

Can I Tell
You
Something?

Bob Van Domelen

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A Place to Start

Chapter One

A Difficult Calling

Back in 1992, I started doing something I had never imagined I would do - writing to inmates in prisons around the country. Not only was the writing unexpected, but the topic of my writing was even more so - help and support for those with sex-related offenses.

Now that's a combination of words sure to elevate levels of anger, no hate, without another word said. But the fact is that almost everyone knows someone who has either been a victim of sexual assault or who has been found guilty of molesting. What must follow, then, is how to deal with that knowledge.

Compassion and support for a victim, especially a child, is clearly a higher ground choice though there is no one-size-fits-all approach. The goal of any support, however, should avoid crippling that child with suggestions that imply "You're forever broken" or "You have no future." Worse, I

think, might be the Christian perspective that says “You have to forgive” to move on. Forgiveness yes, but forgiveness that is balanced with the time needed to deal with deep emotions. When the timing is right, God will make the words of forgiveness possible.

“How do we get past the anger associated with those adults who are attracted to children? How do we even discuss a road to healing when righteous retribution dominates the minds of those asked to reach out? The solution most commonly offered today is confinement or civil commitment. . .and the longer the better.” (“When Darkness Isn’t Dark Enough” 2016)

Dealing with offenders is difficult for two reasons. Any supportive response directed at one who molested a child is considered a betrayal of the needs of the victim. Righteous anger is understandable and even expected in such a difficult situation.

Even when it is possible to set anger aside, most people are not trained to understand anyone who acts out as a molester has. Church-going people often think pastors have the needed qualifications, but in general, they don’t. I have written a booklet titled “The Church, the Sex Offender, and Reconciliation” that covers many of these issues available as a free download. (www.brokenyoke.org)

Chapter Two

Into the Light

In 1997 I began writing a simple newsletter I called “Into the Light.” It came into being when I realized from those writing me that they felt pretty alone, struggled with thoughts of suicide, and needed someone who would relate to some of what they were going through. Letters received frequently included the words ‘you understand because you have been there’ but I knew that I could never completely understand. At the same time, I did have a pretty good guess.

I knew from the first issue I mailed out (to 47 individuals) that “Into the Light” would never be ‘everyone’s cup of tea’ as my mother used to say, but the audience for this newsletter was not for everyone. It was for very specific people and, as I learned in years to follow, those who chose to love and support them. In the past 24 years, “Into the Light” has been mailed to thousands of inmates and, God willing, many more in the years to come.

“Can I Tell You Something?” is a collection of articles I wrote for “Into the Light” from 1997 to the present (2021). It became immediately clear that I would not be able to create the kind of flow normally found in most books.

There are no chapters, only titles, and every article most likely has something previously mentioned in an

earlier edition or mentioned in a later one. Above all, the intent behind every article is God's love for all of us who have so terribly harmed others and His presence in the ongoing process of change.

Before closing this brief introduction, let me share something with you that might make reading this book a little easier to understand. Every now and then, I open a file containing some past effort and read it. Almost without fail, I experience some deep reaction that tells me that though I thought I was writing for others, I was also writing for myself. The things I share as hope and encouragement touched me, prompted me to consider, and even moved me emotionally despite the distance of time since the article was written.

I know that God has done this in my life, and it is His call for me to serve others in this fashion. As I share in response to letters I receive, if what I have written doesn't point the reader to God's love, mercy, and presence, then they are just words. At the same time, when I put words to paper, I trust that God has a purpose in them, and that's why I write.

When I think of the days following my arrest and into those of confinement, everything that happened around me took on added emphasis. I listened more closely to what others were saying--perhaps in a manner that suggested it could be a longtime before our conversations would resume if at all.

Most notably, I began to question many things,

especially God, life after prison, and what the future might hold for me. And in those times of questioning, I found myself looking more honestly at the man I had become.

Before moving on I need to share one very important point. This book is in no way meant to minimize the actions of those who have molested anyone because there can be no balance between victim and offender. But I believe victim restoration demands a decision on the part of an offender to do whatever it takes to break the cycle of distorted thinking that makes abuse possible.

Early Days

Chapter Three

The Journey - The Path

“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (Psalm 16:11)

“He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:3-4)

The time I served in our county jail was difficult and

at times quite frightening. Before, jail was just a building I passed when driving to work – I never thought I would see the inside of one as a person found guilty of child molesting. But the world inside that place was different from anything I could ever have imagined.

Being the target of ridicule and scorn by others in the unit, my prayer life was pretty much constant. I remembered feeling God speak the words “Rely on me alone” to my heart the day after my arrest. I didn’t know what all that meant but I reached out for the hope God offered, trusting that it would fill all those corners inside me where I cowered in fear.

Eventually I was transferred to the State’s reception and processing center, given my number and a drab green jumpsuit and, because space was unavailable in a general population unit, was temporarily assigned to a segregation cell – a part of the prison filled with obscene shouts and ravings.

There was one narrow window in the room that I could open a few inches. Though I couldn’t see much through the filthy glass, I could hear grass being cut and the smell of a clean outside world filled me. Just as I was about to close the window, I felt the words “Now the journey begins” followed by a sense of peace. What I have just shared took place 34 years ago but the memories are as fresh as if yesterday.

One of the blessings I get hearing from people in confinement or from those in reentry is being able to share in their journeys in a way that is quite humbling. Every letter, every story is unique but there is a similarity in all of them – though the journey is very difficult at times, God is present in what they share.

You make known to me the path of life

For years I saw what I believed was ‘the path of life’ but it was on the other side of the street. I could see it but just couldn’t find a way to get over to it. Perhaps it was the reality of prison for what I had done that created a way for me to surrender, to admit I was fully to blame, to set aside excuses that I held that made what I had done seem less wrong. It might seem a strange way of saying it, but somehow, I felt I had permission to be on that path of life. My sins were no longer a separation from God but now an invitation to walk in his mercy, love, and forgiveness. It was the path I truly wanted to be on.

You will fill me with joy in your presence

Everything didn’t happen all at once but pretty much a day at a time, sometimes from moment to moment. The more time I spent in God’s word, the more I found ways of praising God, of thanking Jesus for dying for me, and of looking for the presence of the Holy Spirit. Then I sensed a joy deep within.

I remember telling others how God had turned my cell into a holy place only to hear some of them laugh and call me crazy. But it was my holy place, a resting spot from the world in which I lived.

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake

Every now and then I hear from someone who writes of leaving the busy world and living in a cave or some other secluded place where life would just be “God and me, no one else.” The thinking is simple – if no one distracts me, my journey will be more direct with fewer opportunities of getting lost. At least that’s what they think.

Prison taught me to pay attention to the voice of God found in others I might meet each day. Some were guards reminding me of rules; some were other inmates sharing how God had blessed them or asking me to pray for them; and still others were individuals who witnessed their faith without words but with the action of their daily lives.

It’s pretty easy to reject those who are not Christian, to condemn them for not believing as I believe, but if God created all of us, he must be part of all of us. And when others act out of a sense of goodness, whether they know it or not, they act out of God’s purpose and as the psalm says ‘for his name’s sake’ for God IS goodness. Even though I walk through the darkest valley

Every now and then I hear those with sex-related

offenses being called ‘modern day lepers.’ In the world in which Jesus lived, lepers were rejected, alienated, and feared, so the comparison is not far from truth. Unlike the leper, however, I cannot claim that I was without fault or that I was innocent and therefore unjustly labeled.

What I did got me arrested and sentenced to prison. What I did placed me on a state sex offender registry for life. What I did gave people a reason to be suspicious of my presence. I cannot change any of these things, but I do remind myself that they were and are part of an earlier stage of my journey. I can’t go back and erase my choices, but I can focus on the path God provides.

It has struck me before that David wrote ‘through’ the darkest valley, not ‘around’ it. I won’t pretend that living with a prison record for child molestation is a walk in the park, so to speak, but the valley will get only as dark as I allow it to be.

I will fear no evil, for you are with me

To be honest, I do fear sin because of the power it has to alter the path I am on, the path to eternity with God. I know from experience how easy it is for me to choose my way over God’s way, to say or do something because it answers a need I have in a way that I want it answered.

I would call anyone who believes that temptation does not exist a fool and worse, a fool with the potential to cause harm and suffering to others. So yes, I do pray daily for the

grace to make right choices and the ability to recognize the lies Satan would have me accept as truth. It is easy to tell the difference between darkness and light, but not always so easy to recognize it when a sin feels right. But if I seek God's way, my heart beats in rhythm with God's presence.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me

Most of the time I would prefer to avoid discipline altogether. After all, who likes being told what to do? Who wants to be told this or that place is off-limits? Who wants to go over and over the details of a past to someone deciding if the truth is being shared or not? I think at the core of discipline might be a feeling of being under someone's thumb, restricted by the will of someone else, and that pretty much defines being punished or at the very least, under the unwanted control of that other person.

David recognized the value of the rod and the staff, believing that the protection of the flock depended on how those tools were used to keep them together or to bring back those who had left the path. Being human, it's harder for me to humble myself to the guidance/discipline of others, but I know that with surrender comes the freedom from a choice that would hold me back.

Each day IS a journey filled with the unexpected, the challenges, and yes, the blessings. The path might be difficultat

times but when walked in the name of the Lord, it is a pathfilled with love and discovery. See you at the end.

Chapter Four

Are You There, God?

There is not much light that comes through the narrow slit the institution calls a window, but the slit is there, nonetheless. In some ways it adds to the feeling of punishment because a road can be seen in the distance, cars going from someplace to somewhere.

The cell itself is certainly not luxurious in terms of space or furnishing, but it serves the purpose for which it was intended.

Somewhere on the unit vulgar words are exchanged between individuals - nothing new. The vulgar language never seems to let up, hanging among the walls like paintings might if decorations were considered an approved expenditure.

I am not describing any particular prison nor am I trying to set the stage for an attack of depression. Most of you live in conditions similar to what I describe, and I wanted you to know that I do try to envision where you are when I write to you.

At the same time, many of the letters I receive point out God's miracles and His presence are easier to see and experience because of the comfort in which I live. Writers tell me that they pray, read the Bible, and attend chapel services, yet things don't get better - they get worse.

Legislation is passed almost weekly somewhere in the country which affects the future of someone with sex-related offenses. Institutional treatment does not allow for the presence of God because God is considered a byproduct of denial in many programs.

Communities do not see an offender as needing rehabilitation as much as deserving commitment for life. In fact, some states have assigned a life sentence for the crime of child molestation. It comes as no surprise to me that many inmates fail to see God loving them. Most of those who cannot see God also believe that God has abandoned them, turned His back on them forever.

“To you I call, O Lord my Rock; do not turn a deaf ear to me. For if you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit.” (Psalm 28:1)

David also prayed, *“I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: ‘He trusts in the Lord,”* they say, *“let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”* (Psalm 22:6-8)

Why is it that you and I see our lives as so much worse than David's life? Was he making something up when he wrote those words of anguish? Yet we view David as a man of God, faithful to the Lord despite his failings, and a model of the kind of relationship we seek with God in our lives.

Reverend Edward R. Sims wrote "It's a moral world God has made and He cannot abolish my past. But God will liberate me from the constraints of my past, from the confines of a self-image that is negative and limiting, from a crippling guilt or a suffocating personal tragedy. God will open for me anew future; I must choose to make that future different, and do the hard work that choice involves. God will be with me in the choice and in the contest that choice requires. That is the promise - not the magic of an instant paradise, but the grace of opportunity and the courage to live out my decision. God makes it possible; I make it happen." (Vintage Voice, December 1999)

The presence of God is not limited to chapels or churches or Bible studies. The presence of God is reality within the cell I described, not making it paradise but making it possible.

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."
(Hebrews 13:5) What an incredible promise God gave us! Not one of us could ever say the same to another person for we

would leave and forsake another and have already done so.

One man told me that people refuse to see the changes he has made in his life. He has not re-offended, maintains strict boundaries in where he goes, and is daily seeking the intimacy of the Lord in his life. Yet to the public, he is the same man as he was years ago when he molested a child.

Their image of him chokes his spirit and strains his belief that God is bringing him to a better place. He does not give up on God, he merely cries out as David cried out, "*How long, Lord?*" (Psalm 79.5)

If I call you a Doubting Thomas, you might remember the apostle Thomas saying, "*Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and place my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.*" (John 20:25) When Jesus appeared a second time and had Thomas do just that, Thomas replied "*My Lord and my God!*" (verse 28) He believed! And if he believed, why do we still refuse to see him in that new light? Why do we hold him to the darkness of his doubts?

Change is about making new choices, and if we are honest, those choices must be made regardless of how we are or are not seen by others. We should not reject the idea of abusing a child because the abuse will bring us back in prison. We reject abusing a child because of the harm that such abuse causes to a child, harm no child deserves.

Another man wrote “I can’t stand being the way I am anymore! I have to change!” His words are not just the cries of despair finally surfacing. I think they are words which come at the prompting of God, evidence of God’s presence. . .not making it easier for the man. . . just God pointing out His heart’s desire. And in that anguish, the man hears God and knows he is called to a better place.

“Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.” (Psalm 107:6) God will do this for you and He will do it for me.

Chapter Five

Unclean, Unclean!

“A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said, ‘Be clean!’ Immediately he was cured of his leprosy.” (Matthew 8:2-3)

“As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near,’ heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” (Matthew 10:7-8)

History tells us that lepers living during the time of

Christ had to maintain a distance from healthy people and loudly announce their presence by calling out, “Unclean, unclean!” I have wondered about this man who approached Jesus so boldly. What brought him to such inner strength to take the risk he took? His was, after all, a disease without a known cure. Leprosy was for him (and others so condemned) a life sentence--each day another day of experiencing a disease that literally wasted his flesh before his very eyes.

The leper had said, “If you are willing” and Christ responded, “I am willing.” In some ways, I wonder if the leper had the following conversation with himself before approaching Jesus. “If Jesus is willing to heal me, then I get to be healed. And if he isn’t willing, well, then life and death will be pretty much the same as I had imagined they’d be for me before I even heard of this man. What have I got to lose? Well, that’s settled then. I’ll ask.”

Centuries later, those with leprosy were sent to some remote place like the island of Molokai where they would live and die isolated from healthy people. Good people, like the famed Damien of Molokai, did what they could for those who suffered and many, like Damien, eventually contracted leprosy themselves and truly became like those they served.

It would be years before medical science found ways to treat the condition, and those medical advances spelled the end of forced isolation.

It is fair to say that registrants have become today's lepers, although unlike early lepers there is little compassion for those who commit such crimes. Men and women who offend are isolated from family and friends in prisons as part of societal retribution. At the completion of their sentences many of these same individuals experience further separation as the result of divorce and/or court restrictions. And a growing number sit in confinement after their sentences have been completed awaiting trials that will ultimately determine if they are to be civilly committed as sexual predators.

I am not arguing the degree of damage that offenders have brought on their victims, for my own offenses have generated currents of pain that continue to flow unchecked years after the crimes were committed. Nor am I arguing the reality that some individuals are indeed predators with no desire to restrain their attractions and possessing every desire of continuing the very behaviors that brought them to prison in the first place.

I am suggesting that registrants are being diagnosed in the same manner as lepers in the time of Jesus. I am suggesting that medical labels have been attached that clearly announce, "No change is possible!" And I am suggesting that because the public has mixed righteous anger with equal measures of self-righteous retribution and fear, that we are not far from serious consideration for colonies of isolation.

“At least in a place like that,” proponents will argue, “our children will not be at risk.”

“Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”
Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said, “Be clean!”

I have received hundreds of letters from individuals who have prayed fervently for no more victims. These are individuals both in prison and out of prison, but the common thread is a desire born of deep conviction--a desire to bring healing for themselves and their victims.

I have received perhaps even more letters from individuals currently in confinement who are waiting their turn to get into whatever treatment program might be available. These are men and women who have accepted responsibility for what they have done and want as much help as they can get. Because of the sheer number of offenders, treatment is normally not offered until the final stages of confinement. Some live in states with few or no programs available and little likelihood that a program will open for them. And truth be told, they are afraid to return to society without the appropriate tools they need to avoid re-offending.

“Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”
Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said, “Be clean!”

I have read letters from people with incredible faith in

God. They are the kind of men and women who read this newsletter and loudly proclaim, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” And they believe God can and will. These individuals acknowledge their need to surrender completely to the Lord; they share a desire for the healing of their victims; and they express a longing to grow in their spiritual lives with the support of others in a church environment.

“As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near,’ heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.”

This is a message for all who seek the Lord in their daily lives, and this message contains that condition known as leprosy--a condition with no cure in the time of Jesus. Was Jesus saying, “Go out and do what might seem to be the impossible”? I think yes.

By laying his hand on the leper, Jesus changed that man forever. The Word tells us that the man was completely cured, and that word is both ominous in some respects and wonderful in others. Ominous for it implies the complete absence of the condition. And in the case of the leper, the condition he bore was indeed gone.

Will the one who sexually offends ever be cured in the same way, a complete absence of desire and/or any temptation? I am not going to write that God is incapable of

bringing that about, but I am more inclined to feel that such will not be the case. I'm also more inclined to say that registrants will do what all people who have sinned do--they will face their temptations from a position of being a new creature in the Lord, seeking God's grace to meet and overcome the temptation.

For the registrant (myself included) reading this, we have a responsibility of significant proportion. We must be honest, accountable, and willing to learn healthy responses to daily living choices. Our faith cannot be simply a statement such as "The Lord will change me" if that statement is not founded on a willingness to submit and be obedient to His will. Our faith must be an active communion with God's desire for us, a witness of that relationship to those who watch us, a lifetime commitment to the process. In short, faith demands a response.

For those reading this article who are not registrants, you have a responsibility to acknowledge God's word in all things. The lepers Jesus healed were considered untreatable and destined to suffer the consequences of the disease. Jesus did not remind the leper of the current thinking on leprosy. He answered, "I do will it. Be clean."

We are in a time not unlike the early days of leprosy only we call the lepers child molesters. One who has molested can never say, "There is no way I would ever re-

offend,” but every person deserves whatever support is needed to minimize that possibility. Permanent confinement and loss of freedom is not the answer.

I fervently pray each day for my victims, for other victims and their offenders, and for those who have not yet been identified as either but will eventually join these ranks. My heart desires that someday the medical world will do for molesters what it has done for lepers, and I sincerely pray that this can be done without the extreme of ‘colonies of confinement’ as the answer.

The leper who came forward beseeching Jesus broke the rules. He did not shout “Unclean, unclean!” nor did he keep an appropriate distance. Instead, he asked, *“If you are willing, Lord, you can make me clean.”* And Jesus responded, *“I am willing, be made clean.”*

I have no problem with keeping an appropriate distance in my self-boundaries, but I want to be clean. I want to be made whole. God wants that, too.

Chapter Six

Matthew 18.6

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you

if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6)

I can't think of a single verse that brought more fear to my heart than this verse quoted above. I can't think of a verse which brought me more despair than this verse. What, if not a stumbling block, would the world call the actions of someone like me who molested children? Stumbling block is far too mild a description.

More than one victim of the world's molesters has cried out, "Where were you, God, when those terrible things were happening to me? Why didn't you protect me? Why should I believe that you love me? When you love someone, you don't let such terrible things happen. I just can't trust you, God!"

