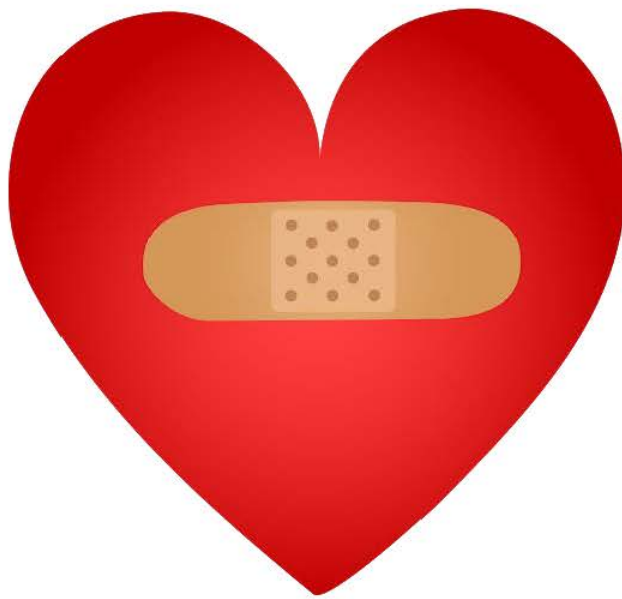


Finding Restoration



Danielle Carter

Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural references are from the *New King James Version* of the Bible.

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. Psalm 147:3

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Welcome!

This little booklet was written during a season of deep brokenness after a time of great failure. It combines Scripture and story, my story. I share it with the hope that you may find some measure of help or comfort through it.

If this booklet has come into your hands, maybe you also have been through a time of failure, a time when you did things you never thought you would do, and now you are living with the fallout from bad decisions and find yourself trying to move on with a life that has been devastated. This has been my journey.

With great confidence I can tell you that there is hope for full restoration. The process is painful and not as quick as I would have chosen it to be. But there is exquisite fellowship with Jesus all along the way — if you will allow it.

Maybe this will be the beginning of restoration for you. Welcome to the journey...

Temptation and Sin

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. James 1:14-15

Each one. Nobody is exempt from temptation. It may come in a different form to you than it does to me, but we will all experience its alluring power. The goal of temptation is to lead us into sin, but before it can succeed, it must first draw us away — from our spiritual moorings, from our convictions, from our fear of the Lord, from the fear of consequences. The longer we ponder and meditate on a temptation, the more its power to ensnare us is multiplied. Our arguments against it and resistance to it are weakened little by little. Every consideration and justification strengthens its power to deceive us.

The wording in the opening Bible passage gives the imagery of a fishing lure. That sparkly, shiny thing bobbing in the water is intended to catch the attention of the fish, who, desiring a good meal, is enticed by the lure. It looks like a tasty little morsel that will satisfy its appetite. But what the fish cannot see is that hidden beneath the sparkle is a hook that is waiting to ensnare it and bring it to its death. This is the picture James gave us of temptation.

The starting place of sin is a desire already resident in us which causes the temptation to be attractive to us. A temptation can only be effective in our life if there is a desire in us for the particular gratification that is promised by indulging in it. It must hold forth the potential of satisfying some unmet need in our life. But know this: sin always brings consequences. James goes on to tell us this at the end of verse 15: “*and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death*”.

~~ *My Story* ~~

My own story of temptation and failure began with a very good and noble thing — a desire to help others. I read passages in the Bible such as Isaiah 61, Matthew 25:31-40 and many other places where, by word and deed, Jesus taught us to extend the love of God and the hope of Christ to those who were bound and hopeless. Having been set free from addiction in my own life by

the power of God, I longed to see others free as well. I invested time, money, prayer and love into people who were in the most desperate places in life. I wanted to honor God by loving these people for Him and seeing their lives changed. But somewhere along the way there was a shiny little bait dangled over my life and I bit into it. I began to assume an unhealthy sense of responsibility for these people, going to extreme lengths to extract them from the trouble brought on by their addictions and bad choices. Because I had let my life become so overly connected with theirs, I disregarded the wisdom of not engaging alone in ministry to the opposite sex, justifying my actions because I couldn't find others willing to get into the trenches of these mangled lives with me. And so, after a season of having my life totally entangled in such ministry (to the detriment of my own spiritual life), I found myself caught off guard, and one careless moment sparked a season of sin, a destructive relationship that lasted almost a year.

