Jesus, my Savior, to Him I am forever bound.

Here is another one of my poems;

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

Out of the darkness,
Into the Light,
Came a soul,
Filled with blight.

A hand reaching down,
A life encompassing.
A presence transforming

In the gift of His love;
The compassion of His mercy,
The favor of His grace.

Out of darkness
Into the light,
Came my soul
No longer in blight.

My Lord close by
Guarding in love
A heart of broken,
A mind of pain.

Out of darkness, cold and empty came I.
Into the light, warm and full was He.
Forever to be — am I!
Forever to remain — is He!

* Jeremiah 15:15-21

** Job 11: 13-20

Poems are excerpts from *Reflections On the Word* by Mary Kowalske

STACEY

Transcript of a message given at Calvary Chapel Bozeman, Montana, where Stacey's son Ted Ethridge is Senior Pastor

I believe tonight God wants me to be transparent and share with you all the issue of a deep sense of inferiority that I've struggled with all my life. God's love and Truth have shattered and are still shattering the lies that have always engulfed me.

There is a passage that describes what God does in all of our lives as Christians: *Isaiah 61:3*, God's good news for all of us. He gives us *beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that we may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.*

As I looked back over my childhood, I saw that two trees were being planted — I through seeds of inferiority planted one and God through seeds of righteousness planted the other. Praise God! His tree keeps getting stronger and stronger and mine keeps getting weaker and weaker, the final end being when I see Jesus face to face. Now I'd like to take you through my life and show you the 2 trees that were planted.

When I was a child, there were a few life situations that added to my insecurities and sense of inferiority. One was the makeup of my family. I was the youngest of 3 girls; I am 12 years younger than my oldest sister and 7 years younger than my other sister. My parents' agenda was to have a socially acceptable family and so I think they were quite content with two girls and then surprise! I came along. My parents were slightly older when I was born and as I was growing up, they were always nice and loving to me, but I felt like I was just an added burden to their lives.

My Father was a very proud man. He worked his way up from sweeping floors in a barbershop in a small farm town in Illinois to being a vice president of a department store similar to Macy's. In that process we moved frequently from town to town in Illinois especially in my younger years. By the time I was 6, I had moved 4 times. Not just did constantly moving like that add to my insecurities, but the timing of the moves also made growing

up extremely difficult. After living in a smaller town for over 2 years and experiencing a wonderful kindergarten year, we moved to a bigger town and much bigger school when I started first grade. Not only did I leave my friends behind, but also my sister who had been in junior high school was now in the same grade school that I attended. She hated being back in grade school and the same school with her younger sister so she wouldn't talk to me at school and even pretended we weren't even related. My parents always thought children should be seen and not heard so I was never able to talk to anyone about my frustrations.

God's plan was being worked out and His seeds of righteousness can be seen even in these situations. My name "Stacey" means "of the resurrection" or "one who will rise again" and God created me with a strong resiliency so as my 1st grade year continued, I loved my teacher and what I was learning and began to get a couple new friends in my neighborhood.

Part of my parents' social agenda was to attend a good church, usually one of the biggest in town. We went to the First Methodist Church of Peoria religiously every Sunday. I was afraid of Sunday school so I sat in church with my parents and loved singing the hymns about a holy and loving God. Also we went to my grandparents' cottage in Northern Wisconsin every summer and I actually felt close to God as I walked in the woods or sat on the beach looking out at the lake.

I didn't start high school with the same classmates I had been with for eight years; we moved again at that time so I started high school with total strangers. It was again a move to a much more affluent part of town, so I felt like a country bumpkin around my new classmates. At some point in High School I realized that I could make my outward appearance better through makeup, clothes, etc. Also I realized I had acting ability and was very active in theater activities in school. I loved both acting in plays or being backstage. I learned I could play a role — put on a front of being OK, but I was still terrified for anyone to get to know the real me and reject me.

One of the saving graces in my life was my love of school itself and learning. Focusing on what I was being taught during my classes temporarily brought me out of my insecurities and allowed me to think about something other than my classmates' opinions of me. I was always a good student with a very active mind. Teachers for the most part were glad to have me in their class. As I grew older and more afraid socially, some

teachers would make fun of me, which was a shame, but for the most part, I loved school and did very well academically.