The victim felt twice-betrayed--someone violated him or her and God did nothing. God *did* do something. But God grieved for the violation as well as for the choice made by the offender, another child created in God's love. The letters I receive show that in a high percentage of cases, offenders who write were themselves molested. This is not offered as an excuse for their actions but as a fact. Men and women betrayed as children grew up and betrayed other children in the same fashion. Men and women who as children called out to God but came to doubt God, encouraged the same doubt in God's existence in their

victims.

I wish I could say that all offenders grieve what happened to them as children. I wish I could say that all offenders grieve the harm they brought to their victims. I wish I could say that all the world grieves the sins committed to satisfy a need. The truth is, I cannot. What I can and do say on behalf of offenders is that the break in the connection between their hearts and that of God must be repaired. Without that connection, healing is little more than a word.

It is encouraging, I think, to look at the men Christ chose to be His disciples. They were an unpolished group--no perfect people there, no sinless ones. This specially chosen group of men turned and ran when the world might have thought they should close ranks around Jesus. They verbally denied knowing Him, and one even tried to make a few bucks by betraying Him. Yet Jesus deeply loved each of them--even Judas--and sought to reconnect them to Himself after His death on the cross. How then, are we who feel so disconnected because of our sins to find or receive that connection?

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is

light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

The longer a person carries a burden, the heavier it gets. The heavier it gets, the more difficult is the journey undertaken. And the more difficult the journey, the more resentful one feels for having to make it alone with no one to help.

The first verse really sounds like such a simple thing, doesn't it. We are asked to come to God and to take on the yoke of obedience to His will. Yet we hang on to the burdens we carry and continue to complain of their weight. Could it be obedience that we fear? Might we see obedience to God as the surrender of control? Worse yet, how many scars do some carry from yokes put on them by their parents? Is God's yoke any better?

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” A breather. A kind of freedom not felt in a long time. . .perhaps never felt in the lives of some. A cool breeze on a hot day that refreshes unlike other pleasures which come at tremendous cost. A rest. *“I am gentle and humble in heart.”* Not loud or demanding. Not threatening with physical or emotional harm. Gentle. How long since you experienced gentleness? And humble. Not the kind of wimp “I can't do anything” humility, but a quiet certainty that doesn't need to display the power and authority that is most certainly there.

“For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” As I look at these words, I feel reminded that I am not really so far from the will of God. But my life has many rough edges, and the mettle of who I am to become has yet to be completely tempered in the fire of God’s love.

Suppose a coach came up to you and said, “I think you have what it takes to make a name for yourself in this sport. Would you be willing to let me bring you to that level of play?” There would be little hesitation. You were singled out. You were invited to a higher level. At the same time, you believed in your heart that the coach could bring strength to the weaknesses you have. God will do that and so much more. *“Learn from me. . . my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

If you believe that your sins have excluded you from the love of God, please believe that they have not. *“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”* (Psalm 103:12) The loss of connection was always at our end, never at God’s. This is not about making others think more highly of us. It’s about God’s incredible love for you and for me. *“Learn from me. . . my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

God wants all that is in us that is of darkness to be in the light of His love. He wants the sinful nature we carry to be drowned for that nature cannot exist in His presence.

And He waits for us to come to Him.

Chapter Seven

Who Is My Lifeline?

“Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” has been one of the most talked about programs in recent times. Ask anyone, “Is that your final answer?” and if they have seen the show, they’ll come back with “Yes, Regis, that’s my final answer.”

Recently I was at a meeting where an individual was asked a question that left him scratching his head. He smiled and said, “I think I’d like to use one of my lifelines.” We all laughed and then briefly discussed how elements of this TV show had become almost a second vocabulary in our everyday living.

To a man who has an addictive behavior, a lifeline is truly a lifeline, something separating him from continuing a behavior that could kill. A registrant without a lifeline is molestation waiting for the opportunity to happen.

“The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the

Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.” (Psalm 18:2-3)

If ever there was a definition of a lifeline, God is it. Over the years, however, I have been accused of “hiding” behind the Bible or living in denial because my trust is in God and not in man. My pride-filled nature bristled at those accusations and a part of me mentally sought to defend myself.

I am learning to set aside accusing letters until I can answer without feeling the need to justify myself. I am also learning that this kind of letter causes me to look more closely at my life, especially as I write this column for you.

Years ago, I functioned as an adult among adults without really feeling my own connection to them as an adult. There was always something lacking, something they had that I didn’t feel I had. But that something was like an upset stomach. I knew all was not well, but I couldn’t get more specific than that.

Over and over, I called on God to change me, but it just didn’t seem to happen. I didn’t deny God existed, but I started to define myself as my own lifeline. It was up to me to take control of my life and put it on the right path again. I did for short periods of time, only to fall and bring harm to innocent victims. In my broken state, I was a lifeline frayed beyond any measure of usefulness.

The Primary Lifeline

Matthew 6:33 is a verse I use frequently in my writing: “*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*” The verse is my compass as it points faithfully to God, never to any person or even to myself.

Only God knows what you and I truly look like. We see the flaws, the scars. We are looking up one minute and in opposite directions the next. That doesn’t make us bad people--just people.

The lifeline of my relationship with God most often seems curved and erratic, but in my heart, it is straight and vertical. The line of God’s relationship with me is always straight, no distortions.

My conversations are lopsided--heavy with my requests for this or that need. But God speaks. I try to listen carefully, yet it isn’t easy, and despite my problems in listening, God keeps talking to my heart.

The Secondary Lifelines

On TV, a contestant unsure of an answer calls upon others, accepting the response of the majority or relying on the expertise of someone believed to have the answer.

I knew God before I started abusing, but it took someone to lead me gently back when my darkness was

exposed to light. My prayer to God was simple, “Help me!” God touched the hearts of others listening to Him in their conversations, and they reached out to me. They didn’t tell me that they were the answer. They pointed to the answer.

When I started treatment, I wanted my therapist to be the answer--someone close at hand who could help me understand myself, offer direction for changing my life, and encourage me in the daily process of change.

In the past 15 years, not everyone I met in my treatment program believed in God. Some, in fact, adamantly denied there was a God. Others saw my faith in God as refusing to take responsibility for the harm I brought my victims. In the same way, those yet to become part of my healing walk might reject God in the much the same fashion.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

If my relationship with God is primary, if He is my lifeline, then He will help me receive what I need and help me to reject what is not needed. I feel, however, that it is arrogant for me to determine the manner or the vessel which God will use to continue the work begun in my life. God did not create only those believing in Him. He created all.

Yes, That’s My Final Answer

To ask God for help is to be willing to set aside

my idea of how that request will be answered as well as to believe that the request will be answered. It is not to blindly accept everything I am told or asked to do as being from God, but to take all those things back to God in prayer.

Trusting God as my lifeline demands obedience and faith. . .obedience to become vulnerable and faith to be sure of what I hope for and certain of what I do not see. The answer is God, and yes, Regis, that is my final answer.

Chapter Eight

If Only

“As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.” (Luke 8:42-44)

It has always struck me that the miracle of the woman healed of bleeding is more or less sandwiched in the middle of another miracle story, the healing of the dying daughter of Jairus. Perhaps there is some significance to that, perhaps

not, but my eyes are drawn to details of the woman's story.

Scholars suggest that she was suffering from consumption (Tuberculosis), a disease for which there was no cure but more than a few willing to take her money in exchange for remedies they guaranteed would work. But they didn't and the only thing that got better was the purse of the one selling the remedy.

Here's an obvious statement. She was a woman. I bet you are impressed with my grasp of the obvious, well, at least a little.

But in the time of Jesus, there were certain things, personal things, that women did not openly share in public. Her approach to Jesus in the large crowd was meant to avoid drawing attention to her problem. Yet even in her secret approach, she had faith. We read in Matthew's account of the story in chapter 9, "*She said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.'*" (verse 21) And she was!

I have wondered why Jesus stopped and asked, "Who touched me?" His disciples had tried to minimize the situation by pointing out the size of the crowd, but Jesus said, "*Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.*" (verse 46) Knowing she could not hide, the woman came forward, knelt before him, and told her story. Jesus responded, "*Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.*" (verse 48)

I am guessing that in that specific moment, no one else existed for that woman but Jesus. She saw no one but Him, heard no other voice but His. It is not possible for me, however, to imagine that the crowd merely ignored what had happened.

“Heal me! Heal ME!” the people had called out wherever Jesus went. And Jesus healed. He touched them or allowed them to touch Him, and they were healed. But this woman was called on to explain her condition to strangers, to humble herself without letting anything stand between her and the desire she had for healing.

On rare occasion I receive letters from individuals with age-inappropriate attractions who have not acted on those feelings but neither have they found the courage to be open to other people about the nature of their struggles.

I also get letters from individuals who have acted out and have either been arrested or are awaiting charges.

Sometimes the letter is from a spouse or a friend of the offender, but the bottom line is the same basic request. They want healing! Finally, there are the letters from men and women in prison--some serving long sentences, some doubtful of ever being released. Because of lengthy sentences, there is no treatment available to them in the first

years of incarceration (a time when help might be most effective) and certainly not much hope being offered them.

Like all these, I pleaded with the Lord in my prayers to heal me, to take away the darkness that was mine. But nothing changed. There was no “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace.” I didn’t give up on God, but I sure wondered what it took to get His attention.

I was arrested, sentenced to prison confinement, and experienced changes in my life I could not have imagined possible. And through all of that, I still did not wake one morning and hear, “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

Instead, I woke each day asking God to be more real in my life. With increasing regularity, however, my requests included “but in your time and in your way.”

I know that I am still a work in process with some seriously rough edges. The Master Carpenter knows those edges, their shape and their course texture. His gentle hand runs through my life, smoothing a little more with each pass.

If Only

The woman had thought, “*If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.*” But it did not stop there. She cautiously inched forward until the tassel of his cloak was within reach, until she finally touched it. Then the miracle happened. The flow of blood stopped.

It is difficult to reject bargaining with God by making

“If only” promises. The woman really didn’t do that, but she did arrive at the decision to touch the cloak because of an “If only.”

Jesus completely healed the woman who touched his cloak because of her faith. He healed the blind and the lame, expelled the demons that had invaded the lives of many, and brought Lazarus back from the dead. Why aren’t our prayers for complete freedom answered? Too little faith?

Healing of a Different Kind

"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."
(John 8:10-11)

I had been caught in my sins and they were made public. In the days that followed my arrest, the number of people getting involved in my disclosure increased. I somehow believed that their purpose was to bring healing and help. But it wasn’t.

Their purpose was to gather evidence that would be part of hearings leading up to my sentencing. The police had assured my wife and children that they would be there for them, yet once the case was closed so was their connection and the offer of help and support.

I prayed for probation and for extensive treatment without prison but that was not to happen. My sentence was

pretty much standard for that time, but I had to ask, “What about the prayers, the pleading? Didn’t you hear me, Lord?”

God had heard my prayers! I was like the woman caught in adultery hearing Jesus say, “Go now and leave your life of sin.” I had expected Jesus to step into my life and make it impossible for me to ever be tempted or sin as I had? God didn’t do that.

Instead, He brought me into relationship with His Son and introduced me to the intimacy of the Holy Spirit. The miracle, then, was to know that I was loved and forgiven. When tempted, I knew I could make other choices.

Jesus healed the blind and made them see; healed the lame and made them walk; forgave those who sinned saying “Go now and leave your life of sin.” I think that the greatest miracles Jesus worked were not those connected with physical issues or demonic possession, but those whose souls had been transformed.

If you look carefully, you will find that God’s Word is full of “If . . . then” promises. We shouldn’t be afraid of them because they are a reminder that we have a choice in how we respond. And in this respect, I really want the spiritual courage of the woman who said, “*If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.*”

Unfortunately, not everyone will be in our corner or stand cheering us on in our healing journey if we are

registrants. But the power of the Almighty will be and if we listen closely, look intently, we will see evidence of His presence.

Chapter Nine

I Will Bring You Back

“I will be with you and will watch you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done all that I have promised you.”(Genesis 28:15)

A new year. It seems like only yesterday we were all wondering what would happen with Y2K, and many people believed that we would certainly face one disaster after another as computers crashed. Two years later, we walked in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, and incredible strife in the Middle East.

These are most certainly difficult days we live in. A few weeks ago, I attended a banquet and listened to the words of a man whose daily focus for living was clearly on God. His talk was a mixture of exhortation spoken with intensity and praise sung from his heart. The effect was so intimate that

many in the room (myself included) felt that the message was personal.

I can't recall everything he said--this is one of those times when I wish I had a photographic memory--but there were statements that clearly stood out to me. The moment, for example, he recalled the words of Genesis, my inner ears came alive. He repeated the phrase, "and I will bring you back" a number of times and all I could think of was how God had brought me back--out of the darkness I once called light, out of the confinement of prison, and out of the prison of my compulsive behaviors.

I knew the words he shared were not just for me, they were for everyone, and they were especially meant for the newest societal lepers--registrants. "What better title," I thought as I wrote myself a note on the program, "than 'I Will Bring You Back' for the next edition of *Into the Light*."

Days later as I considered the direction of the article, I was almost overwhelmed for a time with frustration. "How hollow the words might sound to those serving a long sentence or facing civil commitment." But they aren't hollow words. "And I will bring you back." Isn't that what every one of us hungers to hear? Isn't it as much a matter of receiving the grace of hope through faith as any physical movement or anticipated freedom we experience might be?

Staring at the words yet again, I started to place the

emphasis on a different word each time--a play on words in some circumstances but very significant with this phrase.

And I will bring you back. . .

Long time readers of “*Into the Light*” will remember that on more than one occasion I have shared that God burned a simple message in my heart as I started my own time in prison. It was “Rely on me alone.” I did not take this message to mean I should ignore everyone else or even to ignore those in charge of my treatment program. Rather, I took it to mean that the days of my claiming to be in total control were over.

My self-control had not prevented me from abusing children or from living a lie that hurt all those who loved me. It took a surrender of myself to God before I could see how deeply buried I was in mire, and it took faith (God’s gift to me because I asked for faith) to trust the manner in which God would bring me back.

And I WILL bring you back. . .

This is not an idle promise God has made to His people. It is a promise that will never be revoked. “*But if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my name.*” (Nehemiah 1:9) The central issue, however, is that we must turn from our self-serving behavior and face God in faithful obedience.

Sadly, I find it all too easy to sin, so I don't write these words to you from some lofty tower of perfection. I need God's forgiveness every day, and because of the death of Jesus on the cross I know that I have it. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16) What better proof have we of God's love and faithfulness?

And I will BRING you back. . .

When the emphasis is on the word 'bring', there is an element of being taken by the hand of the Father and led through life. We still have choices to make (and not all of them will be good choices), yet the road signs are there for us to see. God's Word is a "How To" book for all of us suffering from the human condition.

Additionally, when we are in relationship with God there is an actual sense of His presence in everything we do. God is not an abstract thought or theology, but some people like to consider Him so because it makes it easier for them to choose their own will rather than God's.

I count on the Holy Spirit within my heart to help me see where change is needed in my life. The Holy Spirit responds by nudging me in directions I need to go. Sometimes the nudge comes from a friend who points out something I did or said that looks more like the old choices I

once made than of the new choices I hope to be making.

I am learning that these nudges don't feel any less uncomfortable than they did years ago. After all, isn't the object to be "free" of all the not-so-good things in our lives? That's what people suggest, but I think that reality shows struggle is a part of everyday living. Some days can be difficult, but if I look closely enough, God was always there, always bringing me to the next level.

And I will bring YOU back. . .

There is a tendency for us to read the pronoun "you" as meaning someone other than "me." If that's what you feel more often than you care to admit, read the phrase above with your eyes and hear God speaking the words just for you!

"And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that He has given me, but raise them up on the last day." (John 6:39) There are times when I feel like such a failure because of temptations. I wish God would just banish them from my life. I believe that God just asks me to do the best I can, to seek His grace, to be willing to admit I am weak, and to desire His love above all other things.

When I look back over the years since my arrest, the one thing that made everything possible was believing that I was loved and desired by God. That relationship is my identity and through it I am able to channel the love I have for my wife, my children, and countless others.

Believing that God will not (or worse, cannot) love me until I have fixed all the broken parts of my life is one of the lies Satan delights in promoting. He knows that sinners want God's love and forgiveness. . .he just encourages the thought that they are not possible.

And I will bring you BACK. . .

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me! I have found my lost sheep.” I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” (Luke 15:4-7)

If the one sheep had not left, there would have been no need for the shepherd to leave the flock at all. I see myself as that sheep and I know that only God would continue to come after me offering His complete and healing love. We humans would never be able to forgive without limit or love without limitations--that is God's gift to us. I wish I could say that believing all of this would make everything wonderful. I wish I could say that society is ready and willing to offer forgiveness and restoration to those of us who have sinned so grievously, but I cannot. As I write so often in this newsletter,

healing is not about having everything be right in your life. It's not about always "feeling" wonderful. It IS about knowing God is always present and always loving.

As we begin this new year together, my prayer will be that we are able to encourage one another, to pray for one another, and to allow others to pray for us. Living is one day at a time, one choice at a time, and a trust that God is with us in those moments when we don't "feel" His presence. He IS there and He will bring us back.

Chapter Ten

What Future?

"But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently." (Romans 8:24b-25)

It is always easy to write about what others should do or how they should feel. When I answer questions in letters, however, I know that I answer as one from the outside looking in. Granted, I do answer from experience but only as an example. I think to presume otherwise is arrogant and perhaps even unintentionally diminishes the significance of the feelings that underscore those questions.

I just finished a wonderful book this past weekend titled “*Out of a Far Country*” by Angela and Christopher Yuan. It’s the story of a young man and his mother as they openly share about his downward spiral into a world of drugs and the conflict he has with his homosexual identity.

Having met Christopher some years ago, I knew the direction the book would take but what moved me was the way God worked in and through Christopher’s life and that of his mother, Angela. And because I was moved, I tried to consider why. There was, after all, the simple formula--accept the Lord, surrender everything, and trust in the outcome--but it was the uniqueness of their lives that made everything fresh and inviting.

Perhaps that’s what is inspiring my thoughts at the moment--a desire to avoid offering cookie cutter advice while encouraging the journey that awaits all who are willing to risk their lives to make the journey.

When I allow myself the occasional look over my shoulder, I am sometimes blown away by the way my life was transformed and continues to be transformed. One aspect of this journey surfaces over and over--I did not really recognize God’s hand in things until after the event. It was like being caught up in a current of the moment, carried along, and then settled in a manner that had God asking “Did you see what I just did for you?” My mouth would be open in astonishment.

In my mind's eye, God merely smiled.

But hope that is seen is no hope at all

Most of this newsletter's readership is in confinement in county jails or prisons (federal or state), so letters I receive eventually bring up word of an impending parole board hearing. They ask for prayer that God would bless them with physical freedom and/or that the hearts of the board members would be softened.

None, to my knowledge, walk into that meeting assured beforehand that a parole will be granted. If it were, they would simply write "The board will be seeing me next week and I should be released within a few weeks after their decision." What is to hope for? The decision in this example has already been made. But the reality is that they don't know what the outcome will be and that gives birth to hope for the freedom they seek.