The temptation that hooked me didn't come in the form of a bad thing. It was shiny, sparkly and holy looking. It deceived me by convincing me that I could accomplish this good thing for God in a way that was outside of God's prescribed order. It promised great things, but deceived me and brought me to a place of shame, humiliation and great loss.

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"Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren." James 1:16

Sin is deceitful, making promises it can't keep. It entices us with the hope of pleasure yet leaves us empty and unfulfilled, guilt-ridden and ashamed.

We were created by God to find all of our satisfaction in Him. Sin deceives us into thinking that there is another way to find true satisfaction apart from God and His ways. It's a lie as old as the Garden of Eden, when the serpent convinced Eve that God was holding back something that was good for her. She thought her disobedience to His command would bring her a pleasure that God was withholding from her. The consequences were devastating to her, her family, and the entire human race. Sin brings forth death. So James warns us not to be deceived into thinking that there is a way that is better than God's way. Whatever need we have in our life, it will be met by God, in His timing, in a way that is healthy and holy.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. James 1:17

Do you have a need that remains unmet? Do you have a desire that remains unsatisfied? I would urge you to content yourself in the Lord's goodness and His perfect timing. We are on dangerous ground when we are unwilling to wait. We have an enemy who is all too willing to dangle his shiny, sparkly bait of immediate gratification before us, hoping we will bite. Many fall prey to the call of temptation merely because they are tired of waiting on God's provision and decide to take things into their own hands.

Have you ever heard the testimony of someone who turned to drugs or adultery or some other variety of sin in a moment of weakness? Have you ever heard them say that it was worth it? Anybody? No. Me either. But what you will hear repeatedly is that, if they had known where sin would take them and what it would cost them, they would never have given in to temptation. If they had seen the end at the beginning, they would have run for their lives.

I listened to a sermon many years ago preached by Dr. Michael Brown entitled "Acharit – the final end". The preacher told the story of a married man who, in a moment of temptation, agreed to meet a woman at a motel for an illicit encounter. However, when he arrived he found not just the woman, but several men waiting for him. They tied him up, made a ransom demand to his wife, and tortured him brutally for days as the ransom was being raised. The man did not survive. If he had realized what it would cost him to yield to this temptation, he would never have consented. It is the same with me. Had I only realized the impact of yielding to temptation, I would have resisted with all my might.

I never would have believed that I was vulnerable to such a temptation, but I now live with the awareness that no one is exempt from the possibility of falling prey to temptation.

Acknowledge Your Sin

Jeremiah 2:35 Yet you say, 'Because I am innocent, Surely His anger shall turn from me.' Behold, I will plead My case against you, Because you say, 'I have not sinned.'

These words were spoken through the prophet Jeremiah to a people who continually resorted to idolatry. They worshiped the pagan deities, but in time of trouble called out to Yahweh, refusing though to acknowledge that they had done anything wrong. The Lord was calling out to His people to return to Him. He was prepared to be merciful to them. But He had a requirement of them:

Jeremiah 3:12-13 "Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: 'Return, backsliding Israel,' says the LORD; 'I will not cause My anger to fall on you. For I am merciful,' says the LORD; 'I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God, and have scattered your charms to alien deities under every green tree, and you have not obeyed My voice,' says the LORD.

“Acknowledge your iniquity.” That’s all He wanted from them...just to admit that they were wrong. He promised that there would be mercy for them if they would just admit their wrong. But they wouldn’t. They followed their own desires and convinced themselves that this was right. How often have you heard someone give this advice: “Follow your heart”? It sounds good on the surface but it is contrary to the ways of God.

They wanted to follow their own desires without anyone telling them they were wrong and they didn’t want to listen to a God Who made them accountable for their actions. And because they refused to acknowledge their sin, it was not possible that they could receive His mercy.

~~My Story~~

When the Lord brought me out of this sinful and destructive relationship, I had no difficulty admitting that I had sinned. But a friend confronted me with the fact that there was an unacknowledged root of sin that lay within my heart

– idolatry. I was shocked that she would say such a thing, and I absolutely disagreed with her analysis of the situation. Pride rose up in my heart as I huffed and puffed internally over the thought that I would be accused of idolatry. In an attempt to justify myself I looked up the word idolatry for proof that I was innocent.