After High School I went to college because that was what my mother had done and it was the expected thing for me to do. I went to the same school my mother graduated from — the University of Illinois and of course I was in a sorority as she had been. For some reason, I got in one of the best sororities and instead of seeing that as an accomplishment, I saw it as another time for comparison and inferiority. My sorority sisters were either beautiful or brilliant and I certainly didn't measure up.

My freshman year I felt like Cinderella at the ball. Because I was in a sorority, I was fixed up for a date every weekend and I could play the role quite well as long as I didn't date anyone long enough for them to get to know me. My sophomore year I was more like the ugly stepsister. I did not have a boyfriend, my studies were getting more serious, and I was becoming depressed, wondering what life was about and what was to be my purpose in life. I was feeling very lonely and insignificant. God's timing is perfect. One night during that time, a group called Campus Crusade for Christ came to our sorority to speak. That night, for the first time in my life, I heard about the possibility of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I learned that Jesus Christ paid the penalty for my sin and that through a personal acceptance of Him as my Lord and Savior I could get to know God in a personal way. I was thrilled. I had always worshipped God from afar, but that night I realized I could actually get to know Him personally. When the time came to pray, I fervently prayed for Jesus to forgive my sins and come into my heart and make me the kind of person He wanted me to be. I turned my life over to Jesus and for the first time in my life I had a purpose to my life and I loved it. I was always telling others about Jesus and even became a Bible study leader in my sorority. I felt wonderful as long as I was talking about spiritual things, but I myself was still a shell of a person. I had no depth, absolutely no idea of who I was, but I knew one thing — no matter who I was, I wanted to serve the Lord.

After college, the Lord called me to fulltime Christian work at Voice of Christian Youth in Detroit. I shared with and counseled teenage girls. There again, everything was fine as long as I was talking about Jesus, but otherwise I could even feel inferior to the teens I was talking to. God was still working, watering His strong seeds of righteousness. At that time, I began to learn the power of God's Word, His Truth that dispels the lies of the enemy. I often quoted the verse that "*Jesus is the same yesterday, today*

and forever.” Hebrews 13:8 I realized that as I depended on Christ’s stability, I too could be stable. Also at that time, I saw my anger and bitterness toward my parents as the sin that it was and chose to forgive them.

My third year in VCY, I met Tom at one of our meetings where he was the guest speaker, telling how he had been delivered from drugs by giving his life to Christ. I thought Tom was the wonderful Christian husband I had prayed for. Our dating relationship was wonderful. We prayed together, shared Scriptures with each other and served the Lord together. Then after 1 year we got married and everything changed. I obviously was not what he expected a wife to be and he let me know that. He started spending much time away from the house and our relationship grew very distant. We got married when I was 25 and decided to have 4 children by the time I was 30 and we did. I had no idea how to handle the responsibilities of being a wife or mother, so I depended on Tom to make the decisions. He had no clue how to be responsible either, so we both feebly attempted to make a life together.

Still God’s grace was working. Although I wasn’t very good at the cooking and cleaning part of being a mother, I loved learning and I was a natural teacher. I loved spending time with my children, teaching them about Jesus and watching them learn and grow. I kept seeking the Lord and always found Him faithful to meet my needs. At first Tom and I went to a couple of churches together, but by the time all 4 children were born, he didn’t want to have anything to do with church or Christians. As Tom and I grew farther and farther apart, sorrow and suffering became good friends because they caused me to know my Lord better and better.

After 8 years of marriage, Tom started to show signs of what is called “Post Viet Nam Shock Syndrome” and ended up going daily to the VA Treatment Center. His 2 female psychologist/counselors told him that I was causing some of his problems and encouraged him to separate from me. I had made a vow before God to marry Tom until death do us part, and I couldn’t stand the thought of being separated, so I kept praying that God would somehow restore our marriage, but Tom moved out in 1981 after 11 years of marriage, leaving me with children aged 6, 7, 8 and 9, and he moved into his own apartment.