But if we hope for what we do not yet have we wait for it patiently

There are, however, letters I receive from individuals who have seen the Parole Board a number of times without hearing the words "Parole granted" but whose hope is not diminished. They still say, "Maybe this will be the time" but they also add "And if the answer is no, I will be okay."

The morning of my first Parole Board hearing, I had been called to see the nurse. Some weeks earlier I had been

tested for HIV, so the call to see the nurse meant the test results were available. Looking at me with a sheet of paper in her hand, she said “Your tests were negative.”

I had been fearful that a different answer would also mean that I had put my victims at risk, possibly even guaranteeing a more drastic turn of direction for their lives. But the test was negative. My guilt was not lessened but I thanked God for the release of that fear I had carried.

Walking into a small room, I looked at the three members of the parole panel and simply said “It makes no difference what your decision will be. I was told this morning that my test for HIV was negative.” Then I cried.

The official word from the Parole Board came two weeks later: The “Insufficient time served” and “A risk to the community” boxes had been checked. Parole denied. And despite assurances from everyone who knew me, I was denied a second time a little more than a year later.

Patience. Now that’s a word that can be difficult. For one who has surrendered to the Lord, the flow of events is not always positive. Sometimes they are out and out painful. Sometimes we call out “Are you really there, God?” and in a quiet moment, we recognize that God is there. The bad is still bad but we are not alone and that makes the bad bearable.

What Future?

It’s almost impossible to write about or for those with

sex-related offenses without facing the questions that are very real to them--even to me. Where to live, to work, or even to attend church are issues that continue to get redefined by some state legislatures or any number of community common councils. Those efforts are all in the name of protecting children--and I would be cold if I did not believe that for at least some of them enacting the laws this was the motivating factor. I can and have argued that child safety is rarely improved if at all, but the arguments fall on deaf ears. There are simply too many people who support such legislation for whatever reasons. Is life hopeless for someone with sex-related offenses? No, I don't think it is, but at times it can feel like it. So, what's next?

I come back to Christopher Yuan and his story of conversion when most would have argued such change would be impossible for him. I come back to my own story of change despite the belief many had that I was someone to be feared, not to be trusted, and to be kept apart from the healthy of this world. I can't shout my way into some level of community approval. No court decision supporting me would alter the minds of those who have defined me for life.

Testimonies are powerful because readers feel there is hope for them in their lives. At some point, however, we all need to see testimonies are examples of what God has done while looking for what God is doing in our personal lives.

Your miracles will never be the same as mine but they remain miracles. And setting the stage for any miracle is the willingness to believe that God cares enough about us to work one in our lives.

We don't get to determine our future other than to be open to the good that we can bring to it. And guess what? There is not one person I write who has not experienced at least one miracle that will be seen by someone searching for his or her own hope. We are all instruments of God's love. We all have the capacity to touch the life of another in a manner that brings glory to God. So if you ask, "What future?" I would just say "Watch for it and give thanks!"

Chapter Eleven

A Time for Mourning

"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:18)

Last evening, I received a call from a friend who told me he had been crying for three hours over the tragedy that took the lives of 20 children and 8 adults in Newtown, CT. My emotional state at the moment was pretty far removed

from his because I had been watching a program on TV with my wife. After hanging up, my indifference caused me to feel a little guilty.

This morning I watched a news report online where a photo of each of the victims accompanied a brief statement about them. The first photo, a 6-year-old girl, showed a bright, smiling face. A moment after that image was displayed, I thought of my own 6-year granddaughter and tears came.

The words of the victim's father described a loving child, a gift from God. He added that anger was not an option if he were to take care of his family and get through what was happening. I don't know if I could have said what he did.

When my friend called, he had added "And I thought of you." He knows of my background, of the time I spent in prison, and of this ministry. He even financially supports the ministry, but he called because he was mourning those children and believed I would understand.

As the news was breaking later that day, I actually heard my inner self say, "At least I didn't do that!" – a statement of minimizing guilt if ever I heard one but one that surfaced nonetheless, but I did realize something significant.

Twenty-five years ago, though I knew what I did was seriously wrong, my view of those behaviors was from inside the protective self-absorbed shell I had been living in. After all, I would remind myself back then, I didn't force myself on

anyone. That shell no longer exists to the extent it once did; those I had abused were children who did not deserve the direction their lives took because of me.

I do not believe that God allowed this tragedy or the things I did years ago to happen merely to test the faith of survivors. As my pastor shared, God cried along with us over what happened. I do believe, however, that God received all those who died at Sandy Hook Elementary into His eternal presence because they were His children.

One thing is certain, not one of those whose life was taken woke that morning with the thought “Today is the day I will die.” The same could be said for a child of any age whose day included an unwanted or unplanned act of sexual molestation. I don’t want to think of this, but how different was I from the shooter in Newtown, CT? We both made at least some plan to bring about what we did. We both put ourselves in a position of control over the lives of others. We both lived in worlds that saw everything as meeting or not meeting our needs--with little or no regard for the needs of others.

Is there a difference?

Maybe my minimizing comment “At least I didn’t do that!” bears at least some truth. A victim who has been killed has no opportunity to rejoin family or loved ones, no future goals to be reached because they are no more.

My victims have the potential for healing and fulfilled lives though I have no way of knowing the extent of their success in doing so. I sincerely pray that those who love them continue to support them in this process.

Unlike the young man in Newtown, I did not take my own life. Because he did, he is unable to explain anything to anyone. He cannot balance his deeds with at least some form of penance or society-demanded retribution. There is no justice for survivors.

Mourning – A Time of Healing

Most letters I receive from individuals with sex-related offenses share an expression of sadness for choices made; most who write can recognize how their actions changed the lives of their victims; and most recognize a need to mourn the loss of a victim's innocence as well as the wake of pain inflicted on family and friends of a victim.

Though some might disagree, I know from experience that offenders will also need to mourn the losses they experienced because of their choices. Very few leave prison and return to family, to former jobs, or even to the church they attended. Those things do matter and if they are no more, they must be mourned--not from a "Poor me" position of self-centeredness but from a "This all happened because of my choices" position of acceptance and the responsibility taken for those actions.

Treatment programs are, of necessity, focused on victim empathy and the recognition of the damage abuse causes. There is little room or time for personal mourning such as I have described but that doesn't mean it cannot or should not happen.

Healing is not a matter of forgetting because I believe that would be impossible, for example, for the survivors of those who were killed. I think it is also impossible for someone who has molested to forget what happened. There is no "Just put it behind you" if change is to be achieved.

It is my responsibility to pray for all whose lives I affected by my choices. God can and will do what I cannot, but healing for me and for my victims demands my willingness to petition God, to call out from the center of my being.

I also think that those of us who have abused are in a unique position to pray for others who have abused. I have asked people during workshops if they are able to pray for someone who has done something atrocious. Many honestly say that they cannot. Then I ask, "If you don't pray for them, who will?"

I asked my wife the same question about the young man responsible for so much destruction of lives in Newton, CT. She responded by reminding me that some Christian would do that. Her comment reminded me of a man who

regularly visited serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, a man who shared God's word with him and eventually baptized him. I would like to believe that God's servant was making possible a time for mourning, an opportunity to pray for those he had killed.

There is nothing about crimes against the innocent that can be made to look less heinous than those crimes are. As difficult as it is to say, I need to remember that I did heinous acts and took innocence I had no right to take. But I also believe that I have the opportunity to continue putting my life on a God-centered path. There will be times of mourning, but there must also be times of rejoicing. I pray that God helps all of us recognize the appropriate time for both.

Issues to be Faced

Chapter Twelve

Do You Still Love Me God?

“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might

display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:15-16)

Over the years I have heard it said that if I describe someone in a certain manner often enough, that description becomes locked in my mind. Would it be too far a stretch to think that if someone in prison for sex-related offenses is always referred to as a registrant, or sex offender, the person will always be considered a registrant? Always a sex offender?

Would it be a further stretch to think that if churches continue to reject someone with sex-related offenses from their faith communities, the person will eventually see this rejection as God’s decision? After all, are not faith communities meant to be Christ’s hands, feet, eyes, voice, and heart to all who seek God?

Given this continued kind of rejection and condemnation, I don’t really think it would be a stretch for some to ask, “Do you still love me, God?” because love, support, and encouragement are outward signs of “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The absence of these outward signs becomes a growing wedge with God seeming to grow more distant.

Spiritually, those rejected are being forced to live apart from the very faith communities that could heal and bring

change. Spiritually, those rejected are forced to wear signs announcing their crimes, their sins, so that others don't become infected. Spiritually, they are being cast aside as the forever broken.

God becomes more distant; the cross of Christ is meant for everyone except those who sexually offend; and sadly, for some, that repetitious rejection will eventually become "God doesn't care about me. God doesn't love me."

Christ came into the world to save sinners

"Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?'" (John 8:10) He followed that by saying something unheard in such circumstances, *"Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."* (verse 11)

I have often thought about this response Jesus made because there is no indication that He took away any and all temptations from her of her past life. Rather, Jesus simply tells her to leave her life of sin. If it had been me in that circle of condemnation and if Jesus said those words to me, how would I have responded that day, the day after, or in the months that followed? Would I have left my sinful past? Would I have faced temptation with the knowledge that I could say "No" when tempted? And in fact, is this what the woman did with her new lease on life?

Of whom I am the worst

“*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*” (Acts 9:4) For someone who had spent his life as a Pharisee, the voice Saul heard must have shaken him to the core of his being. And given that he had persecuted those following Christ, it isn’t hard to see how Saul might have described himself as the worst of sinners.

Those with sex-related offenses against children are frequently confronted with “*it would be better for [those who cause a child to stumble] to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.*” (Matthew 18:6) Jesus spoke those words and for anyone looking to justify the exclusion of such a person from their church or neighborhood, verse six is where they stop reading. There is no mercy--only condemnation.

For the longest time, “*of whom I am the worst*” was the point at which my eyes stopped. I didn’t really read any further because those words pretty much spoke to what I believed about myself.

I was shown mercy

Looking back, I know that I was blessed beyond what I had a right to be. My wife and my children still loved me and that was a true gift. Though they couldn’t forget what had happened or why I spent years apart from them, I believe that they looked at me as the man I was supposed to be. In some ways, their response was the very grace God offered me

and a reminder that God doesn't define any of us by our sins.

In me, Jesus might display his unlimited patience

It is common for us to define God in human terms because we really have no way to do otherwise. So, when I consider the world for those with sex-related offenses, I see society's impatience, frustration, anger, and a host of other negative emotions serving as a wall to an offender's change and healing. The mortar locking those negative emotions in place is the mortar of human nature and therefore a human response to crimes that seem beyond belief.

The life and teachings of Jesus speak to us clearly of forgiveness and of being examples of Christ's love. The walls don't come down, however, just because they should. I think they don't come down because people fear what it would be like to not have them in place as their protection. They don't come down because they have become society's way of supporting victims, of standing arm in arm against child molestation and other crimes of sexual assault.

I must confess that I construct my own walls though they are mostly a negative response to the rejection of others. I want people to be as I want them to be. This is where it gets difficult.

If I am to trust in God and to believe that God loves me, then I must accept the fact that God loves those who don't love me. I don't get to decide who God loves or doesn't love. I

don't get to decide how others should deal with me, though I do get to decide how I deal with others.

Maybe life for some of you has just gotten too difficult, too lonely, and perhaps too hopeless. Maybe for you "Do you still love me, God?" feels like an appropriate question.

[May we] believe on him and receive eternal life

It would be great if believing on Jesus would result in life being just what we would like it to be. It would be great if believing on Jesus would bring about a spirit of reaching out by all people toward the ongoing healing for victims and offenders alike. But there is nothing in the verse that implies things will be different in the world around us just because we believe. The verse simply reminds us of the inheritance we have in Christ Jesus, the eternal life with Him in His heavenly kingdom.

Some days that might not be enough for you or even for me, for that matter. That's when we all have to remind ourselves of the unlimited patience Jesus has for us. He knows we will fall. He knows we will doubt. And He knows some of us will despair.

Despite all that I see around me in this world, I am convinced beyond a doubt that I am loved by God. I pray that when you find yourself asking "Do you still love me, God?" you will hear a resounding YES in the deepest parts of your

being--because He does! You are worth loving!

Chapter Thirteen

Called to Forgiveness

Over the years that I have been either putting together this newsletter or responding to letters from inmates, the issue of forgiveness is clearly of concern. Most often, letters include “I know God forgives me, but I can’t forgive myself” or “My sins are just too great and God is tired of my weak promises to avoid them.”

A week or so ago, I found myself looking through Scripture, believing that a single verse would surface with the familiar feeling “This is the topic, Bob.” When several came alive with equal force, I decided that they would all work. I pray that my comments following each verse do not distract you but will be food for thought.

The Offer

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

One of the most difficult things to do is confess a sin or a weakness because we believe that if others know, we will

be seen as weak or even, in the case of those with sex-related offenses, despicable. Better, we think, to keep quiet and trust in our own strength and self-control.

It could be argued that confessing our sins to God alone and asking for forgiveness should be enough and, to a degree, it is. At the same time, we know that when we confess the same sin over and over, our resolve and commitment to “sin no more” weakens--sometimes to the point of believing that our chances for change are hopeless.

The Prayer

“For the sake of your name, Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.” (Psalm 25:11)

As a boy, I never had trouble confessing that I lied, disobeyed my parents, or said some word or phrase I should not have said. There were, I believed at the time, such things as little sins and big sins and thankfully, I only did the little ones. But as I got older, that changed. I did some of the big ones and these were the sins that brought shame.

I confess to you here that sometimes shame became a wedge, and I kept those sins to myself. But there was no freedom, no sense of deliverance--even though I feared a repetition of this or that sin--without finally understanding that God wanted my confession because I needed the forgiveness He so readily gave.

The Hidden Sin

“But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.” (Psalm 19:12-13)

Though others might be quick to ask, “How could you not know what you were doing was wrong?” I believe that we sometimes don’t. I am not referring to one of the big sins, however, because unless we have somehow managed to dull our moral senses completely, we are usually aware of them.

I think that hidden faults can be actions we fail to confess but they can also be those weaknesses we carry that often don’t make our conscious level of thinking. “*Who can discern their own errors*” seems to bear out the nature of this human weakness.

“*Keep your servant also from willful sins*” speaks directly to the sin behaviors that fit my top ten list of choices I make often because I choose something despite knowing I should not. Believe it or not, our top ten sin lists usually don’t bear much similarity or if they do, the numbering is different.

“*May they not rule over me*” defines the addictive nature of sin as well as anything. Those of us who have spent time confronting past behavior eventually come to see that there are triggers (hidden faults) that open the door to serious sin.

Looking into our personal areas of weakness and

asking forgiveness for whatever needs forgiving will, in time, dull the addictive edge in our thinking. Confronting and successfully dealing with our major weaknesses doesn't eliminate the potential for temptation but it can and does provide for a healing and holy alternative.

The Promise

“Blessed [or Happy] is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.” (Psalm 32.1-2)

I do believe that my sins are forgiven. I do believe that Jesus died as atonement for my sins because I could never hope to atone for them on my own. And because I believe as I do, I am confronted with something I have occasionally struggled with--being blessed or happy in my daily walk.

According to “Barnes Notes on the Bible,” the idea is that the sin would be, as it were, covered over, hidden, concealed, so that it would no longer come into the view of either God or man; that is, the offender would be regarded and treated *as if he had not sinned*, or as if he had no sin. (italics mine)

Given the state registries and local residency restriction laws, to most of the public, at least, my sins are not covered over or hidden. But as Barnes wrote, that is “the idea” even if it doesn't necessarily work that way in all situations. But to

God, it does! And that, my friends, is the truth that matters.

The Daily Maintenance

“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation” (Luke 11:4)

Forgiveness is not a one-time thing because we should be asking for and offering forgiveness every day. There can be no “I won’t ever forgive that so-and-so” any more than “I cannot forgive myself” but it is understandable that forgiveness in whatever form is required is not always easy. At times it can feel downright impossible.

Most Christians know and maybe even say The Lord’s Prayer at least once a day. It is the prayer Christ gave to His disciples when one of them asked “teach us to pray.” But if you are like me, you tend to go over the words quickly because they are so familiar. In doing so, you and I can miss the reality that forgiveness works both ways: we ask for it and we offer it.

I don’t think a day passes that I have not done some form of wrong to someone or someone to me whether that wrong is almost unnoticed or really obvious. So, if I am to seek a relationship with the Lord, I must also seek a relationship with those in my world. They don’t have to become my best friends but I do have to understand that I affect their lives just as they affect mine.

If this prayer is seriously considered daily, change will

occur in us and perhaps in those with whom we interact. More importantly, if this change is based on forgiving the wrongs, then our focus will be on what is right and holy.

The Only Option

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6.68-69)

Jesus had shared with those listening a difficult concept when He said, *“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. (vs 53)”* Many turned their backs on Him and left because it was too much, perhaps too strange.

Jesus had asked, *“You do not want to leave too, do you?”* (verse 67) Peter’s response was born of faith and grace. I wonder what my response would have been. I would like to believe that I would have said the same as Peter and if that is the case, there is no better source for the healing of my past or the hope of my future than in Jesus.

We are forgiven. We must forgive. In receiving and offering forgiveness, we are blessed.

Chapter Fourteen

A Bruised Reed

“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.” (Isaiah 42: 3, 6-7)

Every now and again as I consider a topic for this column, I wonder whether or not I am supposed to be offering clinical advice of some type. It only takes a few moments, however, for me to remember that I am not a licensed therapist, nor have I discovered something others have not thought of before.

The basic premise of this newsletter has not changed since the first edition (May 1997). I offer you hope and encouragement, and a firm belief that change is possible despite the opinion of the world.

Isaiah 42:3 is the signature verse for Prison Fellowship, an organization founded by Chuck Colson serving the needs of inmates in prisons around the world. For me and many others, the image of a bruised reed is not an incompatible image. Most of us have felt more than bruised.

We have felt completely broken and useless.

A bruised reed he will not break

These words show the difference between how we see ourselves and how God sees us. God wasn't on the other side of a closed door when we molested one of His children. He was right there in the same room, in the same place, and He grieved what was happening to an innocent child. He also grieved what was happening to us, for we are also His children.

Our decision to molest was not some "It just happened." Our lives had been out of control, our behaviors more and more carried on in darkness, and perhaps most perversely, many of us justified what we did. Over a course of years, we were not just bruised, we were black and blue, and God saw each bruise as it happened. He did not break us as one might snap a pencil in two and throw it away. He kept calling us to Him, but we had our hands over our ears.

A smoldering wick He will not snuff out

Matthew Henry described the bruised reed as those oppressed with doubts and fears, and the smoldering wick as the wick of a candle newly lighted but about to go out. God's desire is to strengthen the reed and to fan the flame of belief, hope, and relationship into a flame.

My flame had all but extinguished on April 3, 1985,

the day I was arrested. I wanted out of life, because my life had become so distorted, yet I sensed God fanning the smoldering wick of my being. He called to me in my despair, reminded me that I was loved, and planted a vision of freedom from the darkness in which I had walked. My surrender to that vision was, perhaps, the first real step of faith I had ever taken. The hand of the Lord was there for me, and I took it.