Idolatry - the worship of a physical object as a god; extreme admiration, love, or reverence for something or someone.

In other words, it is making God second place to someone or something else.

There in black and white, I was exposed as guilty. I had compromised my values and beliefs, given up ministry that had been entrusted to me by God, forsaken intimate fellowship with God, and focused my life and energies on that which was destroying me daily. Idolatry.

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It is a humbling thing to admit that you are wrong. But if we are to be raised up in the resurrection life of Jesus, we must first be humbled in the dust by the acknowledgement of what we really are. Sinful. Rebellious. Idolatrous.

Let the Lord deal with your life. Let Him search you thoroughly — every corner of your soul —and as He shows you what He has found, simply agree with Him. If your life has been stained by your failure to walk in His ways, run to Him and confess it. Admit it. All of it. You are wrong. You have sinned. You failed horribly. He already knows, and He's only waiting for you to acknowledge it so that He might flood your life with mercy.

You Did it to Yourself

During the first few weeks of this time of restoration, I had begun reading through the book of Jeremiah. The people were so very rebellious. God kept warning them through His prophet that there would be serious consequences if they didn't hear and obey his warnings, yet they continued right on in their disobedience. Then, when bad things began happening they would complain about their difficulties before God. As I saw this scene played out multiple times in this book of the Bible, I spoke back to these hardheaded people who refused to listen to God's warnings and said in frustration, "You did it to yourself."

~~ *My Story* ~~

As those words hung in the air I realized that this was true of me as well. My life was in chaos, and I could blame it on no one but me. Many had warned me that I was taking a wrong path and that it would end badly, but when I weighed all available options, I determined that it would be less painful to continue the relationship than to end it. I was wrong. The downward spiral was swift and destructive, leaving me emotionally and spiritually devastated. When I cried out to the Lord from this broken place, He was merciful to hear my cry and begin the process of repairing the things I had destroyed. As I surveyed my mangled life, I could only say, "I did it to myself."

I could have blamed others who had played a role in my plunge into waywardness. I could have found many reasons to wallow in self-pity. I could have hidden behind many excuses as a justification for my actions. But part of my healing was to realize that I was responsible for my bad choices. Just me. It was a bitter pill to swallow. It would have been so much easier to see myself in the role of victim and not culprit, but I had to face the raw truth. I had to do it. You will too. It's part of the process.

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Graves of Craving

“Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: “Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!” Number 11:4-6

God miraculously brought Israel out of Egyptian slavery, but they now found the provision of the Lord unsatisfactory. The Lord had been faithful to feed them day by day with manna. But they didn’t want the manna. They wanted meat. They remembered the foods they ate in Egypt and longed to be satisfied with those things again. It seems that they had forgotten that, whatever good things they may have experienced in Egypt, it was at the cost of their freedom.

They were discontent with the provision of the Lord, and they murmured and complained against Him. So he let them have what they wanted, but it came at a high price:

“But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was aroused against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague. So he called the name of that place Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving.” Numbers 11:33-34

Be very careful that you don’t look back with cravings for those things that the Lord has brought you out of. When you begin to meditate on the benefits you believed you enjoyed while you were a slave to sin, you can be sure that your memories will be distorted and incomplete. You may remember the drug induced euphoria, but forget completely the times you almost died from an overdose. What about that sinful relationship you continued in because you wanted to be loved — do you remember how dirty you always felt? And do you remember the strife that was in your heart and life continually in because things were out of order? Don’t forget what your sin cost you. Don’t forget the sorrow and pain it brought into your life. Don’t forget how it wrecked relationships with people you loved. And most of all, don’t forget how it

disrupted your relationship with God. So if you're tempted to look back longingly at the leeks and garlic of Egypt, don't forget the whips and chains.

~~ *My Story* ~~

When the relationship ended, the real struggle began. When I thought of the suffering he was enduring because of addiction-related issues, my heart broke. I wanted to rescue him, or at least just make sure he was okay. Moment by moment I had to resist the urge to go see him. Who else was going to help him if I didn't? I knew that continuing to entertain these thoughts would bring me to a place of weakness that would put me in danger of returning. So even though it hurt, I made myself remember the lies, the betrayals, the broken promises, and the continual chaos that his addiction brought into my life. But what always sealed the deal for me was remembering what it had cost me in my walk with God. I was not willing to pay that price again. Ever.