God led me to a small church that was Bible-based, but it was also legalistic. God used the Scriptural teaching at that church to show me how to be repentant for my bad attitudes toward my family and husband. I

learned to face the sins of selfishness, self-centeredness and self-pity. I grew in my understanding of God's goodness, and faithfulness. The church also stressed memorizing Scripture, so the children learned many Bible verses.

In my personal study during that time, I learned that Jesus is the Friend that sticks closer than a brother, and He is the glue that holds me together. Also as I was adjusting to being a single parent, I learned that God's grace is sufficient for anything we have to go through. Scriptural promises such as this became my life preserver.

Five years after we were separated, Tom and I were divorced and he remarried. I had still been praying and believing that Tom and I would have our marriage restored, so this was a very difficult time for me. It was the first time that God had said "No" to a deep cry of my heart. I learned that God could answer prayers in three ways — "Yes", "No" and "Wait a while." It was a real crossroads spiritually for me. After being a Christian for about 20 years, I was being brought to a new understanding of God's sovereignty. All I had ever wanted was a secure, happy, loving marriage that would honor the Lord, and now my loving Heavenly Father had shut the door on that desire of my heart. As always, God's grace was sufficient, and He strengthened my heart to choose to trust Him no matter what He allowed or didn't allow in my life. It was the beginning of a more realistic and mature walk with my Lord. I grew as never before in my knowledge of Who God was what His will was in my life. A verse that explains this victory is *2 Corinthians 2:14: Now thanks be to God, which always leads us in triumph in Christ.* As Oswald Chambers says in *My Utmost for His Highest*, "I am in the train of a conqueror, and it does not matter what difficulties are, I am always led in triumph." (October 24th)

The children were now 11, 12, 13, and 14, and as adolescents and teenagers, all 4 children turned their hearts away from the Lord. That was another very hard time for me, but once again my wonderful Heavenly Father was watching out for all of us. I still wanted the children to go to church, and God even worked that out in the divorce decree. My non-Christian lawyer actually put in the divorce papers that when the children visited Tom and his wife on the weekends, they all had to be driven to church in time for Sunday school every Sunday morning. God is so good! Scriptural promises again became my life preserver. One such promise is *Psalms 112:1-2: 1) Praise the LORD! Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who delights greatly in His commandments. 2) His descendants will be mighty on earth;*

the generation of the upright will be blessed.

I personally needed spiritual reinforcements. God is so faithful. He knew I needed more balanced teaching and a more supportive church body, so when all 4 were teenagers, He led us to a new church, Calvary Chapel of Oakland County. This was the first time I was in a group of people that accepted me for who I was. I saw it as I was in the land of acceptance where they spoke the language of love. I was petrified! My new wonderful, loving brothers and sisters, my new family of God, would not let me hide any longer; they really were interested in me and wanted to get to know the real me. I felt like a turtle whose shell had been removed. This was definitely part of God's plan for me, and I began to see how He could love me through His people. At this church I not only learned how to understand and receive God's love and acceptance, but I also met other single parents who were also struggling to raise godly children. I loved the Truth I was learning and the wonderful songs of worship, and little by little, I began to relax more and more and accept who I was as God's creation — actually enjoy being Stacey.

The first Thanksgiving day after we had started going to Calvary Chapel, my 4 teenagers went to Tom's for dinner as they always did, and I chose to not have Thanksgiving dinner with my new found Calvary Chapel friends, but instead to fast and pray for me and my family. I wanted the guidance and help that only God could give. And as always, he was faithful and led me to Isaiah, chapters 40-45. I saw so many encouraging promises like *Isaiah 42:16: I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, and crooked places straight. These things I will do for them and not forsake them.* and *Isaiah 44:3-5: 3) ...I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit on your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring. 4) They will spring up among the grass like willows by the watercourses. 5) one will say, "I am the LORD'S; another will call himself by the name of Jacob; another will write with his hand, "The LORD" S, and name himself by the name of Israel.* And *Isaiah 45:8: Rain down you heavens from above and let the skies pour down righteousness; let the earth open, let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together. I the LORD have created it.* What an amazing time with the Lord that was! I ended the day with a promise in my heart that God was going to rain righteousness on my precious teenagers who at that time were totally blind to the things of God.