In faithfulness He will bring forth justice

Justice to one who has not surrendered his heart in obedience sounds like this: “The system is out to get me. What I did wasn’t so bad that I should be in prison.” To be in agreement with these words, one must ignore the reality of the pain brought to the lives of victims. No one can justify molesting a child. No past history of being abused evens the scales of justice.

God loves us through the consequences of our actions. A prison sentence does not ignore the horrific childhood an offender might have endured--that sentence is meant to address the wrong done to another. Far too often, however, treatment seeks only to focus on victim empathy while rejecting the need to deal with the abuse an offender might have endured. Healing should not be for one or the other but for both.

Called you in righteousness

We are called toward the light of God’s presence,

toward His righteousness. I get letters on occasion from inmates who have decided that this call justifies rejecting any need for treatment. They are, they remind me, a “new creation.” To the idea of being a “new creation” in the Lord, I offer a solid “Amen!” To the idea of rejecting treatment because it is not centered on God, I offer that this newness will allow them the ability to see molestation with new eyes, and to see treatment as being able to understand themselves with their new eyes.

I don’t agree with everything SOT programs are doing, because I believe some concepts taught merely shift inappropriate behavior from one age level to another, but they can bring to light important information. Some behaviors are just wrong, and whether they involve children or adults, they are still wrong. Immorality is immorality.

I take hold of your hand

If ever there was an image that speaks to my heart as a child of God, it would be seeing my hand in God’s hand, feeling His love and protection.

As a little boy taking my father’s hand, I knew he was taking me somewhere that was good. . .certainly somewhere that would be an adventure I’d remember. Like all little children, there were things I wanted to see and do, so sometimes I would pull away and run in a direction my father had not intended me to go. As I got

older, I didn't take his hand, but I knew when it was right to stay close and when to venture off.

When I was 16, my dad went to be with the Lord. It wasn't his choice but the effects of diabetes that took their toll on his body. When I think of him, I see him differently now. I see him as a child of God, his hand in God's hand, being loved for all eternity in God's presence. And I see myself also reaching out for God's hand, guiding me in my choices, healing my bruises, and fanning into flame the spirit of His love within me.

Open eyes that are blind

Not long after my arrest, someone asked me, "Didn't you see all the people that cared about you and loved you? Why didn't you let them help you?" My answer was simple, "I couldn't see them."

The very walls that I created so that others wouldn't know of my dark side also made it impossible for those people to get inside me to where they could do some good. Maybe that has been one of the more difficult aspects of my past to deal with--knowing how I had turned my back time after time.

This might sound overly simplistic, but the more I seek God in my life, the more I see those He places in my journey to walk a distance with me or to offer directions. And sometimes, I get to do the same for them, and they recognize God's hand in that, too.

Free captives from prison. . .

Release those who sit in darkness

During my confinement, there were times when I truly wanted God to release my body from prison. I hated the buildings, the locks, the restrictions, and the separation from my family. Most of all, I hated the despair disguised in its many forms demonstrated by inmates and prison staff alike.

Some inmates buried themselves in activity of any kind that would allow them to escape the reality of prison, but the ones who truly made an impact on me were those who recognized why they were in prison and what they needed to do to avoid re-offending should they be released.

They were the ones who attended chapel activities not as something to do but as a means of learning how to change. They were the ones who would attend Bible study and return to the unit with a desire to be different. And they would be. It wasn't phony or pretend. It was real.

Healing and change are real. Although the bruised reed will always bear some scar, some indication of being wounded, it will stand with other reeds, drawing its strength from the sun, its need for life-giving moisture from the rains, and its connectedness with the soil that provides nourishment.

You and I are bruised reeds. It takes courage, however, to become vulnerable enough to allow others to see our

bruises without feeling the need to defend how we got them. God the Father loves us and calls us, and He gave His Son, Jesus, to die on a cross to atone for our offenses. That cross reminds us that Jesus has already done what we could never do, and that should give us the hope and strength we need to live from one day to the next.

For those who have surrendered to God, the Holy Spirit consumes our lives, awakening in us the senses we felt long dead, senses keen on recognizing the presence of the Lord in every aspect of living. No, a bruised reed He will not break. What a loving God we serve!

Chapter Fifteen

For What Do You Hunger

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Matthew 5.6)

For the first twenty years of my adult life, a war waged within me. It was a battle where I could see one defeat after another with only occasional victories. When the victories came, there were no celebration parades, no public announcements trumpeting times I had rejected temptation. But then how often did I trust anyone enough to even share the fact that I had overcome temptation?

Defeat meant bouts of depression, the anxiety of possible public disclosure, and more shame than I ever thought possible. In those days when I was still living a double life, reaching out for help was just too scary a place to consider, yet I sure wish I had done so. I wish I could have shouted, “Help me,” but I remained silent.

Perhaps the most dismal thing about this war waging inside was the belief that it would never get any better. Yet God is a faithful God, and when I finally stopped running from myself, He was there with His incredible love and healing presence. No, everything didn’t get better all at once, but I could tell things were getting better.

In many respects, my choices of behavior were motivated by legitimate needs, or at least I thought so at the time I considered them. I’ve also learned that most all of my needs are legitimate, but I can respond to those needs in legitimate or illegitimate ways. I went to prison because my choices were not only wrong, but they were also devastating to everyone involved.

When push came to shove, as the saying goes, I finally came to recognize that I chose sin because something in me overrode the reality that I was sinning against a child, my family, friends, a host of others and, most importantly, against God. The best way I can describe it for you is to say that I hungered for what I sought. . .despite the consequences.

It all seems so irrational now. I ask myself, “How could I ever have expected a child to meet needs I could barely define myself?” Yet I was an adult living in an adult world, trying to appear adult, and finding little connection with adults except in occasional moments. I am not saying I was completely dysfunctional as a man, a teacher, or a husband and father. I am saying that I cheated those I cared most about because of the hunger that drove me.

I wish I could simplify and define my hunger for you, but it is hard to find the right words that make sense to me – much less make sense to you. There are bits and pieces of me in almost every letter I receive from men around the world, yet no one is a complete copy of me, so I will trust that you will understand my hesitation to be too descriptive or clear on this issue.

At one point after my arrest, however, I recognized that I had to surrender my idea of how to satisfy my needs and submit to others. Anyone who has been in prison will know what I mean. I learned I could complain and struggle, or I could trust God to help me make sense out of what was happening around me. I could resist and try to force my will on others, or I could try to seek peace within myself by obedience when obedience seemed so difficult. I was changing.

“They were hungry and thirsty and their lives ebbed

away. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the hungry with good things. He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains.” (Psalm 107.5-6, 8-9, 14)

I gradually came to understand these words, especially the part about being brought out of darkness and deep gloom. With time, God was breaking the chains that bound me. The hunger I had for so long was not there – at least not in the constant way it had been. In its place, a new hunger surfaced, a hunger for the things of God.

If one seeks only the things of this world, then the things of God are less easily found. My identity in this world was very confusing to me and everyone else, and to continue to forge new layers onto such brokenness would have eventually produced disaster upon disaster.

My identity in the Lord, however, is something from all time as He knew me in my mother’s womb and declared me *‘fearfully and wonderfully made.’* (Psalm 139) Even as I think of that at this moment, all I can say is, “What an incredible God I serve!”

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled

My sins were, I believe, an attempt to fill a void within

me that I could not define at a conscious level. Like many of those who write me, I struggled to find the ‘whys’ behind my behavior. Trying to find a single cause and effect relationship, however, made the task more difficult because there was no single cause. Instead, I began to feel freedom as God had me face first one and then other issues in my life, most of those issues seemingly unrelated to my molesting.

Over time, the walls that I had built to hide my secret identity started to crumble. The demolition took place in group meetings, one-on-one counseling sessions, job interviews, meetings with parole agents, and in the chapel (whether in prison, in a church, or in my prayer time) when I knew I was being called to surrender old beliefs for new ones.

Eventually, doors opened to share my story with others. I can tell you, by the way, that it’s a scary feeling to stand in front of an audience, exposed and vulnerable to how they might feel about my testimony. At the same time, I can also share with you that such opportunities always produce positive moments – for them and for me.

I have been out of prison for thirteen years (32 years now as of this writing) and have not reoffended. That piece of information is shared with you not to show arrogance but to show hope and encouragement. I no longer have the hunger for children I once had, but I know that I must be watchful for anything in my life that might lead me down that road again.

I have written on numerous occasions the verse “*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*” (Matthew 6.33) Seeking God must be my first hunger, placed before all things that confront me every day. Do I succeed? Not always. Tension in a specific situation has a way of blocking my line of vision.

The unknowns we all face can be overwhelming, and we humans have a built-in desire to make everything work out as we want things to work out. It’s called control but could just as easily seen as our particular hunger.

If you are thinking that what I offer is the suggestion of obedience without active participation – God will do it for me – nothing could be further from the truth. Obedience is making the right choice when hunger demands gratification without concern for the morality of the choice. That’s difficult.

“*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord*” is not blind praise from blind people, nor is it ignoring responsibilities we all have here on earth. It’s the recognition that we are God’s children despite the manner in which we have sinned.

The world offers satisfaction – moral and immoral – to those who hunger, but it blurs the line between good and evil with political pronouncements. It condones the very darkness of sin in the name of “Adults Only.” And it speaks in outrage against those who would decry evil as evil.

“By your hand save me from such people, Lord, from those of this world whose reward is in this life. May what you have stored up for the wicked fill their bellies; may their children gorge themselves on it, and may there be leftovers for their little ones.” (Psalm 17.14)

Just to know that the Lord loves us despite our failings and that it is His desire that we spend eternity with Him should bring all of us great joy. It does me!

Chapter Sixteen

We Are Reconciled Restoration Might Take Time

“that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:19)

One of my favorite places to be is with those who do prison or jail ministry because I never feel as though they look at me with eyes fixed on my past, a past that included time in prison for sexual assault. They are my encouragers, my occasional accountability team, and my reminder of God’s mercy and forgiveness. I can say the same for you who are reading this newsletter because sharing with you involves

trusting God to encourage me in what I write.

When I correspond with individuals in prison for sex-related offenses, I try to see them as I want them to see me--in the process of Christ-centered change. I don't like to refer to someone as a registrant any more than I would identify my son as "The Liar" or my neighbor as "The Prostitute." We all sin, some more grievously than others, but God calls us by name, not by those failings. As I tell people, "God doesn't call me molester. He calls me Bob."

Despite how easily those words come, I daily read letters from individuals who cannot find a way to see themselves as anything other than a registrant. Many write to share that they know God has forgiven them but that they cannot forgive themselves. More write that re-entry seems almost impossible given the rejection they fear facing them when they are released.

While we do need the support of others, the healing change we seek for our lives must center on us, on how we identify ourselves and how we believe God identifies us. In that sense, how the public responds is not important, though I would be less than honest if I didn't acknowledge how nice it is to feel accepted.

The bondage to the past can never really be broken until we take into the core of our being that Jesus took those sins to the cross as atonement to the Heavenly Father. The

verse above says “*God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ.*” It doesn’t say “God took the death of His son on the cross under consideration and would get back to humanity as to whether or not we would be reconciled.” It said we are reconciled because of Christ. Not counting people’s sins against them

Some believe that God forgets our sins (Psalm 103:12) because “*as far as east is from west*” implies forgetting. When God removes our transgressions from us, He chooses to love us without the filter of those past sins. He sees us all as He created us and calls us to be in His love. In a way, believing that God could hold my sins over my head like some tool of control but that He chooses not to do so is more of a sign of love than forgetting my sins.

For my part, I am a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) because the choices I make and the identity I claim are in Christ. The old me, which I chose not to willingly reveal, lived in murky moral darkness. My eventual surrender felt in some ways like my slate had been wiped clean, like I was newly born into the world.

But I grew to realize that I still had to deal with temptation as well as with the consequences of my addictive behaviors. Having been blessed with the cleansing love of Christ, the option of re-offending was like an invitation to swim in a foul-smelling cesspool. Could I jump into that

cesspool if I wanted? Sure. But knowing I could and choosing to do so are two different things.

Breaking the Bond

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

Keeping sin a secret empowers that sin--helps keep it alive. Whatever one might say about Sex Offender Treatment (SOT), no one who is sincere about change will complete the program without breaking the shame that binds. And I believe this happens because the choice is not made to satisfy a group facilitator but to face the darkness within that needs to be eliminated.

In Chapter 7 of Luke’s gospel, we read the story of the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus when he dined at the home of a Pharisee. She knew what she had done. She believed Jesus could set her free by forgiving her. And she was willing to humble herself for this to happen. Simon the Pharisee was not able to accept the woman’s actions because of her sinful past, because he could not release her from that identity.

Steps to Restoration

At the minimum, society wants to be assured that a person in re-entry completed treatment and found a way to break the addictive behavior cycles so many have. Most of

society does not really think this way, but those who are willing to be supportive of you and me do. They want to know we did something significant to bring about change.

A person who tells a pastor “I didn’t need treatment-- God healed me!” is not, in my opinion, a candidate for long-term successful re-entry. I am not suggesting that re-offending is inevitable, just that there are triggers still present that make it a possibility.

Dealing with Shame

One point I made at a Correctional Ministries and Chaplains Association “Impact 2014” Summit dealt with shame, specifically the shame we assign to temptation. We are afraid to tell anyone that we have temptations, especially temptations that fit our criminal pasts.

Perhaps we fear that the progress others think we have made will disappear as though it never existed. Perhaps they might think we are no different than we were when in the center of our addictive behaviors. Worse, they might just believe that we are manipulating them as we manipulated our victims. We keep still rather than risk losing their support and acceptance.

I get the feeling that some SOT treatment facilitators consider temptation as proof that nothing has changed. “Unless we can eliminate those fantasies,” they say, “we have not succeeded in protecting society.” Or they might suggest

that the person is not giving the program 100% effort.

Every person without exception deals with temptation. This particular temptation just carries greater consequences. When temptation does occur, however, it seems to me that being able to effectively say no IS a sign of change.

Maybe I am being a little unrealistic. After all, can we really trust others with knowing our weaknesses, our darker sides? Never mind that we don't act on the temptation because the temptation is enough by itself in their eyes and maybe in our own as well. I rather wish, by the way, that the verse in James also said, "*and don't forget to confess your temptations, for in confessing them, you take away their power.*"

The Timetable

There is nothing anyone can say that will cause me to deny the reconciliation God has brought into my life. I am different, considerably so since my arrest in 1985.

But restoration--at least restoration in a way that you and I might imagine it--is still a work in progress. They say that the pendulum continues to swing to the right in how the world deals with this issue. We are feared, despised, and rejected more than we are loved, respected, and welcomed. Whenever I start to have a pity party, I am reminded of a friend who reminds me where I have been and what I have become in the past 29 years. He then closes with "Don't let anyone stop what God has been doing." And he's right.

Chapter Seventeen

I Resolve

How many times have you wondered if you'd ever get your life on the right track? How many New Year's resolutions have you made and then discarded as too difficult or not really what you wanted? If you're anything like me, the answer probably is "More times than I can count!"

The start of a new year has traditionally been a time for making promises to self or to others, promises that might have sounded more than possible in the thought process of making them but which grew to become mountains once the resolutions were actually made. In a way, though, resolutions are about beginnings.

On Wednesday, December 9, 1998, I sat in my parole agent's office and signed papers of discharge. I had thought about this event for years and wondered what I would feel like as I walked out the parole office door for the last time. Somehow it seemed to me that life would start fresh again by the simple act of someone saying "Good luck" as the interview finished. But that wasn't the case at all.

When I walked out of that building and got into my car, life was just as I left it a short 30 minutes before, and that

did get me started thinking about a lot of things--resolutions included. This wasn't about starting over or even about long term promises. It was about living as correctly as I could each moment, knowing that I would have good days and not-so-good days. It was about reminding myself that I was not the one in charge--God was and is--but that I could choose His way or my own.

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11) The key to the verse comes in understanding that the plans for my life are to be found in the Lord. God knows my heart and He also knows the gifts, talents, and interests I have. He should--they were all given to me by Him.

But I am impatient. The vision I see for myself is one which is completely free of the dark secrets of the past and of the webs of destruction I once helped to spin. This part is good. It's what we all hope to do. But I also want to be farther down the road in my spiritual development, more equipped to handle the stress of daily living than I am. Another good thing. The problem is a matter of timing.

God reminds me in Matthew 6:25 *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than*

clothes? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

Those are hard words for someone like me, a man who has been taught that self-preservation often means being something of a "Unless I'm in control" person. So, when God tells me to have patience and to wait upon His will, I sometimes find myself saying with more force than I should "No, I can't wait." But wait I must if what is to happen in my life is to have any lasting value.

"Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you." (Jeremiah 29:12) Impatient people call upon the Lord quite often but it's usually a selfish, one-way conversation. But do you sense something more in that verse? Do you see the "come and pray to me" part? God calls us to step away from where we are in order to enter into His presence. Jesus did it. *"After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray."* (Mark 6:46)

Some of you are saying that Jesus wasn't locked up and that Jesus was, after all, talking to His Father. I think people on the "outside" sometimes use the same kind of thinking. But the truth is that a cell or wherever you are can be a holy place if you allow it to become so. And remember, the Lord added, "and I will listen to you."

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and

will bring you back from captivity.” (Jeremiah 29:13-14)

One of the problems with resolutions is that so often they are made with a mindset that says, “I can do this. . . I can do this on my own.” If I have learned one thing about myself, it would be to recognize how untrue such a statement of resolve is. Without God I can do nothing.

I can remember times of real frustration in the first days of seeking. Every time I looked at someone I considered to be a holy person, I felt even more distance between God and me. My sins were just too heinous and the damage too devastating to merit a God who would listen to one such as I.

But God blessed me with a hunger for His presence. He showed me over and over how His son, Jesus, had died for all those terrible things I did. He introduced me to the active presence of the Holy Spirit in my everyday living. I’d like to say I don’t know why He did these things, but that wouldn’t be true. My Father in heaven reminded me that I had asked, and He was but answering.

Little by little, day by day, I am being brought back from captivity. Not from the jail cells I occupied but from the prison that was within me. There are days when I struggle to see evidence of the changes I long for, days when I feel I am not the man I am meant to be. But the outstretched hand of the Lord is always there, and a voice within me says, “Take my hand and hold on for eternity.” And in a moment of resolve,

we touch.

Chapter Eighteen

Anger

“Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him. Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord.” (Psalm 4:3-5)

To be right up front, I grew up unsure of how to handle anger. The phrase “Don’t you get angry with *me!*” spoken with deliberate focus but no raise in my mother’s voice, rings easily in my memory whenever my anger surfaces. I am pretty sure I read much more into her statement than she meant it to carry, but what did I know? I was just a kid.

Over the years I have shared a lot of different emotions in these newsletters. I have written about issues that have been raised in the mail I get. But I cannot recall writing about this topic. Is it fear? Is it an uncertainty of what to share? Whatever it is, anger is a valid feeling demanding a valid response and I know that I am not alone in my uncertainty as to how best to approach it.

I once shared the problems many of us have receiving

good things because we somehow feel we have given up the *right* to feel good. After all, that is the underlying theme of community response whenever conversation includes the topic of those with sex-related offenses.