I remember hearing someone make this statement: "Don't give up what you want most for what you want now." It was a reminder to me that the craving in the present moment would eventually subside. So I fought it as best I could. I had a precious friend who would pray with me, who listened to my eruptions of feelings and emotions, and encouraged me continually to seek the Lord for complete deliverance. So I prayed a lot. And I cried a lot. And I hurt a lot. Sometimes the significant victory was just getting from one moment to the next without giving in. But eventually, it did get easier. The unhealthy desires weakened, became less frequent, and finally the pain began to subside.

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Many people, having yielded to the intense cravings of the old life in a moment of weakness, find themselves in graves of craving. Sometimes it may be an actual grave, sin having caused a premature death. More often it is the demise of the vibrancy, excitement and joy of life. It becomes a mere existence, just making it through this day only to have to endure the next one.

In order to walk in freedom from whatever has you in bondage, you must be prepared for a season of suffering. But honestly, whether you pursue freedom or not, you will suffer. It's just a matter of what your suffering will produce. Will it produce a wasted life spent pursuing those things that lead to

your destruction? Or will it produce a transformed life yielded to God? You get to choose.

It Doesn't Always Look Like Deliverance

Acts 27:41 But striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves.

Several verses earlier the other people on the ship had received a word from Paul that everyone would be kept safe and that no one's life would be lost. I would imagine that few, if any, of the people on board the ship believed in Paul's God, though they may have been encouraged by Paul's confidence in his God. But let us imagine for a moment the events that are transpiring in this verse. They know that they are not far away from land but now the ship is stuck, and the fury of the sea is beating against it and smashing it to pieces before their eyes. I can imagine the sound of splintering wood all around, with fragments of the boat flying everywhere. It must have seemed in that moment like certain disaster. But deliverance was not to be found on the boat, so to get them off the boat, the boat had to be destroyed. Deliverance by shipwreck....not our first choice.

It is like the demonized boy in Mark chapter 9 who was so close to his moment of deliverance but thrown into convulsions one last time by the demon that gripped him. In that moment it looked like the boy was dead and that the demon had won. But then Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was free forever.

Sometimes, up until the very moment of deliverance, it doesn't look like deliverance... And then you stand there, bewildered, amazed... delivered.

So don't fear the strength of the waves or the convulsing throes from the enemy. Your deliverance may be only a moment away.

~~ *My Story* ~~

I tried to act like I was okay. My whole life felt out of joint. I felt like everything that had been part of my identity had been stripped from me. I felt absolutely empty and worthless — a failure. I cried more in six months than I probably had for years prior to that. Sorrow was my constant companion,

along with guilt and shame. I wondered if I would ever be happy again. I knew that ending the relationship was the right thing to do. So why did everything feel so horrible? Life seemed very cruel and unfair. Was this to be my new reality?

In the moments of pain and sorrow, it seemed that things would never be any different. All I knew to do was to keep drawing near to Jesus. When I was sad. When I wanted to give up. When I wanted to go to bed and sleep for years. I just kept going to Jesus.

And then it happened. One day I woke up with joy. On that day I was so glad that I hadn't given up somewhere along the way. All those tears, all the pain, all the struggle — it didn't seem like deliverance. But it was all part of the process.

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Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. Psalm 30:5b

The Aftermath

Genesis 45:24 So he (Joseph) sent his brothers away, and they departed; and he said to them, "See that you do not become troubled along the way."

The brothers of Joseph heard news that was too good to believe. Their own brother was ruling Egypt and had forgiven them for their past transgressions against him, which put them in an incredibly privileged position. He had made promises of provision and protection to them and had sent them to bring the entire family to be near him in Egypt. But he knew that once they had left his presence, they would remember the horrible things they had done against him and begin to question the authenticity of his goodness in light of their wretchedness.