The years following that Thanksgiving Day were amazing years of growth and healing for me as I continued to learn how much God loved me and I fell more and more in love with my Lord. My children were watching this transformation in me and God was working in their lives also. I learned how to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and become the lovingly authoritative mother my children needed me to be. I watched God work in each of their lives and change their hearts and open their eyes to see God's goodness. One by one all 4 children made life commitments to follow the Lord. Tammie was the first. She recommitted her life at 23 and Ted was the last; he was 22.

I watched God bring the perfect spouse into each child's life and then after all of them were happily married, I was once again at a crossroads in my life. I truly believed that Jesus was my husband as it says in Isaiah 54:4-6. Since He was the best husband a girl could want, I was content to serve my Lord however He chose to lead me. I thought that would probably be some kind of fulltime Christian work again, but the path He chose for me was a complete surprise. The Bible says God will do for us more than we could ask or think (Ephesians 3:20) and that is exactly what He has done for me. In 1999 He brought a wonderful, godly man into my life, Steve Birkenhauer. Steve is the wonderful Christian husband I had always prayed for! God has used Steve's love and acceptance of me to restore the years the locusts have eaten. (Joel 2:25) I even reconnected with my oldest sister; we have visited her twice and she has visited us once in the 6 years we have been married. My other sister and I reconnected when I became a Christian in college and we became close when she became a Christian a few years later.

As I quoted at the beginning, the Bible says He gives us *“beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that [we] may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified. (Isaiah 61:3)* My life is a living example of this. Praise His Holy Name. I love to share the “good news” of what God has done for me and my family.

CAROL

I was born in small town America. My Dad was a serviceman. My parents divorced when I was 4. We moved to Michigan and I spent a lot of time with my grandma, who was my example and my only link to sanity. She was 4'11", nearly as wide as she was tall, and loved the Lord. She rose at 4 every morning, knelt by her bedside and prayed and prayed and prayed. Many years later, the seeds she planted in me sprouted to life.

It was at my grandma's church that I was molested for the first time. I was going downstairs to use the bathroom when an old man with bad teeth grabbed me, forced me into the bathroom and did his business while the worship service went on upstairs. We both joined in the after-service supper and acted as if nothing had happened. I felt like I had done something bad and that I would be in trouble if anyone found out. That is what it is like when a small child is sexually molested: she feels guilty, as if she is the one who did something wrong. I didn't tell anyone about this incident for a long time.

My Mom married a man named Dick, father of my three brothers. As the oldest I was responsible for the rest of them. If my brothers did something stupid, it was my fault. And my brothers did a lot of stupid things; like the time Rick got his head stuck in the staircase, or when Nathan put mom's schnauzer in the freezer. My brothers got beaten a lot. Dick was strict, mean and brutal. He would throw tantrums and beat his sons with whatever object was in reach. My brother Rick got beaten when his baseball team lost.

Whenever my parents were together they were fighting. So mom withdrew, started drinking and spending a lot of time away. I took care of dinner, dishes, laundry and looking after my brothers. At the end of the week I would get an allowance. Sometimes Dick would give me a few pennies and say, "This is what you were worth this week." Throughout childhood I had it drilled into my head that I was worthless.

At the age of 12 I was molested again, by an uncle, and then beaten when I tried to tell my parents because they said I was lying. He also molested my cousin but no one believed her either. Years later it came out that he had molested his own son.

As an adult I was still plagued by feelings of worthlessness. I grew up to be angry, hard and foul-mouthed. I was a hard drinker and a mean drunk.

Many women who are abused as children get into relationships with abusive men and stay in those relationships in spite of the mistreatment. I am not one of those women. My one relationship with an abusive man did not last long. We got into a fight, he slugged me, I hit him with a baseball bat and broke his arm. End of relationship.

But then I found out I was pregnant with his child.