There is also the element of a need to be seen walking around in sackcloth, calling out “Unclean, unclean.” From this comes the notion that registrants are the modern-day lepers. It is not an inaccurate description, at least from the public point of view. A fair description though? Absolutely not! The description portrays offenders as having done nothing to change behaviors or thought patterns. Left unchallenged, offenders become like the mug shots taken immediately following an arrest--portraits that are rarely flattering and certainly not inviting.

At some point, we must be able to put on a garment of praise for it is a garment that “bears the stain of human failing.” And because our sins created the stains, we are *all* called to repent and seek God, not just non-offenders. For it is those things that become the “cleansing agent” for the garments we wear.

I don’t believe that all Christian society denies salvation for registrants, but there might be many who whisper “Well, if it were my decision.” The anger of society is, I think, at its core rightly placed. Of all that we hold dear, children are at the top of the list. To molest them and to betray that sacred trust an

adult has with a child is hard for anyone to accept. When abuse happens, the result is anger, a justifiable anger.

In your anger do not sin

Though it might be difficult to convince some people, there is inappropriate anger directed at registrants, an anger that does not allow for reconciliation or restoration. It is rooted, I believe, in an inability to forgive and fueled by the sin of abuse itself. “If I forgive the offender,” some may reason, “then I am forgetting the harm done to the victim, and that is something I will never do.” Unresolved anger.

I ask myself, “How is holding someone to their sin not sinful on my part?” Yet I know there are people in my past for whom I still have deep resentment. They wronged me, never said they were sorry, and left me to pick up the pieces of myself that they deliberately shattered. When I think about this, I see those who have not forgiven me in a different light, yet the same light. The inability to forgive and to release another from the bond of a sinful behavior is wrong. Period.

When you are on your beds, search your hearts

Without a doubt, those of us who have offended against God’s children should not be asked to deny our own anger, especially if it is justifiable anger. I don’t have to look very far for things that would make my list. Just using issues shared with me in letters, you would see:

- molested as a child (“Who helped me?”)
- absent or abusive parents (“What does love look like?”)
- churches quick to condemn, slow to support (“You cannot be here because of the children who attend.”)
- programs that deny offender childhood trauma (“This isn’t about you. It’s only about your victims.”)
- being ineligible for any parole
- denied halfway houses (“Too close to places where children might congregate”)
- residency restrictions that refuse to account for any possibility of change despite statistics that show low recidivism rates (“If we don’t do something, our city will be a dumping ground for registrants”)
- civil commitment (clearly “Life without parole”)

The list could go on, but the point is simple: Anger that exists must find a healthy resolution.

Search your hearts and be silent

As a child, I was taught “When you get angry, count to ten.” David’s solution was much the same but better, I think, because counting is only an alternative activity, something to do instead of fume. Somehow, I sometimes see God placing a finger to His lips and then going “Shhh.” My mouth opens,

then closes. Silence.

One of the most frustrating aspects of being silent is that I come face to face with a simple truth: I can do nothing to change the heart of another.

I hear a rustling. Could that be those who are shouting “Stand up and fight! Take them to court! Sue!”? I don’t disagree with the notion of righting a wrong, but shouldn’t that kind of action be taken because it is right to take it? Should anger be the foundation of the fight?

All I can tell you is what I feel, and what I feel is that righteous anger does not attack. It resolves. Righteous anger speaks, but it also listens.

I serve on a committee that has been attempting to educate people. Residency restrictions are not a solution nor do they protect anyone, so this committee has been speaking out to any who would listen. We don’t do what we do because we are angry over how offenders have been denied basic rights. We speak out because the restrictions are wrong.

It has been over 30 years since I was released from prison, yet I am subject to the same legislation that is faced by someone released now. Thirty years should count for something and when it doesn’t, I feel angry. When I am silent, though, I wonder about the offender just released. Is it any more just for that person to go through what is happening in many communities than for me to be free of that just because

of thirty years? The point is that the residency restrictions are wrong. I don't have to be angry to know that, and I don't have to be angry to serve on a committee.

***Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself;
the Lord will hear when I call to him***

This is the first verse, but it really is the key. Despite the inequity of many situations, I believe with all my heart that God does hear our plea. How things will be resolved or even if they never get resolved should not alter how we deal with the anger they produce. Anger is a good thing, a motivator. But when we are consumed by anger, it is a most destructive force.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Chapter Nineteen

I am NOT Anxious!

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” (Philippians 4:6)

“Dear Registrant. This is to inform you that as of December 1, your complete address will be listed on the

state's online registrant registry. As a registrant, you are to continue to comply fully by providing all information requested of you by this office. Failure to do so will result in a Class H felony and may result in a prison sentence of up to four years.”

I did not copy the letter I got word for word in this example, but what you have read is pretty much the focus of the letter. The state was telling me that anyone wanting to know where I lived could find my name and address on the Internet.

Do not be anxious about anything

Some of you have been writing to me with fears that this information on the Internet could make it impossible for you in your effort to re-enter society. In every letter, the emotion I sense ranges from deep concern to basic panic mode.

My usual response is an attempt to calm those writers; to tell them that not everyone sits at a computer console looking up names and addresses; and to remind them of God's presence and His loving protection. Of the three, I count the last one as the most important, but I can understand why those I write to might not see any of what I share as being realistic.

Okay, maybe I should be just a little more honest with you. The idea that someone is making a list that might include my name and address does bother me. I have a wife, a family,

a home, and a job. The thought that someone would have so much hate for me that any of those things would be considered fair game for being attacked is not a thought I take lightly.

So am I lying when I respond to the letters I get? Am I answering as I do from a comfort zone of not having had to face what others have faced in more restrictive communities? I don't think I am lying nor is my life a complete comfort zone, yet I will agree that my faith in God is tested at times. Yet God has not let me down so far, and I don't feel that will happen.

Had Paul put a period after "*Do not be anxious about anything*" you and I might easily have wondered about his sanity. But Paul added a comma, and having done so, gave us a significant verse to ponder. He wrote, "*but in everything, by prayer and petition.*"

I know, you must have noticed that Paul still wanted to make sure there were no exceptions because he wrote, "*but in everything.*"

Most of us spend a lot of time in prayer asking God to make our lives better. Some of you might ask Him to move a foul-mouthed cell mate out and replace that person with a Spirit-filled Christian. Others, having a parole board hearing coming up, might ask God to touch the hearts of the board sufficiently to bring about a parole. And what about the situations registrants might face upon release? Lots of prayers

being offered there.

What strikes me about most of my prayers is that they are born of anxiety or fear. I remind myself that each day should be filled with conversations with God; filled with a desire to hear the whisper of His love; and filled with an earnest desire to serve Him in all I do. Some days I do okay, other days not. Anxiety. Fear. They are like trump cards in bridge or a draw to an inside straight in poker.

Paul also seems to make a distinction between prayer and petition, and this makes sense to me. My spiritual advisor likens prayer to being in the presence of God, of sharing and listening. When I think of my advisor, I think of a man who takes to heart the admonition found in Psalm 46:10 where it says, “*Be still and know that I am God!*”

Petition is by definition an act of asking for something, so I think most if not all of us do a lot and I mean a lot of petitioning. Studying the verse, I don't think that Paul favors prayer over petition, just that he says that they are different.

with thanksgiving, present your requests to God

There are two key elements connected with the manner in which we pray. First of all, we are to pray with thanksgiving. On occasion I have thought this meant that whatever I pray for I will get, so I should thank God in advance for giving me what I want. But this idea falls short. For example, if an inmate prays for a release from the parole

board and doesn't get it, what is the point of thanking God ahead of time if release was the only option?

I recently wrote "Prison taught me to praise God not because of the wonderful life I had in prison or because a favor I asked of God was granted. Prison taught me to praise God because God is God and there is none beside Him." As confusing as it might seem to my mortal, very human mind, if I believe in God and in God's love for me, then all prayer should start with thanksgiving.

Second, there is an attitude of relationship in that phrase "*present your requests to God*," for in order to do so, we must approach God. This cannot be done by those who don't know Him, and people without a relationship with the Lord are like thirsty dogs, willing to follow anyone who gives them something to drink, willing to call that one master.

So what has changed?

Just about every month I read of some new restriction placed on registrants in states around the country. Anxiety. I hear on the news about communities adopting legislation that restricts a registrant from living within 2000-2500 feet of a child care, a school, or any place where children normally congregate. Because of this legislation, some communities by that definition are completely off limits and some registrants who have been living quietly and doing what they need to do are being asked to leave. More anxiety.

Some Internet sites offer maps of cities within their state that have stickpins indicating that an offender lives at that location. Click on the stickpin and the offender's name, address, and photograph come up. Even more anxiety.

I believe firmly in change and the ability we all have with the grace of God to set appropriate boundaries and establish effective accountability. If you've read this newsletter before, you will be nodding you head in agreement that I have.

You will also know that I have never suggested that it is my responsibility to change the hearts of others toward me. I am only able to change myself, and on difficult days, I wonder just how effective I have been. But I believe in the kind of man I have been called by God to be, not in the man some say is a little more than a registrant waiting for an opportunity to molest. Again, you've read this before.

The answer

I often include the entire Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr in letters to inmates who are having a difficult time with a host of issues or one particular issue. It goes like this:

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;*

*Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.
Amen.*

Seeking God in all things is the answer whether by prayer or petition but certainly with thanksgiving. Situations might continue to get worse instead of better but none of us can control that. In the end, we are charged with bringing our lives into God's will through surrender and obedience.

Anxiety? Sure, we will all have days that are filled with anxiety, but we can allow it to destroy any hope of peace, or we can acknowledge it, turn it over to the Lord, and believe the words of Romans 8:28: "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*"

Hang in there as this new year begins and be open to what the Lord wants to do in your life. I give thanks to God for the blessing of sharing with you; I pray that all goes well for you wherever you are; and I ask God to fill your life with His healing love and presence. Just remember, All things are

possible with God!

The Process of Change

Chapter Twenty

Change My Heart

“and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors and say, ‘We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly’; and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive. . . then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you.” (1 Kings 8:47-50)

Years ago, I dabbled in writing simple computer programs with my Commodore 64 – a real relic compared to the computers we use today. Though I no longer try to write programs, I remember a command that was pretty simple. It was called the “If – Then” statement. *If* the user of my

program chose a specific option I had included, *then* the program would jump to that part of the coding that matched the user's response and produce the desired result.

When Solomon dedicated the temple, he offered a lengthy prayer as part of the dedication that included “If – Then” statements, choices the Jewish nation could make in terms of their relationship with the Lord. Past history had proven that this stubborn people had frequently turned their backs on God – pretty much like we all do today.

If they have a change of heart

Being arrested, especially for a crime against a child, is a frightening experience because for many of us, a traffic violation was about as serious as crime got. This time, however, the crime meant public exposure, angry and distraught families, neighbors, and church families. There was also a personal desire to erase all those sinful choices as though they had never happened. But they did.

I share this because in my case I think my sorrow at the time of my arrest was not so much because of what happened to all those I had harmed as it was that I wanted my life back. I sometimes thought “If enough people believed my words of contrition, maybe someone would say ‘We believe you. Just don’t do that again.’” God knew I needed to have a change of heart. For my part, I knew that something deep inside me was broken and nothing I had tried before had fixed

that brokenness.

In the land where they are held captive

While in the county jail, it seemed everyone knew my charges. I slept for short periods, usually no more than an hour or two, fearful of what might happen. Eventually I was transferred to the state's prison receiving center and temporarily assigned to a cell in the segregation unit as other units were full. But it was in that small cell surrounded by yelling and cursing that I felt both God's presence and peace. My heart would be changed and though I could not see it at the time, my life would be forever different.

We have sinned, done wrong, acted wickedly

While in prison and separated from the world I had fashioned, the realization of what I had done stopped being about me, about my losses, and my shame. Listening to others in our treatment group, I understood that our stories were very alike – not always in our own backgrounds but in the thinking that brought us to be members of the group. We had all sinned, done serious harm to those who did not deserve it, and lived in the center of wickedness.

Occasionally we each tried to soften the weight of our actions by hinting at victim consent, unusual situations, or even aggressive victims who pursued us. Some quoted "*And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord*

Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:11)

They maintained that the verse condemned any DOC directive to share what was clearly in the past before they were washed, sanctified, and justified. But the choice offered them was clear - participate or be eliminated from the group. No one quit.

By the way, I see that verse as a way of announcing that I am no longer the man I was. Being washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of Jesus meant that I was called to make healthier, God-centered choices. Knowing that I could make those choices did indeed make me a new man.

Turn back to you with all their heart and soul

Those who truly seek God, accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, and believe in the presence of the Holy Spirit, might respond, “I have turned back to God with all my heart and soul.” But I suspect that many of them would follow that statement with “Okay, God. So do your thing. Change me!”

In some ways it is like an if-then statement: “*If* I do my part by surrendering to God, *then* it’s God’s turn.” The result of clicking on a word in a computer program produces an instant result – the result we want. What if when we choose to click on a word we are faced with a response that looks nothing like the result we wanted?

Would we complain to the programmer? “There’s

something wrong with your program,” we might argue. “It didn’t provide the answer I wanted.” Do we, in fact, say the same thing to God? “Lord, I don’t think you heard my prayer right. Your answer looks nothing like what I was asking for. As a matter of fact, I’m not sure I can do what you are asking.”

No everything changes at once. There are no ‘presto-change’ moments. Change is work and it takes time. The word “process” is often used in treatment and few of us like that word. Nothing will come easy.

I would suggest that the same word is at the heart of our relationship with God. Though we have surrendered and do seek Him, the journey is a process. It is one day at a time, growing in trust, believing that we are forgiven and are heirs to the kingdom of God, as well as knowing that at our very core we are changing.

***Then from heaven hear their prayer and their plea,
uphold their cause***

When we see our choices as being the “If” in the “If-Then,” we see God’s part (the ‘then’ part) as being faithful to what He began. Paul wrote “*Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*” (Philippians 1:6)

There are a lot of people, including good Christian people, who do not hold much hope for anyone convicted of a

sex-related offense. They pray for us because it is a Christian thing to do, but I am not so sure that they believe we can change.

If that's the case, then our relationship with God is all the more important because it IS He who believes in us. God helps us change from the inside out. The verse from the song "He who Began a Good Work in You" points out:

*If the struggle you're facing is slowly replacing
Your hope with despair
Or the process is long
And you're losing your song in the night.
You can be sure that the Lord has His hand
on you - safe and secure
He will never abandon you
you are His treasure
And He finds His pleasure in you*

Finally, God will uphold our cause because it is not only just, it is a God-centered cause. With God's grace and our willingness to be His in all things, there will be no more victims.

"I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10)
When we are frustrated or depressed, let us all keep in mind that angels are rejoicing because of us! Our prayer, then, should be "Change my heart, O Lord, make it ever true."

The road we travel is far from easy or smooth, but the destination is worth the focus.

Chapter Twenty-One

Change is Not for Wimps

“Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” (James 4:8,10)

For the past year or so, I have been blessed to be part of a Prison Fellowship bible study team at our county jail. Because I got to lead the study for men from Alpha and Bravo pods last week, I knew that this week we were scheduled to meet with Charlie and Delta pods. We got to the program room and did our usual set up of workbooks and Bibles. Not one came.

After ten minutes, our team leader pushed the intercom button and asked if C-D had been notified. There was a pause and then the announcement “You are supposed to be seeing Gulf pod this evening.” Within a minute, a staff member stopped by the room, spoke to us, and confirmed that four men were indeed waiting for us in Gulf pod.

When we got there, we saw seven men sitting in a straight line, so we rearranged things to create a circle and began the lesson for the week.

I noticed that one of the men was particularly intelligent in his replies and in his knowledge of the Bible. Before closing prayer, he asked if he could say something. What followed was his admission that he was the pastor whose name had been all over local media in the past week or so for sexual assault. He spoke of his sins and the betrayal of those who trusted and loved him. All of us listened. All of us knew what it took for him to share.

Though we left the pod recognizing that there were no errors in where we were meant to be that evening, I did remind myself of the long road ahead for this man. Confession and the admission of guilt presented in a way that clearly showed sorrow is a critical step--but it is the first of many he will have to take in the years ahead.

Come near to God and He will come near to you

That seems like such an easy step but for some it is the most difficult. Raised to believe that sin separates a person from the heart of God, many think “I have crossed a line that should never have been crossed and have caused these little ones to sin. I can’t imagine God wanting anything to do with me.” But the truth is that God desires all come to Him -- especially those who have much need of forgiveness. And if

you think about it, who among us would have been able to cast the first stone at the woman caught in adultery?

Because God is always with us, coming near to God is to consciously choose to set aside whatever barriers are in us. And despite the encouragement of those around us, I think it does take courage to step beyond those barriers to better connect with God.

The greatest battles we face might be those existing within us. The body (the flesh) wants what it wants and can make a convincing argument that it knows best. Years ago, a whole culture was preaching “If it feels good, do it.” A generation of Nike followers preached “Just do it.” Maybe the saying would have been better had it is said “If it feels good and is appropriate and morally correct, do it.” God’s word supports the modified version.

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God.”
(1 Thessalonians 4:3-5)

All I can say is that these words are not for wimps. Just think, though, of the changes we’d experience in our lives by following them.

Wash your hands, you sinners, purify your hearts

A commentary on the letter of James suggests that he

was very aware of his audience. He called them “*you adulterous people,*” “*you sinners,*” and “*enemy of God.*” You and I know the things we have done, the harm we have brought others--especially the young--and our need of forgiveness that comes with saying “Yes, Lord, I am a sinner. Have mercy on me.”

Having said the words, we wash our hands by turning from the actions formed in our darkness; we purify our hearts by choosing to seek all that is worthy to be proclaimed. Have you ever noticed, by the way, that what we do in secret is the last thing we want made known to the world? That alone should say something about sin.

Strange as it may sound, we spend a lot of time and energy building a fondness for our sins, a hunger to serve the flesh. And in this light, we are, as James suggested, “*you double-minded*” – we parade our Christian side to the world while wallowing in the muck and mire of sin in shadows.

I have written many times over the years that the formula “All you have to do is” sounds too simple--because it is. If “All you have to do is” set aside every addictive behavior you spent years developing, then prepare for battle because there will be many battles to be fought. And battles, my friends, are not for wimps.

Battles are fought without knowing the outcome yet trusting God to give strength when the battle we fight is one of

moral righteousness. Should we be surprised, though, when we are wounded in the process? To overcome sin is to decide that what the body wants is not always what God wants. Saying no to the body is to discipline it in the ways it is meant to live and I think it is safe to say that the body is not always going to be happy about that.

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” (Hebrews 12:11)

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up

There was one truth that I learned with my arrest in 1985--I could not continue to be as I was. I *had* to change! That was not merely my focus but also the focus of those who continued to love and support me. None of us, however, knew what to do about someone like me. Thankfully, some knew enough to pray because the work ahead was and continues to be mine and not theirs to do.

The day after my arrest, I was talking with my pastor, listening to his words of encouragement. Left alone for a moment, I found myself on the floor with a deep sense of despair over all that was happening and all I had done to bring on this moment. In my mind's eye, however, I saw God's hand reaching out to me and mine stretching to reach His.