God makes us so many promises in His word. He makes these promises with the full knowledge of who we are, what we've done, and what we will do in the future. And knowing all this, He still makes such amazing promises of goodness. If He was only just a little bit good it probably wouldn't be so hard for us to believe that. If He was good to us when we were doing everything right, we probably wouldn't have a hard time believing that. But He said that He'll be good to us even when we haven't done it right, even when we've messed up. We are afraid to trust that anybody could be that good... or that anybody would be that good to us.

When we are in times of intimacy and proximity when all we can see and think of is Jesus, we delight in His goodness, but He knows that once we have to return to the demands and cares of this life, as our minds engage in other things, the sweetness of that fellowship will begin to fade, and each fleshly misstep will become a reason to doubt that He still intends to be good to us. Those very doubts can keep us from drawing near, near to the very place where we need to come so that we can receive fresh assurances of His love and kindness.

~~ *My Story* ~~

It took a while before I felt like I was able to come before the Lord and be open and vulnerable. I lived under a cloud of guilt and shame. I was afraid of

feeling rejected in His presence. I was afraid that I would sense His displeasure with my life....with me. I believed that He was good, merciful and kind, but my betrayal made it difficult for me to believe that He could possibly be any of those things to me. He would repeatedly send me reminders of His love for me, sometimes through another believer, sometimes through the Scriptures. And oh those moments were sweet! But then, sometime later, I would remember what I had done and question the possibility of being accepted and loved by Him. How could He still love me? All my theological understanding of the love and mercy of God couldn't comfort me. I would cry to Him from an anguished heart – feeling distant from the One I wanted and needed most. But He wasn't willing to leave me in that place. And so He made sure that He reaffirmed His love for me as many times as I needed it. Finally the day came when I found myself in a settled place regarding His love. I don't know how it happened. I can't give you the three-step plan. He just kept loving me until I was thoroughly convinced of His love for me.

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And so, like Joseph, I believe He would say to us, “Don't become troubled along the way”. Don't forget that even when we knew better and sinned anyway, He was waiting to deliver us and be merciful to us. When you are tempted to wonder if He can still care for you at all after what you've done, remember this — the shepherd who left the ninety-nine sheep to go after the one that had wandered off, when he had recovered it, rejoiced over that one sheep more than the ninety-nine. If you have strayed, know this — He is so happy that you are back.

The Safe Place

Recently I watched as a large bird was flying over a body of water, so close to the water that it seemed to be barely above it at times. This bird was on a mission, searching for its next meal. The intended victim would be a fish that was swimming close to the surface and easy to snatch up. The bird couldn't go into the fish's environment, so it had to wait until the fish was close enough to the bird's own environment. And the unsuspecting fish, hanging out in the shallows, became dinner.

~~ *My Story* ~~

As I shared earlier, one of the major factors contributing to my downfall was a life extremely distracted by ministry. I was giving of myself almost continually to people in crisis and my personal spiritual life suffered for it. I substituted ministry for intimacy with God. Bible reading and meditation on the Word were given minimal time, and my prayer life was reduced to what I could squeeze in between the needs of people. My life drifted further and further from the deep pursuit of God, and I didn't even know it. I left the safety of the secret place of the Most High.

Finding my way back to the secret place was the beginning of my restoration. While there were definitely practical matters that needed to be handled, the most important thing was reestablishing my spiritual life. Without that as a priority, I wouldn't have had the strength I needed in the weeks and months to come. I unplugged from various forms of media that I had used as a distraction, cleared my calendar of every non-necessary thing, and sought God. I poured out my heart, with tears and groans. I spent large amounts of time reading the Bible, listening for His voice. I needed Him desperately — and He was faithful to come to my rescue. Day by day, step by step, I began walking with Him again.

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Shallow living is dangerous for the fish in water and the Christian on earth. We have an enemy who walks about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may

devour. The devil may not devour the believer who is safely abiding in Christ. But the believer who plays around in the shallows of this life rather than plunging deeply into intimacy with the Savior, makes himself an easy target as he lives his life on the fence called compromise. He carelessly ventures so close to the enemy's environment that the devil is able to snatch him up in an unsuspecting moment. He then finds himself captive to some sin or other, never knowing he has been so vulnerable until he has been caught.

Go deep in God, believer. And then go deeper still. This is your safe place.