At my mother's insistence I agreed to give the baby up for adoption. (Mom was pregnant at the same time, so I had a sister born in September and a son born in October!) But when Shane was born, and they brought me the adoption papers to sign, I could not bring myself to give him away. My mom came unglued. I had no means to raise a baby, not even a bottle or pacifier. We had no money for heating oil and no telephone.

I would walk to a gas station 3 blocks away to use the payphone. A mechanic named Lee would flirt with me. I was not interested until a girl friend bet me a steak dinner that I would never get a date with him. I went to the movies with him just to win the bet and we have been together for 46 years now. We were together 22 years before we got married (!) but from the beginning he loved Shane like his own son, helped raise my brothers and paid our bills whenever the money ran out. Through the years he has been generous, forgiving, patient and the one anchor of stability in my life. He is the one person God has put in my life who I know is not going away.

Our daughter Toni came along. (Once again my mother was pregnant at the same time.) We had to move in with Lee's parents, which was not a good thing. His mother disliked me. She had hand-picked a perfect mate for him but he chose me instead and she never got over it. My own mother was not around much anymore but occasionally stopped by to remind me that I couldn't do anything right.

I became angrier and angrier and plunged deeper and deeper into substance abuse. I wanted desperately to quit drinking and drugging but did not know how, so I called out to Jesus to either let me die or let me stop. And I stopped.

Jeannie was an old friend and partner in crime. I had grown up with her husband Steve. One day she showed up at my door with two presents for

me: a pie and a songbird. She was a Christian now. She shared her faith with me and invited me to church. My most outstanding memory of church was the old man with bad teeth, and I wanted nothing to with it. But I let her take my granddaughter Harley to Sunday school.

Finally Jeannie talked me into attending a women's Bible study.

“All right, I'll go,” I said, “but I'm not talking to anyone and I don't want anyone touching me!”

I walked in the door and the first person I encountered was Sandy (“The Hugger”) Clemens. She wrapped her arms around me like a long lost relative and said, “Do you know you're loved?”

Then I was forced to attend a Christmas play because Harley was in it. One person after another came up and hugged me. Then along came Sandy the Hugger again. She held me so long I thought she would never let go.

“You are loved,” she said, “Jesus loves you. He has always loved you. You are loved.”

This “love” thing was all new to me. At first I didn't like the strange, unfamiliar feeling that came over me. But I got hooked.

In 2000 we went to an evangelistic conference in Ohio led by Greg Laurie, and I got saved. Going forward at the altar call was Harley's idea, and she brought me along. We walked past Steve and Jeannie who were serving as greeters. We found ourselves in the middle of a big, tightly-packed crowd. I felt something behind me and turned around. A little old lady put her hand on my shoulder and said, “God loves you, He always has, He never will stop. You're going to be okay.” I looked away for a few seconds, turned around again and she was gone. It is hard to describe what happened next, but it was as if God lifted all the old junk out of me and in its place I felt warmth, safety, relief. For the first time in my life I was at peace.

We got home at 3 in the morning. I set my New Believer's Bible on the table, then noticed an identical Bible sitting on an end table. We discovered that Jenny, a young lady who was living with us, had also gotten saved that night, and received exactly the same Bible.

My brother Rick, who was more like a son than a brother, lived with me on

and off all his life. He had a good heart and had always loved the Lord but could not get it together. His life was a cycle of recovery and relapse. In the end, he finally got right with God and sobered up for good. He became a different person. He had always been a nonstop talker, but now all he wanted to talk about was the Word of God. He had always been energetic; now his energy went to helping people, studying the scriptures, attending church and recovery meetings and sharing his faith everywhere, even in the courtroom. Then without warning he died of a heart attack. I still miss him and can't wait to see him again.

For the first six months after I was saved, I could not get through a church service without crying. Sometimes I announced, "I'm not going to church, I'm tired of crying all the time!" But I went anyway. I could not read the Bible without crying, but I kept reading anyway. And I am still reading the Word of God and walking with the God of the Word.