“Rely on me alone.”

Despite all I had done, I felt His presence and all I could do was wonder how God could love someone like me. But God didn't provide any clues about everything that would happen in the years ahead. He just kept reminding me that He was there.

Many years later, I can say that there have been many, many moments and events that clearly bore the stamp of God's love. Some I recognized as they happened but most only as a reflection like "That could not have happened unless God," just as meeting the pastor in county jail could not have happened unless it was of God.

I do stand by the title of this article "Change is Not for Wimps." If we commit ourselves to the journey ahead, we don't get to decide every bend in the road we travel. That takes courage and a willingness to believe that our destination will be the right one. "*Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up.*"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Oaks of Righteousness

"The Lord has anointed me . . . to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of

mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, for the display of his splendor” (Isaiah 61:1, 3).

If ever there were a title difficult to accept, it would be to have someone call us “oaks of righteousness.” It’s difficult because given our past experiences in sin, we might never see ourselves as righteous--period. Improving yes, righteous no.

I answer many letters from individuals who believe that they have no right to be treated with respect. Some even believe that others have the right to cause them physical harm--all because of their offenses against children. They live in an atmosphere where registrants exist at the bottom-most rung of acceptability and have, I think, come to believe that such an opinion is accurate.

While in prison, I heard individuals brag about drug charges or white-collar crime when in fact they were in my group registrant treatment program. Sometimes the lie worked, most times it didn’t. But the interesting point is that they were trading one sin for another because the new sin was more acceptable to other inmates and less dangerous for them. And in the trade, all concept of victim basically disappeared. If the letters I receive are any indication, these conversations and evasions of truth continue to exist.

But change IS possible. Repentance IS possible. Restoration IS possible. None of these things is easily

achieved but they are indeed possible.

Okay, I have now inched my way toward the Scripture chosen for this article. If these things are possible, and I believe they are, then it would be good to look at how we might be making the transformation more difficult than it is.

We must look at the sins we have committed, understand their heinous nature, acknowledge the harm they caused, yet refuse to wear those sins as an identity. It is a wrongfully worn identity that can become a wedge between us and all that God has for us. We cannot accept what we believe we have no right to accept.

a crown of beauty instead of ashes

For a good number of years, I felt like one of those Jesus described as a white-washed sepulcher, clean on the outside yet filled with everything unclean. No matter what I did that was right, the scale upon which I weighed my moral life tipped heavily in favor of my hidden sins.

“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” (James 1.12)

Before my arrest, I read these words but believed my particular sin made me ineligible. My arrest, however, was in some ways like a veil finally being pulled aside so that I could

see what I could not see before. I started to see the man I was born to be.

the oil of gladness instead of mourning

For a very long time after my arrest, I felt that laughing was wrong and feelings of happiness were a betrayal of the repentance others expected of me. I had the impression that others expected me to seek forgiveness, but I was meant to cower in some corner because that was my place. This attitude of accepting the loathing and even physical harm at the hands of others as a consequence of being a child molester fits the description shared by many in their letters.

It just occurred to me to consider the attitude of the thief who had just heard the words “*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*” (Luke 23.43) He was still hanging on the cross, still had not died, and still had to endure more pain. But I can imagine something deep inside him rejoicing though not truly sure why he should feel that way.

Following my arrest and into my time in prison, I was reminded by others of God’s mercy, of salvation won for me by Jesus on the cross, and of the way the Holy Spirit prompted new behaviors in my life. The consequences of my crimes did not disappear. They demanded sober reflection. They still do. The difference, however, is that my sober reflection is balanced with the joy and gladness I find in my

new identity, an identity that does not hide.

a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair

I can remember friends on the unit who attended chapel services with me. Some days they would look at me and say, “I don’t think I want to go to chapel. It’s been a bad week – maybe I’ll feel more like worshiping next week.”

Sin and circumstances can be a garment of despair, a garment that whispers “Why bother. You’re nothing but a sinner who keeps breaking promises. God is probably tired of hearing you recite the same failings anyway, so you might as well skip services.” Too often, we listen to that voice of despair, stay away from times of worship, and then wonder if we will ever feel right again.

The garment of praise, on the other hand, is not a spotless garment but rather one that bears the stain of human failing. It is a garment that we all wear in the best of times and one God understands. Our free will helped create the stains; our repentance and desire to seek God becomes the cleansing agent.

We often enter the sanctuary noticing the others attending. Sometimes we see them with judgment based on our memory of the failings we observed in them during the week. In worship, we hear God’s Word and the message meant for all of us. Little by little, we forget those around us

and approach God's throne with a voice raised and an open heart. The garment that weighed heavily on our shoulders becomes transformed; the spirit within each of us joins the countless multitudes in heaven giving God praise and glory. ***called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, for the display of his splendor***

Living is, forgive me for stating the obvious, a process. No one gets through without staining his or her garment with the mess caused by living and less-than-perfect choices. But isn't the point not that we sin and even sin grievously, but that despite and perhaps because of our sins we continue to seek God? We know that we are God's children; we know that we are heirs to the kingdom.

Each of us, whether in prison or not, has been created uniquely to praise, serve, and be a witness of God's love.

But what of the world?

By the time I got to this point in writing, it became obvious to me that some of you have already started rolling your eyes. Everything I have shared is so spiritual and the world we live in is far from spiritual. The world we live in will deny registrants housing and employment. Churches will close their doors to someone on a state registry for those with sex-related crimes. Ministries will shrug and say, "We really wish we could help but there isn't much we can do."

Somehow this reminds me of the people who decide

against church until “things are better.” And in honesty, isn’t it easier to tackle what we’d call the issues of basic survival first and worry about God things later? That, some of you would remind me, is life.

At the same time, I do get letters from some who have told me that they literally wondered where they would be spending the next evening or where they would get their next meal. They write to say that they are okay and that they continue to trust God to meet their needs. I certainly don’t know how they survive but for their faith. “*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*” (Hebrews 11:1)

They will be called oaks of righteousness

If you are waiting for someone to make the changes you need in your life for you, the effort will always fall short. On the other hand, if you and I are willing to trust God to do what God does best, we will not be disappointed. Life certainly will not look as we think it should. It will be better. Perhaps not in the material sense but in the sense that matters the most.

“And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” (2 Corinthians 9:8)

Chapter Twenty-Three

Whose Fault?

“His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” (John 9:2-3)

I recently received a letter from a man who wrote: “Please discuss the origins of pedophilia.” It was a simple sentence, only six words, but a request that immediately caused me to wonder if I could even come close to answering. It wasn’t that I have no theories of my own as much as the question some might ask, “What makes him such an expert?” going through my mind. I have decided, however, that I do have an opinion. And I make no pretense that my opinion is authoritative or that of an expert.

Dr. Fred Berlin, a recognized expert on pedophilia at Johns Hopkins Hospital, recently wrote that there is much work to be done before the medical world is able to effectively deal with anyone diagnosed as a pedophile. He also suggested that the condition is genetic and probably the result of a physical abnormality in the brain.

The truth is that I really don't want to see the condition be something that is genetic because if that's the case, the medical world will have confirmed for itself that there is no hope. They will proscribe drugs or castration as stop-gap measures, consider civil confinement as a safeguard for communities, and validate the argument that a pedophile has no other choice. "Look at Bob, the pedophile. Such a shame but he really can't help himself."

I am oversimplifying things, I know, and treatment specialists will remind me that I can learn to develop safeguards, but I am not content to live my life with such a diagnosis. Over the years, I have determined to live my life in the manner I feel God created me to live. I have learned that all actions have consequences and mine have created much pain, suffering, and intense anger for my victims. Yet I refuse to believe that I can never be anything better than another abuse waiting to happen to some child.

What I have shared so far are deeply felt beliefs, but they have done little to answer the basic question: How does one become a pedophile or ephhebophile? [A pedophile has a compulsive attraction to prepubescent children; an ephhebophile is attracted to pubescent or post-pubescent children.]

Trauma

A survey I took two years ago of adults who were

molested as children showed that 70.4 % of the 326 respondents themselves molested other children--and most of the abusive behavior mirrored the abuse done to them. Why would anyone who suffered sexual trauma at the hands of an adult even consider abusing children themselves? After all, wouldn't that individual know the pain and suffering such a choice would bring?

The questions are valid. I often think that those who learn that an offender was himself abused tend to assign more and not less weight to their rejection of an offender. Such offenders are even more despised--certainly not better understood--and the history of being abused is read as an attempted excuse or even an act of denying responsibility offered by an offender.

A man who writes me often suggested that men retain the physical pleasure their brains recorded during the time of abuse. Women, he shared, feel the physical pain of molestation, but barring sodomy, boys often become aroused and that adds a dimension of confusion to the act of molestation because the boy receives a mixed message. "How can something be so wrong if my body is saying yes to what is happening?" Being the computer it is, the brain stores that physical response. But it also stores the anxiety and confusion as well as the anger and despair and the resulting development of a victim's sexuality is less than healthy.

We tend to think, however, that trauma is an event only affecting the young, but adults can experience trauma (relational, physical, sexual, or spiritual) and find they cannot have their needs met in the world of adults. This is where I believe the control factor comes in. The individual has no control over another adult or adult situation but is able to control and manipulate children.

Relational Issues

I have written in “When Darkness Isn’t Dark Enough” that adults who offend find an emotional and sometimes physical connection with children that they are not able to find with adults. Children trust. Adults are wary. Some men seek the connection with children that escaped them as children themselves. I have often shared with others that something in me relaxed with I was with teens--almost as though I could stop fighting the perceived rejection I experienced from adults. My teen years were far from perfect and my connection with teens as an adult was an opportunity to correct some of those issues.

Ironically, it was the fact that I was an adult that allowed or encouraged children to connect with me. They were seeking positive affirmation of themselves as well as an intimacy that many of them didn’t know at home from their own parents.

The needy ones thought I was cool, the others thought I was weird and to be avoided. Me? I was clueless as to the effect I had because I was more interested in meeting my needs than theirs. My broken sexuality and the false intimacy I had learned became methods of connection that were both unhealthy and illegal.

Some offenders have shared that they never had an interest in children and wonder themselves how they could have turned to a child for sexual intimacy and control. They describe adult situations that became intolerable in their minds and a growing separation from the adults in their lives. I have noticed that many include a spiritual separation from God during this time of trouble. “God was not there,” they write, “despite my pleas for His presence.” Because they molested, they have been classified as pedophiles and that becomes an added dimension of separation from God. “This condition can’t be changed--not even by God,” they are told. But God can change it!

False Intimacy

Most of those who write me confirm my own experiences when it comes to falsely identifying sexual intimacy with healthy intimacy. The sexual experiences many of us had as children were not isolated events. Besides the physical reaction to any sexual behavior, there was a relational connection that said, “This is what people who love

each other do.” I knew early on that what I was doing or letting others do to me was wrong and not of God’s design. But I also believed that if I said “No,” I would be alone. Better to say, “Yes,” I reasoned, and have something than to say “No” and have nothing.

The significant aspect of what I am sharing is that the behaviors became repetitive and even addictive. With time my choices were determined by past choices rather than logical or moral consideration. When any behavior becomes a first choice, we see that behavior as defining us. The danger then is that we might say, “I don’t know how to make any other choice. This is who I am.”

Eventually we seek help or are forced to seek help. We share the behavior patterns with a professional; that person consults a store of diagnosis considerations; and the therapist pronounces the fatal sentence, “You are a pedophile.” Having made that pronouncement, the ramifications connected to pedophilia are immediately assumed. For many thus sentenced, despair follows.

Hope

There are a host of variations as to how an adult comes to be attracted to children, but I see them pretty much as environmental--byproducts of trauma, a disastrous upbringing, or faulty relationships. None of these excuses the victimization of an innocent child, so please don’t interpret anything I’ve

written to imply that it does.

My own healing process depends upon my willingness to see that there is always something to be changed; some need to be legitimately met. The critical part of sharing this with you is to let you know that I filter everything through God. I can read books or speak to therapists (Christian or non-Christian) knowing that the Lord will help me retain what should be retained and reject what should be rejected.

Hope is what motivates me as a victim, and hope is what motivates me as an offender. *“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”* (Hebrews 11:1) I hope for an increased understanding of what was done to me as well as of what I did to others. I hope to forgive and be forgiven.

How I became a molester is not as important in the final scheme of things as how I will become a healthy man. If my image of self never moves beyond the shame-filled label of molester, then I minimize the power of God, the reality of Jesus and the cross for my salvation, and the presence of the Holy Spirit who is with me in all moments and in all places. I believe that I was created to be a man of God, not a molester. Somewhere along the way I did become one who molested, and now I live each day with hope and trust. My prayer will be that you will walk alongside me as we walk the narrow road of faith. As those of us who share the name molester say,

“No more victims!” And we must include ourselves.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Anyone Got an Eraser?

“Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.” (Romans 8:5)

It could be argued, I suppose, that the true nature of an individual might be defined by the thoughts the individual entertains. For the alcoholic, thoughts of having a drink might start as the mere hint or suggestion in the mind and grow to become an obsession. At some point, it is no longer an issue of “having a drink” so much as it is one of “I *have* to have a drink.”

Over the past few years, I have managed to lose 52 pounds--and yes, I needed to lose 52 pounds. I felt great about that accomplishment, proud that I had said no to unnecessary snacks and yes to healthier foods. My mind was set on achieving the ideal weight for a man of my age, but I not only fell short of that goal, but I have also seen a steady increase in

my weight over recent months.

My meals are well monitored by a loving wife, so the increase cannot really be attributed to what is served at meals. The increase comes because of snacking junk food between meals and not saying no to the offer of a donut or a favorite candy.

Okay, so all I need to do is get back on the diet wagon; all I need to do is say no more often. How tough could that be?

The truth is that the diet by itself might help me lose unwanted weight, but unless there is a change in the way I think, I am dooming myself to ups and downs in body size. This article, however, is not meant to be on weight loss; the article is meant to be a brief discussion on fantasy life. A leap in topics? To some of you, yes, but I think there is a connection, so I'll take that leap.

Living according to sinful nature

Many offenders consider a tempting fantasy about children or memories of past sexual contact with their victims to be proof that such thoughts are part of their nature. The thoughts, they maintain, define who they are.

I have written that the first time an individual chooses to act out a behavior he or she will always have that potential choice to deal with. And to a degree I think it works the same way with fantasy life. Saying yes to an unhealthy or inappropriate fantasy allows that thought to become the

foundation for future fantasy; that fantasy becomes action; the action produces further fantasy; and the cycle is set.

Why would anyone entertain thoughts that are immoral, unethical, or illegal in the first place? The answer must be that there is some need met by that choice, a need great enough to overwhelm the fact that the choice is considered wrong by a clear majority of people. That the thought is wrong is a minor inconvenience to one so addicted.

The first time such an inappropriate choice was made there was usually little doubt that a line had been crossed; promises abounded that the line would not be crossed again. But permission was granted to cross the line and that first experience made that choice an ongoing option. With time and repetition, this inappropriate choice can easily become an addiction and a false solution to filling an unmet need.

Without determining a more appropriate choice by saying no to one that is inappropriate, it is not hard to see where any of us who struggle could eventually “live according to the sinful nature” and focus almost exclusively on gratifying that nature.

Living according to the Spirit

For all of us, not just registrants, living in the Spirit is an act of the will. I personally believe that such a life begins with a surrender of self to God, a willingness to confess and repent of sinful actions and thoughts, and a determination to

seek the presence of God each day.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” (Philippians 4:6) Talk about a verse that seems to be in direct conflict with the subject of inappropriate fantasy! The passage goes on to tell us *“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Boy, that’s what I need!

This is not, however, the act of my saying a simple prayer asking for a clean mind and then expecting God to use some giant eraser to eliminate years of mental dirt and grime buildup. Much as we all would like that to happen, it doesn’t. Nor is it an act of ignoring thoughts that surface at will. It is an act of placing who I am and what I think at the foot of the cross, acknowledging inappropriate thoughts for what they are--inappropriate.

Had I not lost 52 pounds, I would not have known what it felt like to be 52 pounds lighter. But I have experienced that sensation, so my recent decision to return to healthier habits is based on solid ground. It is also, by the way, a spiritual thing because I know that if I allow my body to become too out of shape, I won’t have the strength to continue this ministry.

Likewise, I know what it feels like to go for extended

periods of time without inappropriate fantasy, so when those thoughts do occur, I am not surprised. How else should Satan tempt me but using temptation where I have fallen before?

The solution is to recognize what is happening, bring the Lord into the moment, and then to trust in His protection. Should I hold the thought a moment longer, I ask for forgiveness and the wisdom to know that I can overcome such temptation. Knowing that inappropriate thoughts define who I was and not who I am called to be does help a lot.

Said another way, the temptation to inappropriate fantasy is better attacked by agreeing that it exists, condemning its power to provide an appropriate solution to an unmet need, and thanking God for the wisdom to recognize the darkness for what it is--darkness.

I am going to continue working on the weight issue by facing it head on. And I am going to continue to battle the darkness by seeking to fill my life with light. Don't let anyone tell you that giving in to fantasy means you are forever defeated. Just work on your armor a little more. God will protect you and teach you!

Chapter Twenty-Five

Bought at a Price

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

I have learned that when my total focus is on something negative in me, some behavior I want to avoid, the task becomes more difficult. Such a focus would be like putting my hand in front of my face and then saying “Just ignore that hand. Look somewhere else” without actually moving my hand at all.

I won’t suggest that all I had to do was move my hand away from my face – problem solved – so much as to suggest that deliberately keeping my hand away from my face helped me know it was somewhere else. And knowing my hand was somewhere else allowed me to see and make better and more God-centered choices.

Many who write me share that they cannot forgive themselves. They also share an ongoing struggle with the fantasy of past sins or the fear of future sins of a similar nature. It has occurred to me that the hand of that particular sin occupies a space that blocks any other vision.

It has also occurred to me that as much as we sometimes hate the sins we have committed, the presence of those attractions or temptations makes self-forgiveness

difficult if not impossible. God has forgiven us, but we are hanging on to the very thing we are to reject. For some, the temptation is a reminder that the sin is still embraced. And perhaps some might even think “If God knew I still want this sin, He would withhold His forgiveness.”

***Do you not know that your bodies
are temples of the Holy Spirit***

Anyone who has ever gone to a car dealership and sat in the front seat of a new car will immediately remember that ‘new car’ smell. I do. It was present in the 2001 Saturn I bought and every time I got in the car, that smell reminded me of the car’s newness.

Sadly, it took about two to three weeks before the smell of newness was gone or not noticed. My new car became my car, still new but not getting the attention I gave it in the first weeks.

Recently, three of the men attending the bible study at our county jail announced that they had been baptized the night before. Each had a look in his eyes that spoke a simple truth, “I am new in the Lord.” Their contribution to the study went beyond the ‘dull’ responses often heard to words that sometimes had the edge of excitement. And beyond excitement, I would suggest that they had a hunger for knowledge. After all, they believed that their bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit.

In their baptism, they were submerged in the water of new life, died to their sins, and surfaced feeling that their sins had been washed away. In that moment of being reborn and in the freedom from their past sins they felt, they were able to look without distraction into their spiritual hearts where they knew the King of kings resided.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) Those men rose out of the water with the ‘new scent’ of relationship with Jesus, aware of the Holy Spirit dwelling in them, and alive with the newness of that experience.