Spiritual Amputation

Some time ago I watched a short biographical video on FaceBook on reggae musician Bob Marley. At 32 he was diagnosed with malignant cancer under his toenail. He refused to get his toe amputated and the cancer spread to his brain and he died 4 years later. Something that was easily treatable ending up killing him. Refusing to deal with it in the beginning, he lost his life to it in the end.

I have seen this same scenario play out in both my own spiritual life and that of others. There is a diagnosis of sin, an area of the heart or life that has become infected. There is now the opportunity to deal with it, confess it, repent and be cleansed of it. But if it is dismissed as being insignificant — if it isn't fully dealt with — it will grow and spread its corruption throughout the life.

Here is what Jesus said:

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. Matthew 5:30

~~ My Story ~~

As I look back, there were times prior to my descent into sin that the Lord sent someone to warn me that I was headed down a dangerous path. I was definitely making some unwise decisions at this point, but there was nothing overtly sinful in anything I was doing. So I ignored the warnings. If I had only heeded those early warnings, I would have saved myself so much heartache. I was unwilling to separate myself voluntarily from those I was “helping” until the situation became a crisis and a painful amputation was required.

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Sin is a serious thing and has serious consequences. We cannot afford to ignore it, no matter how trivial it may seem to us. It is certain that though it may start small, the coddled sin will not remain small. Small compromises can begin a downward spiral that leads us into sins that we never dreamed we

would commit. Whatever the sin you have allowed to remain in your life, it is time to unsheathe the spiritual knife and amputate it. It might just save your life.

Making Friends with the Enemy

1 Kings 20:32 So they wore sackcloth around their waists and put ropes around their heads, and came to the king of Israel and said, "Your servant Ben-Hadad says, 'Please let me live.' " And he said, "Is he still alive? He is my brother."

It seemed that Ahab had forgotten that only moments ago Ben-Hadad was threatening to take all his possessions and wipe Samaria off the map. Now that Ben-Hadad's army had been defeated, in fear for his life, he was looking for mercy from Ahab. The Lord had granted such a mighty victory over the Syrians who had mocked Him by saying He was God of the hills but not of the valleys. He showed them He was God of everywhere. And now Ahab made peace with the Syrian king. God sent a prophet to Ahab with a message of judgment.

1 Kings 20:42 Then he said to him, "Thus says the LORD: 'Because you have let slip out of your hand a man whom I appointed to utter destruction, therefore your life shall go for his life, and your people for his people.' "

Three years later Syria again assembled for war against Israel and the word of the Lord was fulfilled as Ahab died in the battle at the hand of the Syrians.

~~ My Story ~~

Having finally discontinued the relationship, I went through many difficult weeks of sorrow and pain. After about two months I began to feel like I might actually make it through this, until the sparkly bait was dangled in front of my life again...

He contacted me, once again in a place of need. It seemed that there was nobody else to help him, and I felt that if I didn't do something, that he would be in danger. So against my better judgement, I resumed a friendship with him to help him through another difficult time. He said all the right things, apologizing for the terrible things he had done before. He seemed to be finished with the drugs and wanting to make a fresh start; he just needed a little help, a little friendship. I wanted so badly for him to make it, and it seemed, once again, that I was the only one willing to help him. For weeks I

invested time and energy into helping him get stable, only to discover that he had returned again to the drugs. That day was finally the end and I began to cut all remaining ties. However, this episode was a huge setback for me.

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We are told to pluck out our eye and cut off our hand in our ruthlessness against sin in our lives. We must not make provision for the flesh by what (or who) we allow in. That which leads us into sin (and which consequently interrupts our fellowship with God) is an enemy. It must be treated as such. In the case of people, we must never hate them or reject them. But not everyone is what they appear to be, and not everyone should be allowed open access to our lives. We must use discernment lest we be led away by misplaced mercy and the cost be greater than we imagined.

We cannot come into agreement with that which steals our life in God.

Don't Make it Easy for the Enemy

“And when Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come, and that his purpose was to make war against Jerusalem, he consulted with his leaders and commanders to stop the water from the springs which were outside the city, and they helped him. Thus many people gathered together who stopped all the springs and the brook that ran through the land, saying, ‘Why should the kings of Assyria come and find much water?’ 2 Chronicles 32:2-4

There is no question as to whether or not the enemy is coming. The Bible tells us that he goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). He comes against our life not just to annoy us but to destroy us. He comes to make war against our lives and often we ourselves are found to be his greatest allies. When our lives are in spiritual disarray and compromises with sin are tolerated, it is as though we have spread out a welcome mat for the enemy and provided weapons for him to use against us.