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

DOUG

Hello, I'm Doug and I play drums and percussion with the Worship Team in our congregation — Calvary Chapel Oakland County, Michigan. I'm not from Michigan — originally I'm from Texas, but I've lived and worked in eight different states in all four time zones. My wife and I have gone wherever the Lord has led us in our marriage.

I was raised in the Baptist church, and got “saved” at an early age. As was typical in a Baptist church, it was at a church revival where the preacher would ask if you wanted to get saved now or did you want to pray about it for a few minutes first. I knew all the right answers to the preacher's questions, so the next week I was baptized along with my big brother. I was only eight years old at the time.

Really I had no idea what I was doing. Consider a few years later, when I was maybe ten. My sister was witnessing to one of her friends, and she said “even my little brother Doug is born again!” Like Nicodemus in John 3, I thought that was the most ridiculous thing I'd ever heard of — how could anyone be “born again?”

Nevertheless, I grew up in the Baptist church. Mom and Dad made sure that all of us kids went to Sunday School every week. I received a New Testament in 4th grade for memorizing all the books of the Bible. I was a “good” kid and was never in trouble much. I played in the school band, was in Boy Scouts, and was a mostly A-B student. In high school I earned my Eagle Scout badge and was selected for the National Honor Society.

But something else happened during those times. I accidentally found a stash of pornographic magazines. Soon I was into it nearly every day, and nobody else knew, so what was the big deal?

The family still attended services every week, but I was never very active in the church youth group so there was very little discipleship in my life. Since I was “saved” when I was eight years old, and I wasn't getting into any trouble, I had no worries about “spiritual” things. But really I wasn't walking with the Lord. I was still into pornography and it soon gave me a distorted view of dating. My high school years were a long line of bad

relationships. Fortunately I only dated “good girls” who would not allow me to go too far. One of them even attended our church.

After high school I served briefly in the Merchant Marine and had the opportunity to see some of the world. The source of the pornography was removed but the effects were not. After my time in the Merchant Marine I returned home to attend college. I went back to dating the same girl and attending the same Baptist church. Soon I even got a job at the church as a janitor.

During this time a conversation came up with my parents — was I ever really “saved”, or was it the preacher’s idea? Dad explained what had happened at that revival meeting so many years earlier, which I had no recollection of at all. After all I was only eight at the time. So I went to discuss with the pastor, and I decided to get baptized again — this time it was *my* decision. As I explained to the pastor, if I had not been baptized when I was eight years old I certainly would have done it since then.

But, after being baptized twice and being in the church all my life, I still wasn’t walking with the Lord. Back home again after my Merchant Marine service, I was into pornography again. Eventually the relationship with the girl at church failed and we broke up. And once again another long string of bad relationships followed — some with women who were married.

After a few years I completed my college degree and moved to a new city hoping to find my first job and start my career. The source of the pornography was again removed, but again the effects did not quickly fade. I found a Baptist church to attend in the new city, and signed up for a home Bible study group. And there I met the woman who eventually would become my wife. Yes, the effects of the pornography were still there, she was a brand new Christian, and I was very close to causing her to stumble. But now the Lord began to work in my life even though I still wasn’t walking with Him.

Finding my first career job was difficult. Nearly a year had gone by since my college graduation, and my employment situation became quite urgent. One Sunday the pastor announced that he would hold an early-morning prayer meeting the next day. We were all invited to attend and to bring whatever our prayer needs were for the week. So Monday morning I was up early at the church and I prayed *hard* for a job. Afterwards I went back to the apartment and, with my Bible in hand, I *prayed* some more. But after

some time I had to get up and go find the newspaper want ads and start looking. And at that *very* moment the phone rang. I was invited to interview for a job that I had applied for months before — a job on the other side of the country.

Well I was offered the job and soon was living on the other side of the country from this beautiful young woman I had met at the home Bible study group. We kept in touch, and soon became very close friends across so many miles. And with the distance between us there was no opportunity for anything sexual to get in the way of our growing friendship.