The world we live in

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Romans 12:2)

Talk about a challenge! The three newly baptized men were, as some might offer, walking on spiritual air as they returned to their unit. Sadly, they were not returning to a place where everyone would gather around and offer congratulations. No one would be likely to say, “Let’s turn off the TV and all spend some time in God’s word.” Such an offer flies in the face of the world in which we live, a world that is me-centered and not God-centered.

A moment of spiritual connection, an awareness of

God's grace and love despite prison or jail chaos is like the 'new car' smell. We know that we live in a far from perfect place but despite that reality, no one can take away God's presence unless we surrender it.

you are not your own

It is one thing to stand against the attitudes and choices of others, but our strength is more easily weakened when we face our own sinfulness, our temptations, and yes, maybe even our ongoing desires that we know are not of God. It is this last part (still desiring the sin) that makes it so difficult to seek help.

Success as understood by others, I think, is complete victory and complete victory means no more temptations. Of course, those who use this standard use it more for others than for themselves. "Well," they might offer, "I haven't done what you have done. My sins are not as serious." And it is this attitude that makes confession so out of reach, so open to further condemnation and possibly even punishment.

But if we are not our own, if we are truly sons and daughters of the Most High, why do we place more emphasis on the people in this world? Trust me, though, when I say that I am not unaware of the penalties that could be placed on someone by treatment facilitators for such honesty. I am not unaware of the fact that churches might evict a person willing to admit to struggle.

you were bought at a price

Here is the core of my faith: Jesus died for my sins, past, present, and future. There is nothing I have done, said, or thought that isn't covered by the blood of Christ on the cross. And if I spend all my energies looking only at those sins while failing to live in the redemption Jesus bought for me, then Satan holds me in my weaknesses. God, on the other hand, holds me in my strengths – even if I fail to recognize what those strengths might be.

Therefore, honor God with your bodies

I suggested that the men recently baptized had walked on 'spiritual air' and they did in a fashion. By now, however, their prayers might include "God, I wish I could feel like I did at my baptism. I felt clean that evening. Some days I can still smell my sins and what frightens me is that I am getting used to that smell again."

If God has forgiven us our sins, refuses to call us by our sins ("that molester" "that killer" "that drug addict"), then we need to place the hand of God's love and grace in our own faces. We need to respond to life through that filter believing that even in those moments when past sins manage to slip through, God will forgive. God will give us the strength to move forward, and God will continue to call us His loved ones.

We are temples of the Holy Spirit and no one, no

system can take that away unless we refuse to believe it of ourselves. Satan's goal is always to make sin more attractive than being in God's presence. It is a battle we face every day in battles that we often feel we are losing. The 'new smell' of spiritual wholeness is harder to find but it IS there. Remember, we have ALL been bought at a price!

Nearing the End

Chapter Twenty-Six

Restored

“Elisha sent a messenger to say to him [Naaman], ‘Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.’ But Naaman went away angry and said, “I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy.” (2 Kings 5:10-11)

Perhaps one of the most often heard statements about registrants is, “They can't change.” To prove the point, a percentage is usually stated such as “75% of registrants released from prison will reoffend.” That number, by the way,

keeps getting higher and I never see a reference to a specific study justifying its use.

From where I stand, however, the issue of lowering the rate of recidivism or reoffending comes down to two things. First, there must be a desire by others to restore an offender, and secondly, the offender must be willing to go through the process of restoration.

In a recent sermon, my pastor shared a piece of history that had me knowing without a doubt that it would be the basis for an article in this newsletter.

On May 21, 1972, a man attacked one of the most important sculptures in the world with a hammer, the Pieta by Michelangelo. The damage caused by the 15 blows was extensive.

Over the years, literally hundreds of offenders have shared their lives in letters sent to this ministry. Their beginnings could have been compared to the perfection of the Pieta. Each life, however, had been attacked in some way with the bluntness and damaging power of that hammer.

Occasionally, it is a single crisis in life that literally replaces the light in a soul with darkness, but I am inclined to think that more often it is a series of blows that allows individuals to believe that the terrible choices they make are good choices. In the eyes of an observing public, however, the behaviors eventually become an individual's identity because

“It’s just the way he/she is.”

In the case of the Pieta, a panel of experts was called in and the damaged statue was compared to photos of its original. Then in a painstaking fashion over a period of 10 months, the broken parts of the statue were reconstructed. When completed, observers could not find the flaws.

To protect against further damage, the decision was also made to enclose the work of art in a bullet-proof casing. According to officials, the casing is a sign of the times in which we live.

Go wash yourself

In a more perfect world, someone who struggles with age-inappropriate attractions would be able to find help. Trained specialists would gather, do preliminary studies, and then recommend a course of action. Underlying their sense of commitment would be the recognition of that individual’s value as someone priceless and worthy of restoration.

But we live in a very imperfect world, a world in which we refrain from sharing our failings with others--especially failings that do not fit the norm of acceptance. Bill W, for example, found stiff resistance to the notion of publicly acknowledging alcoholism much less having meetings where others with the same problem could meet for support and encouragement. But he persevered and a movement,

Alcoholics Anonymous, was born.

I've known both men and women who have age-inappropriate attractions, have never acted on them, yet felt disclosing those attractions to anyone, including a therapist, would be the end of their career and a justified exclusion from society.

“Go, wash yourself” is not unlike being told “Go, see a therapist.” Sounds pretty simple, but strugglers of age-inappropriate attractions are really no different than the leprous Naaman was in his day. They might hesitate for a different reason, but whatever the reason, the step to healing is not taken.

Naaman does eventually listen to the words of wisdom from his servant and puts aside his pride and preconceived ideas as to how healing should take place. After seven times surfacing from the water, his skin was made clean and he returned to thank Elisha.

Conventional therapy is a long way from understanding age-inappropriate attraction, but there are more theories in place today than 20 years ago. Sadly, I think a lot of people really don't want solutions to be found. It is much easier to hate and confine than treat and support.

I know I have written this in the past, but it bears repeating: victims and offenders alike need to find wholeness, and society does neither any favors by locking the individual

in a victim or offender state of mind. Victims can and do heal. So do offenders. Healing is not forgetting; it is moving through the pain of what happened and finding ways of preventing a repeat of that behavior.

If all a victim hears is “You are a victim. You are forever damaged!” then that child will live an entire life as a damaged victim. And in a way, a society that refuses to address the label itself for either victim or offender destines itself to little change for either, for we often become what others tell us we are.

Then and Now

It is said that one small piece of the Pieta was left out for a period of time and then inserted later as a sign of a completed restoration.

For the registrant given the opportunity to make change, that one piece might be something like the registrant registry--a permanent reminder by the state of an offender's actions. But the registry itself has absolutely no power in protecting children and is, I think, a false blanket of security.

When all is said and done, though, it is my belief that nothing lasting comes without the active presence of God in the process; nothing lasting comes until our neighbors are willing to assist in the process of restoration; and nothing lasting comes until we all believe it is possible.

The Pieta is a wonderful piece of art and recognized as

one of the truly magnificent sculptures of all time. But Jesus didn't die for the Pieta. He died for us. And that makes us infinity more important and more precious in God's eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Define Miracle

“For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” (Matthew 11:21)

“For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day.” (Matthew 11:23)

“It's a miracle!” The phrase was passed from person to person when the parents of a young child undergoing treatment for cancer were told that no trace of the disease could be found in the latest series of tests.

Skeptics hearing of this miracle might politely agree but “It was really the medication and the chemo that cured the child” would be closer to what some might have believed. Still, they reasoned, the child is better so who cares if others think the change is a miracle or not.

I grew up believing that miracles were the kind of thing that happened in the Old Testament (Noah and the flood,

Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, etc) or connected to Jesus healing so many during His time on earth. I also believed and still do believe that people were and are healed when the laws of science said they should not have been. But, in the back of my mind, I always felt miracles were for other people, holier people than I.

For if the miracles that were performed in you

Shortly after my arrest in 1985, friends took me to a charismatic prayer group meeting. Though they had explained what I would see and hear the evening before, I was not really prepared for the experience. Though confused, I wanted to come back the next week and the weeks after that.

The people attending the prayer group were clear in rejecting what I had done but they brought me to the well of God's love. They spoke of healing--not just of the physical but also the emotional and spiritual. Though somewhat skeptical of those who were proclaiming "I feel God is healing someone in the room right now of arthritic pain," I secretly craved hearing the words "I feel God is healing someone in the room right now of sexual addiction." But the words I wanted to hear didn't come.

At the close of one meeting, however, the out of state speaker put his hands on my shoulders, leaned in close and whispered "God is giving me a single word for you. Miracle."

I felt a rush of excitement and quickly shared what was

given me with a friend. She looked at me and asked, “What does that mean for you?” And in that briefest of moments, all the elation I had felt left me like air released from a balloon pricked with a pin. Seeing my despair, she added, “Well, if you don’t know, ask God to tell you.”

Later that day I let my Bible open to whatever page the positioning of my hands encouraged. My eyes immediately fell on “*For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.*”

The word ‘miracle’ was there but my eyes focused on ‘*would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.*’ In that very moment, I saw the miracle God was working. I had been sincerely repenting of what I had done and had surrendered the outcome of my life to God.

For if the miracles that were performed in you

But that was not all. My attention was drawn to the next miracle reference just below the first and this time I connected with the sin, considered the sexual sin of homosexuality. But there was a difference.

The conversation in my heart went like this: “Bob, I am working a miracle in your life and if the people of Sodom had surrendered themselves, that same miracle would have saved their city.”

This was not the message “I feel God is healing

someone right now of sexual addiction” I had prayed to hear, however, because then my prayer had been for a complete cleansing and freedom *all in a single moment*. The miracle God performed in me was different. I had become open to the process of change and had surrendered the control I thought I had in favor of God’s design. Best of all, in that moment I knew I belonged to God!

“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, “The Lord is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him.” (Lamentations 3:22-24)

As I read these verses, in my mind I actually read the words ‘his compassions’ as ‘his miracles.’ *“They are new every morning.”* Perhaps some will argue against such an interpretation, but believing in the light of daily newness, I am not limiting God as to what He can or cannot do.

Surely people will believe

Not every person with a sex-related offense will see the need to change as a priority in his or her life. Not every person will surrender his or her will to the long and difficult process of treatment. And indeed, some will leave prison having changed not at all. But the majority who write to me are on that difficult journey and do want change.

Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth, yet

the Pharisees refused to believe that the miracle came from Jesus. He had, after all, healed the man on the Sabbath. But the man knew. He had sight. Now he could walk about unaided and could, I suppose, find employment that had been denied him in the past. But to the Pharisees, he was still blind.

I was recently blessed with an invitation to speak to a church committee wanting to know what they could do for anyone with a sex-related offense wanting to worship with their faith community. They had already actively sought out information from sources they believed would help them in their decision-making process.

Our meeting did not answer all their questions-- maybe even created some new ones--but there was a willingness to prayerfully consider what I had shared with them. For my part, I learned that some in the church were adamantly opposed to the notion of someone like me attending services there. For them, the example of my life and the lives of others like me made no difference. I was still a child molester.

And if they don't believe

If you are reading this with the hope that you will find your church waiting with open arms for your return, you might be disappointed because I can't paint such a rosy outlook. Some people will never believe in the man or woman you have become, and their disbelief should not diminish your reality. You know where you have been; you understand the

struggle of daily living; and you invite God into that daily journey. In the end, God will welcome you for eternity as one of His good and faithful servants.

No one will ever be able to convince me that God didn't do a miracle in my life. I read letters from saints in prison every day, individuals whose lives are also filled with miracles. For us, the reality of God's love, his miracles, is new every morning--a cause for joy and thanksgiving.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

And I Will Be Clean

“Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.” (Psalm 51:6-7)

A few weeks ago, I saw a commercial advertising cleanser guaranteed to eliminate the most disgusting stains. To prove the point, the advertiser showed viewers scenes of sinks, showers, and toilet bowls literally crusty with incredible layers of filth. A single application of their product, however, removed all traces of dirt, leaving shiny, white surfaces.

Just days after seeing that commercial, I received a few

letters from inmates, and the content of their letters reminded me of that product. Each person shared a deep desire to find freedom from the fantasies that came unwanted, fantasies which stood in the way of change or which might weaken their resolve in some way.

“Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb.” In a very practical sense, truth for the molester is that children do not choose to be sexually molested. They seek protective love, encouragement, and nurturing. What they received from us was a carnal appetite disguised as love and a betrayal of the trust they had a right to expect.

Distorted Truth

There are some who honestly believe that some children are just sexually precocious. This thinking allows them to pursue their desires without feelings of guilt and is a false intimacy. The sexual awareness level between adult and child can never be equal. If there is any truth at all in these situations, it would be that there is a physical pleasure possible, but for the child it will be a pleasure shrouded in confusion, plagued by self-doubt, and sealed with a growing alienation from his or her peers. This is indeed truth, but a very pain-filled truth.

“you taught me wisdom in that secret place.” For many in prison, treatment (SOT, SOTP), chapel services, Bible studies, as well as a forced separation from past, present, and

future victims is the foundation of this wisdom. In my own walk, an ongoing and deepening relationship with God makes the others possible and desirable. Contrary to the opinion some hold that a focus on God is a form of denial, I have found it to be just the opposite. It brings me to accountability within myself and with others.

All of this is prelude to the basic question I was asked in those letters, but it is necessary that I share what I have shared as the foundation for the answer.

The Questions

“What about those unwanted thoughts? Will they ever stop crowding into my life like some unwanted virus?”

Maybe.

I hope that you aren't disappointed with my answer, because even though I wanted to give you a definite and resounding YES, I couldn't do that. It hasn't happened in my life so far nor in the lives of most of those I write. But there has been change, and how I respond to those unwanted images has been a major part of that change.

Every person IS different!

The fact that you and I have molested children does not mean that we did so for the same reasons, although there are similarities. But we do share something critical to this whole issue of thought pattern—there is a cycle to our thoughts and behaviors.

As a simple example, we generally eat when we are hungry and sleep when we are tired but eating and sleeping are common responses that we all share. What people do when they get angry, for example, is not so universal. Some stuff the anger, some react in a responsible fashion, and some fly into an uncontrollable rage. Sheer repetition of any response strengthens the probability of acting in that fashion each time anger is experienced.

For many of us, sexual behavior became our response to all sorts of issues that were in and of themselves non-sexual, much the same, I would guess, as alcohol is used by others as a solution to their problems and issues. Eventually, the choice (sex, alcohol, etc.) takes on a life of its own, demanding fewer and fewer reasons until the behavior itself becomes the goal and not a solution.

What Can You Do?

I am not going to write this in any kind of sequence of importance, nor is this an attempt to replace the work of many far more knowledgeable than myself. What I want to share is what has been working for me, and as they say, use what works for you and discard or set aside the rest.

Self-Identity Is Critical!

How I see and define myself often determines the choices I make when I experience those unwanted thoughts. I know there are clinical definitions for what I have done, but I

have found that saying “I am Bob and I struggle with. . .” is far different than saying, “I am Bob and I am a. . .”

The identity I believe God had for me (and for you) at the moment of my birth did not include a word like “molester.” So, if I have assumed that word as an appropriate description of my being or of who I am, then I can hope for little in the way of change.

If, on the other hand, I see change as focusing on what I am supposed to be as a man, while at the same time recognizing my potential for repeating the evils I have committed, then my choices can be more clearly seen as right or wrong, favoring the new man or relapsing into the behaviors of the old.

What’s Happening?

When assaulted by some image I know is inappropriate, I often ask myself, “What’s this all about?” The question is something of a caution light and gives me that important moment where I think through the choice I am about to make—reject the image or indulge in it. This “moment” will not be very great if one is heavily into addictive behavior patterns.

At one time, my own behaviors were highly addictive, with little time between the experience of a thought and a behavioral response. Experts note that the brain creates chemicals reinforcing behavior with every repetition. While it

might not be possible to eliminate those original chemicals, I have learned that I can override the old by establishing new chemicals. This is, I think, the basis behind behavioral modification.

As mentioned earlier, prison is a forced separation from potential victims for a child molester. Many inmates, me included, felt that the problem of inappropriate attraction to children had disappeared or at least significantly diminished. No live victim, no molestation. But that was the point—there were no children around.

When I made up my mind that I had some serious flaws in my thinking, I became determined to do something about them. One conclusion I came to was that I had to be realistic about inappropriate fantasies. Simply wanting them to disappear did not mean they would.

A New Way?

Some of you have heard this story before, but it set in motion a difference in the way I handled fantasy. At a gathering of relatives, my sister-in-law pointed out that my shoelaces were incorrectly tied—the loops did not fall evenly across the shoe from left to right but hung at an angle. She asked me to tie my shoes and as I did so, she pointed out where I was in “error.” It seemed stupid at first, but I followed her directions and found the loops of each shoelace hanging just as they were meant to hang.

The downside to the whole exercise was that the new process “felt” awkward and even a bit unnatural. I liked the look, however, so I decided to hang in there with the new system. It wasn’t long before tying my shoes the “old” way was just as uncomfortable as the “new” way had been the first time I tried it.

This experiment led to changing the way I did other equally simple tasks. In repetitious actions, I looked to see if there was another way to do the same thing. I learned that many everyday tasks (putting on socks or shoes, for example) were done in the same sequence each time (left- right, right-left, down-up, etc). By reversing the starting direction, I experienced that uncomfortable feeling—at least for a time.

It wasn’t the process of doing something a new way that made a difference, but in order to start the action, I had to think first and then act. Through these exercises, I began to feel some control in my decision-making process and found that this “moment of thought” could be directly applied to how I dealt with fantasy.

The point here is not that the temptations disappear but that there is a definite window of opportunity now existing which allows me to choose, a window that did not seem to exist for me before.

A Positive Approach to Things

I once thought that the way to beat temptation was to

be so busy that I didn't have time for it. Wrong. That system only made me so tired that when I was faced with temptation, I didn't have the strength to withstand it.

My life is busier now than I'd like it to be, but there is a positive energy to what is happening. The boundaries I set are still in place; my relationships with others are appropriate relationships; and my faith in God binds everything together. Prayer IS important in the battle, for communication with God reinforces the image God has of me as well as the direction He wants me to face.

“Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean.” Jesus made forgiveness possible for me and you by His death on the cross. We have been forgiven! What remains is for us to be willing to set aside the old in favor of the new—no matter how difficult that might be. An end to temptation and fantasy? No. A new life? Most definitely, so hang in there and believe that it will happen.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Who Is Going to Believe Me?

“When I get out of prison and try to start over, will there be anyone willing to take a chance on me? Will anyone ever trust me again?”

There are a lot of letters carrying the above theme that cross my desk. Sometimes the individual writing is looking at a release soon while others are praying for God's intervention in the lengthy sentence structure they face. The answer to the question is important, however, and the length of sentence should not make a difference in that answer.

Shortly after my arrest I found myself trying to influence others who knew me, hoping that they would see signs of repentance within my actions or at the very least a sincerity of heart. I wanted them to know that I was sorry, but some of them merely saw my behavior as another attempt at manipulation. Maybe it was. I wanted their love and support.