But back in the new city, on the other side of the country, I was still me. I was attending another Baptist church and was soon ushering and serving on two committees. Yet the effects of pornography still had grips on me and I was soon in another bad relationship. When that failed, what does a young man do in a city far from home? As the Apostle Paul taught in I Corinthians 7 — “*it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*” And so that beautiful young woman agreed to move all the way across the country so we could be married.

As a young couple we still attended that Baptist church — for a while. They even gave us a nice wedding reception. But soon she wisely suggested that we start attending the local Calvary Chapel. It was way on the other side of town, but I had heard their pastor on the radio so agreed to give it a try. We started attending regularly, and joined a home fellowship group in our neighborhood. For the first time I started to see and understand the Bible as one whole “package” instead of a bunch of fragments that came from whatever the preacher’s “topic” was for the week. And now being married, and the source of the pornography far away, I finally started growing and maturing in my faith.

Some may say that what they do in the “privacy of their own home” is their own business, but pornography is perhaps the most hideous of “addictions”. While drugs or alcohol will poison the body, pornography poisons the mind. The parts of the brain which control the sexual libidos become over-developed. A woman is no longer a person to be loved and cherished as God intended, but becomes a “thing” to be used only to satisfy the sexual appetites. The Apostle Paul warned about sexual sins in I Corinthians 6.18-19: *Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is*

in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?

Looking back on my life, it was easy to think “how could I have done that?”, and to be so *ashamed*. As Jesus taught in John 8, I understood what it was like to be a *slave to sin*. I clung to Scriptures like 2 Corinthians 5.17: “*if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.*” So after being in the church all my life, and being baptized *twice*, where was the “new creation” in my life? Casting Crowns did a song about it a few years ago, titled “Stained Glass Masquerade”. My prayer was that my life would not be a lie, a masquerade, a facade, as it had been for so many years — that I would finally be truly walking with the Lord. And I often questioned my salvation — how could I have continued to live like that *after* I got “saved”? The logjam finally broke for me after hearing a teaching on Romans 7. Even the Apostle Paul struggled with sin in his life! Paul, probably the greatest Christian missionary *ever*, called himself the *greatest* of sinners!

One other Scripture that really helped me was Matthew 8.2: “*Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.*” And I prayed that He would cleanse my mind of all the effects of pornography.

And finally, I John 1.9: “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to cleanse us from ALL unrighteousness.*” And we know that when the Bible says *all* it means *ALL*. Praise the Lord!

It has been said that a fish is the last one to learn about water. The fish is surrounded by water, pretty much spends its entire life in water, and its whole world and existence is water. The fish therefore takes water for granted.

When you’ve been in the church all your life, and surrounded by church people all your life, it’s easy to take your salvation and faith for granted no matter the sin in your life. In Luke 7.47, Jesus says “*to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.*” That is, if you’ve lived a “good” life and haven’t had much “need” for forgiveness, you will have little love for Him.

But for me, it’s easy to look back and see how the Lord was working in my life even when I wasn’t walking with Him, and how he poured out so much grace on my life. He protected me through all of the bad relationships over the years — I never went “all the way” with any of the girls I dated, often because of well-timed interruptions, and I never ran afoul of a jealous husband. There was the well-timed phone call that came offering the

interview just after I finished my prayer time crying out to Him for a job. And He allowed me to get a job on the other side of the country, far from that beautiful girl so that our relationship could grow properly.

Pat and I have now been married for just over twenty-five years, and we raised two beautiful girls together. My prayer for them was always that no guy would ever treat them the way I treated girls when I was that age. And I taught them I Corinthians 13.4, “Love is *patient*.” It’s the *first one* on the list. And if that guy really “loves” her then he will be patient and will wait until they are married to have sex with her.

It’s difficult to name a specific point in my life when I was born again. Lacking discipleship in my life my Christian growth was slow. I thank the Lord that He did not let me fall, and that He freed me from the sin in my life. Today pornography is so revolting to me — there are few television shows I am able to watch, and some will even make me physically ill. Instead I have the joy of the Lord in my life, and the privilege of serving with the church Worship Team and in the Helps Ministry. Thank you Lord for saving me, and for freeing me from the bondage of sin!