Word came back to me through others, though, that instead of gaining acceptance, I had antagonized the very people I had hoped to win over. They saw my attempts as unspoken requests to "forget about what I had done" even though I had not said that in so many words.

It's now almost fifteen years later and in looking back over those years I believe I can answer the initial questions: "When I get out of prison and try to start over, will there be anyone willing to take a chance on me? Will anyone ever trust me again?" The answer to both is YES. Having written that, let me put some flesh to the answers.

Rule 1: Rely on God Alone

What took me time to understand was that I was not

included in the original equation. The rule was not “Rely on God and me alone!” A look at my track record back then would have spoken volumes about my inability to make correct choices.

Some people think that to rely on God alone is to “wimp out.” Still others will see such reliance as not accepting personal responsibility for my behavior or of “hiding” behind my faith.

The truth is that God’s will is always correct, yet I must listen for it and be obedient to it. Such obedience can be, at times, the stuff of which champions are made. The last time I looked in the mirror I was not staring at the body of a champion, merely an overweight, battle-scarred veteran who is still in basic training.

When things get tough, however, I am reminded of the most gentle invitation any of us could ever receive. It goes like this: “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*” (Matthew 11:28)

Rule 2: God Trusts You

The theologians will quickly point out that Rule 2 is flawed because of our very nature. While called to choose God, our bodies are drawn toward sin when faced with temptation. I maintain that the mere act of giving us a free will to choose or not choose God, however, is proof that God trusts us.

One difficulty I see is that we measure God's trust by the trust shown to us by others who are not God. Despite knowing some wonderful people, we could not say of any of them "*as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*" (Psalm 103:12) People remember our transgressions just as we will always remember theirs. In the final analysis, the trust of others can never be as complete as God's trust in us.

Rule 3: Let Change Happen

At this point some of you might be sarcastically saying "Duh," and wondering if I have taken leave of my senses. Change like truth, however, is normally only accepted when something inside us agrees with that truth. In other words, if blue is your favorite color and someone suggests that positive change for you requires that your favorite color becomes red, merely saying "Red is now my favorite color" will not produce a positive and lasting change.

Something must happen deep within you that allows blue to be replaced by red. Proof of the replacement will be evident to others when they see red in and around you and the distinct absence of tension that can only result when you are at peace with the choice of red.

For us, the changes we need in our lives are not as simple as choosing red over blue, but the point is that we give ourselves permission to be uncomfortable in the early stages

of change.

For an offender who has used pornography to satisfy relational needs, for example, a healthier choice (seeking conversation, for example) may not feel as satisfying as pornography, especially if the addiction to pornography is strong. The individual might even hear himself say, “Conversation doesn’t work. Give me back my magazines.” Hang in there because God wants you to give them up and because somewhere deep inside, you do want people to believe and trust in you. Your magazines will never give you that.

Rule 4: It All Takes Time

There is a story in Luke, chapter 13, that fits many of us. The vineyard owner, finding a fig tree that was bearing no fruit, ordered that it be dug up so as not to waste good ground. The grounds keeper begged the owner for permission to lavish one more year of special attention on the fig tree. If after his special effort the tree did not bear fruit, then he would dig it out.

There is not much beauty in a branch that has been pruned, yet none of us will bear the fruit we are meant to bear without going through that process. But by faithfulness and daily surrender to the changes God seeks for us, we will bear fruit, and the question “Who is going to believe me?” will not matter.

Chapter Thirty

What Are Your Plans?

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity.” (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

Two dates stand out in my memory: December 12, 1988 and December 12, 1998. It isn't hard to remember that day in 1988 when I walked out of a Milwaukee halfway house just a short two weeks after being granted a parole. As many times as I imagined what going home would be like, there was nothing to match the reality of actually going home.

The future, as far as I could see, was pretty much an empty slate in terms of things like employment. Sitting at the table with my family for meals, watching them do the things that they did every day (but were new to me), and knowing I had a lot to prove made those first days both wonderful and strange and a bit daunting. Ten years later, I shook the hand

of my parole agent following my last visit. Standing outside the probation and parole offices, I found myself wondering “What now?” I was not required to attend any more regular visits with a parole agent but other than that freedom, the rest of my life was the same as it was when I got up that morning.

By 1998, however, I had completed courses in accounting, graduated, and found work--at first two part-time jobs and eventually a full-time job five years later. I had also not only become involved as a member of one of this ministry’s support groups, but I had also become the ministry director.

By 1994 I was speaking at conferences, teaching workshops, and writing a lot. The point I want to make is not that I filled my life with all sorts of activity (though it seemed that way some days) but that I had given God permission to allow His plans for me to become reality. And they did.

I know the plans I have for you .

plans to prosper you and not to harm you

The verses from Jeremiah are a powerful daily reminder that God is in control. When a person doesn’t have a lot in terms of possessions or money, it isn’t hard to believe God is in the business of providing both. God does that but not necessarily in the way of worldly response.

To a registrant in reentry, life looks bleak. No job, nothing that resembles home the way home used to be, and in

most cases little support from family or friends. Every now and then, however, I get a letter from someone in temporary housing who shares that he has the possibility of a job interview that might work. What makes those letters special is the part where they share “And God is taking care of me. I’ll be okay.”

That person is rich because he or she knows what it is to rely on the Lord, to trust completely that things will be well. There are many in the world with large houses, sizeable incomes, and luxuries of all sorts who will never experience that kind of prosperity.

plans to give you hope and a future

I’m not alone in saying that life is far better today than it was while living in the center of emotional, sexual turmoil. “If only I could turn back the clock” is something I hear a lot but that isn’t going to happen. The abuse committed cannot be undone. The wounds for many are very deep and could take a lifetime to heal. But there is hope for victims and offenders alike. There is a future available--for victims a restoration of what was lost and for offenders the permission to move beyond what looked like an inescapable past.

and I will listen to you

God knows my needs and knows what is best for me, but I know that my relationship with God could be a lot better than it is. I don’t talk to God often enough and unless I am in

something of a mini-crisis situation, I tend to listen even less. I don't have God on some storage room shelf for when I need Him, but neither do I consciously include Him in all things. If I believe God is all things to me, why would I not want to do so?

God wants all of us to call on Him, to come into His presence, and to pray/converse with Him. Can any of us say that we give God what He deserves? But God emphasizes a simple truth--if we do those things, He will listen.

When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you

"When you seek me with all your heart" is the difficult part, isn't it. It's those three words--*all your heart*--that separate my efforts from the manner in which God would have me search.

If ever there were people in need of an intimate sense of God's presence, it would be registrants. "Modern day lepers" they call us and in the eyes of many, we are. "Not to be trusted" is the feeling others have about us, and what have we done to earn their trust or regain it, for that matter?

I believe that to start with a focus on how others will accept us or reject us is starting from the wrong direction. We already have God. We have redemption won by the death of Jesus on the cross. And if we have learned anything, we know that we are truly in control of little in life. Seeking God with all our hearts will, I believe, give us a heart to live as we

should, eyes to see Him in all things and situations, and a soul alive with grace. Jesus said “Come, follow me” to those who sought to be His disciples. He also told them that they would need to leave all else behind.

In some ways, registrants don’t have much to leave behind in personal possessions or ambitions, but the directive can also be an encouragement to set aside the old life, the old thought patterns, and the old behavior choices. I think that’s what is meant by “with all your heart.”

***I will be found by you. . . and will bring you
back from captivity***

On occasion I can still remember specific times while sitting alone in my cell that I felt an incredible peace, and with that peace an incredible freedom. The bars, the guards, the institution were a consequence and not a life sentence. The consequences registrants face in society are growing increasingly intense. The response to a registrant in a neighborhood is something I can understand but I know that some take their feelings to the extreme.

I can’t control my neighbors and truthfully, had I never offended, I wonder how I would react to registrants. There are times when I am tempted to think that others should be my first responsibility. That is errant thinking. My first responsibility is to myself, to living as I was called to live, to loving as I was called to love. And 25 years after my arrest, I

can tell you that the walk to true freedom begins with God and ends with God. You will need to surrender, and you'll need to give up what you think should be yours. Whatever you surrender to God, He gives back in blessings a hundred-fold.

Chapter Thirty-One

Be Real-Temptation Is

“When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” (James 1:13-15)

I can recall few experiences more exciting than being caught up in a wave of God-centered praise and worship. Over the years I have had the privilege of attending some wonderful conferences where hundreds of participants began each session with songs and words of praise.

While there is usually a little hesitancy in the first moments or days at these events, there always came a time when I knew I was part of a whole. When that happened, I did

not feel restricted in the presence of other expressions of worship, and I let my voice soar when it wanted to soar or seek its own stillness despite ongoing hymns elevated in joy. In those moments, I was alone, but I was also part of a faith community, a great place to be.

Not long ago, I was with a group of people. Within this group was a man I will call Sam who had recently been released from prison. He shared that he was registered with the state and had just met his parole agent. Sam also spoke of his new church family and what some had been doing to help him in re-entry.

His enthusiasm was infectious, and I thought “Wouldn’t it be great if all those with sex-related offenses would find such support on the outside?” Sadly, few do.

Sensing the attention of others, Sam went on to explain that he had been saved while in prison, that Jesus was his Lord and Savior, and that because of his relationship with Christ, he had been completely set free. As I looked around the room, I saw heads nodding in approval and even heard a few say, “Praise God!”

In that moment, however, I began to feel a little anxious and certainly a little uncomfortable. Red flags started waving in my mind as I listened. I confess here and now that I remember talking to Sam later and all I offered was “Stay in the Lord.” How was that any different from what he had been

sharing with us?

I did not caution him about his risk potential (as I should have done) or about seeking balance in his testimony, a balance that included the need for accountability. A little later, I was asked by a friend “How long before Sam is back in prison?” The fact that we shared the same concern should have been a clear sign that we had a responsibility to Sam. I am sorry to say that we both failed.

A few months later, Sam was revoked though I never learned exactly why. All I knew was that he had stretched the boundaries set for him in such a way as to result in revocation. There was no new offense but that would not have made a difference. It was sufficient to understand that something of the old man in him had resurfaced.

Sam is, unfortunately, not alone. Prison has a way of creating the illusion that certain temptations have disappeared and when that mindset is formed, it is easy to feel “I am no longer tempted.” If there is no temptation, there is no need to be cautious, certainly not about something that doesn’t even exist.

In this part of the country, ice fishing is a big deal and by midwinter, fishermen are driving their cars and trucks onto the ice where they park in front of ice shanties. Every year as winter gives way to hints of spring and thinning ice, there are stories in the paper almost weekly about a car or truck

breaking through ice barely thick enough to support body weight much less that of a vehicle. Because a whole fishing season had been enjoyed without incident, some mistakenly believe it will go on longer than it does. Those who had fallen through the ice had stopped watching for signs that the season was about to end or had ended.

You will be tempted

“No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” (1 Corinthians 10:13) The verse does not say *if* you are tempted; it says *when* you are tempted.

Part of being real with ourselves and with others is not being embarrassed by this simple truth. Yet when someone who cares about us asks “How are you doing?” and we know we are wading in the mud, we have to find a way to avoid saying “Fine.” God’s love for us is never lessened by the fact that we face temptation. Responding as we trained ourselves to respond, though, we don’t see the person asking us the question as God’s representative. And as often happens, fear of being rejected helps make “Fine” the preferred response when it shouldn’t be.

Your own evil desires

I often hear men in prison say, “I will never abuse

another child.” I say the same thing. When we make that statement, however, we are speaking with deep conviction. “No More Victims” might be a catchphrase but it is more than that. It is a promise we make.

But if treatment teaches anything, it is that abuse just doesn’t happen all on its own. Ignoring boundaries and making other unhealthy choices helped set the stage for the possibility of abuse, a possibility that eventually became a reality.

Were the choices Sam made enough to create a new victim? Though I don’t know the answer, it would be fair to say that at least some of his choices were unhealthy; some of his boundaries had been crossed; and in that respect, he jeopardized himself and created potential options for further abuse he should have been avoiding.

After desire has conceived

I think that many of us flirted with death by our choice to wallow in behaviors that became addictions, yet I have never heard any person say, “I have always wanted to be an addict.” One of the best illustrations I have seen is that of a spiral that descends a little at a time, one choice worse than the previous, until there seems no way out of the pit.

Death comes when helping hands are rejected, when a person feels that not even God can help or make a difference. But if you are reading this newsletter, you have come face to

face with your descending spiral of sin choices. And you have learned that God doesn't simply erase your past--He gives you a way to deal with it. He gives you a way to be real because temptation certainly is.

Interestingly, most of the time there is no evident downward spiral and life can look as flat as a straight line. We don't see a gaping hole just waiting to trap us. Though a hole might be there, it can be avoided.

“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”
(Matthew 26:41)

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Bulletin Board

“And if I say to a wicked person, ‘You will surely die,’ but they then turn away from their sin and do what is just and right—if they give back what they took in pledge for a loan, return what they have stolen, follow the decrees that give life, and do no evil—that person will surely live; they will not die. None of the sins that person has committed will be remembered against them. They have done what is just and right; they will surely live.” (Ezekiel 33:14-16)

My fictional town of Crescentville is small enough for

folks to know one another yet large enough that it supports a few successful businesses. There is a small main street with the usual assortment of stores, a pleasant park near the center of the town, and a church that faces the park in the town square.

There is also a large bulletin board on the front lawn of the church. The board does not appear to be of human design and, much to the occasional dismay of those who attend the church, the information posted appears fresh each Monday morning.

This is no ordinary board containing simple announcements of church activities. It is a board that lists various sins by category. Member anxiety stems from the fact that nearly everyone at some point or another has seen his or her name on that board under some specific sin category.

There is only one way that people can have their names removed from the board. They must find someone in the church willing to support and pray for them. Obviously, this means that a named individual basically confesses to another person that the board tells the truth and that he or she needs help to break the bonds of that sin.

Out of shame, some try to ignore the board, but only a handful have lasted more than a few weeks in that kind of denial. Sooner or later, friends in the church approach them

and ask why they are unwilling to receive help. The few too stubborn to resist this final confrontation quietly leave the church.

My story is fictional. If Crescentville exists, I doubt it has a church bulletin board of the kind described above, yet I rather wish that such a board did exist. In this ideal place, people in the church have learned how to admit that they sin, their friends all sin, and if they want help walking away from a particular sin, there is always someone willing to help them.

I want to ask for a little leeway as I continue this story. I want to place a registrant (Mike) in this small town--a man who spent time in prison for his crimes and is now trying to start over.

Mike used his time in prison trying to understand why he did the things he did. A mandated registrant treatment program helped provide understanding in some areas; the many chapel activities he attended took care of the rest. Mike's wife had divorced him and took the family across country.

His room above the garage of an old house at the edge of town was all he could find but it served his purposes. Most important to Mike had been to find a church family, so when a friend told him about Crescentville's small and unusual church, that was where he headed.

It was somewhat of a surprise for Mike to see the

bulletin board on the front lawn of the church. It was even more of a surprise to see his name listed, the only name in a column labeled ‘Child molestation.’

Entering the church, he saw heads turn his way and then just as quickly turn back, huddled conversations taking place on either side of the main aisle. Feeling color come to his cheeks, he slid into an available spot at the end of a pew near the back.

Just before the end of the service, a small group of individuals whose names were on the board stood and asked for prayer partners. Mike stood among them, head bowed, his weight shifting from foot to foot. One by one, others left their pews, approached a standing individual, and went into prayer with that person. Before long, Mike was alone, wondering why he ever thought this church would be able to help him. He thought of sitting down. He thought of leaving. Before he could do either, he became aware of someone standing next to him.

She was at least 80 years old, a face filled with wrinkles formed in both good and bad times. She looked up at him and said, “My name is Alice. When I was a little girl, a neighbor molested me. I wanted him to rot in hell. I wanted to kill him. He took my happiness and I wanted to hate him for as long as I lived.

“When he was arrested, I learned that I was not his

only victim. In the investigation that followed, I also learned he had killed a little girl in another state who threatened to tell on him. The judge sentenced him to life without parole. Her parents wanted him executed.” She paused for a moment before softly adding, “And so did I.”

“I’m an old woman now and I have decided the time for my sadness cannot end unless I will it to end. When I saw your name and your sin on the bulletin board today, I knew God was telling me to stop hating. And here you are. And here I am standing next to you. Who would have thought that such a thing would even be possible?”

In that moment, Mike felt his knees go weak; a wave of some deep emotion passing through him as she gently invited him to sit beside her. “Why don’t we start with a prayer?”

Offenders in prison will read this story and call it a dream, a fantasy that will never happen. Readers not in prison might agree with the idea of reconciliation for registrants but would disagree with the idea of a victim serving an offender in the manner Alice did. What victims are encouraged to have is a healthy hate for those who molested them. Given the trauma victims endure, such a hate would be understandable, but it will, I think, do little for them in terms of healing.

The opening verses from Ezekiel are a ray of hope for those of us who have molested. He wrote, “*And if I say to the*

wicked man, 'You will surely die,' but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right- if he gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live; he will not die."

In my story, Mike is just such a man. He turned from his sin and did all that was expected of him and more. His prison sentence behind him, he went out of his way to seek reconciliation and restoration; he stood with the others who were willing to stand, admitting by this action the truth posted on the bulletin board. He could have sought a church in another town, a church without such a bulletin board. But he didn't.

Alice didn't have to say yes to God's prompting. The hate she bore her offender and all offenders could have been preserved and others would not have thought any the less of her for that. Yet when no others showed a willingness to approach Mike for prayer, she knew that she must.

Ezekiel wrote, "*None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him*" and this is hard to understand. Surely every time Alice looks at Mike, she will be reminded of the abuse that happened to her. She will be reminded that her offender molested others as well. And she certainly might wonder if Mike will molest again.

I don't think it comes down to the idea of

remembering versus forgetting as we generally understand those words. I can easily remember, for example, the first time I was molested and that was fifty-two years ago. What I believe remembering means is that the memory itself of what someone has done should not be used to hold that person in the same condition or in that same point of time in history.

Remembering should not be used to deny any sinner the forgiveness won by Christ's death on the cross. Remembering also means encouraging God's healing in the lives of others (and ourselves as well) to move beyond those past actions and into choices that bring God honor and glory.

The story as I have shared it is far from over. This was meant to be but one moment of sharing that will either continue in its healing potential or die based on fear of what might happen. If the relationship continues, the journey Alice and Mike make will not always be easy but when centered on God it will always be blessed.

The story also echoes a deep desire I have for the church, because the church is sorely tempted to look like the secular world. And when it looks like the secular world, the church is lessened and will eventually cease to draw a flock in search of a shepherd. We all, sinners and saints alike, are children of God, and few of us have no need of restoration. We all need to pray, "Lord, forgive me for my sins. Have mercy on me!" And God will and He does.



Resources

Booklets written by Bob Van Domelen:

Darkness Now Light Testimony

Prison and Homosexuality

When Darkness Isn't Dark Enough: A Discussion

The Church, Sex Offenders, and Reconciliation

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Broken Yoke Ministries

PO Box 5824

De Pere, WI 54115-5824

Website

<http://www.brokenyoke.org> (Broken Yoke Ministries)

Email

Bob@brokenyoke.org

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