~~ My Story ~~

It was tempting to hang onto things from the past — pictures, letters, sentimental mementoes. However, as I let the Lord guide me through the process of restoration, He began touching on those things. And so I began discarding things, deleting things, and removing from my life whatever might cause me to be weakened. It wasn't easy. There were some things that I desired to keep for sentimental reasons, but those desires themselves were a strong indication that they had to go. I knew that I needed to take this process seriously. Failure to be obedient to the Lord in this would be an indication that I was still keeping the door open for a possible return.

There was a period of time that the Lord seemed to protect me from any outside temptations to return again to compromise. I sought Him in prayer, I read my Bible with an ear open to heaven, and I reestablished friendships that had been cut off. I went to church as often as I could — I knew I needed the body of Christ. The Lord used these things to build strength back into my life — because eventually the temptation did come again. But this time everything that the enemy had used against me to cause my downfall had been dismantled. It was not without many tears and great pain, but by the grace of God, I was able to resist.

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Fortify your life against the enemy....live close to Jesus, abiding in the secret place of His Presence. Ask the Lord to give you a love for holiness of life and watch as the springs of sin are dried up. When the enemy comes to attack your life, let there not be a drop of water or a crumb of food that would help him sustain his assault.

Merciful to the End

In the final chapter of 2 Chronicles, the people, priests and leaders had progressed to such a place of idolatry, corruption and hardness of heart that the Lord had to send judgment and they were brought into captivity in Babylon. The temple was burned down, the wall of Jerusalem was broken down and the people were carried away. It seemed like the end. Everything had been destroyed. But the last few verses of the book record the proclamation of Cyrus, King of Persia, for the rebuilding of the city.

The people deserved for it to be the end. They had ignored a multitude of prophetic messages sent to them by God, warning them of the outcome of their course of action. They were without excuse. They willfully continued to sin, being fully aware of the promised consequences. They deserved that everything be torn down much sooner than it actually happened. They deserved to be defeated and taken captive by their enemies. They deserved to be removed from their land. But even after all the backsliding, idolatry, and faithlessness of Israel, God did not leave them without hope in their darkest time. Even as he commenced judgement, there was an announcement of mercy to follow.

This is the heart of God, and it is beautiful. Even when we have done everything wrong, not out of ignorance, but out of rebellion, He is still willing to show mercy. If your life is in shambles today because of your own choices, there is good news for you. God is willing to be merciful to you. He is willing to release you from your captivity and bring you back to a good land. If you refuse His offer of mercy He will allow you to continue in your rebellious path of sin. But why? Why would you want to do that? All that has been destroyed and torn down in your life, He will rebuild. Those things the enemy has taken from you, He will restore. Keep running if you choose. He still waits to be merciful. He is merciful to the end.

Better than we Expected

But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'" "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" "But the father said to his servants, "Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" And they began to be merry. Luke 15:17-24

This son is exactly like us. He walked away from all the goodness of his father to pursue his sin. And when he hit bottom and wanted to return, he knew he didn't deserve anything from his father. He wouldn't even ask. But the father, joyful at the return of his son, was pleased to give him the robe, the ring, and the sandals, and to throw a party to celebrate his return.

~~ My Story ~~

When I turned my back on my sin and returned whole heartedly to the Lord, one of the most emotionally difficult things was coming to terms with my squandering of what the Lord had given to me. Unfaithful. Wasteful. Negligent. Untrustworthy. Surely I had proven that I was not to be entrusted with precious things from the Lord. I looked at others in the body of Christ and realized that I was now a second class citizen in the kingdom. More an observer than a participant. Happy to be back in the family, but yet....very sad. I tried to convince myself to settle into my new reality. I put on a smile and tried to act like everything was fine. But inwardly I grieved. Then one day during my Bible reading I came across this passage:

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Matthew 18:12-13

That wandering sheep was sought because it mattered to the shepherd, and rather than being angry with it for straying, he celebrated its return. I knew that I was a wandering sheep, but the thought of Jesus rejoicing over me was almost more than my heart could bear! It seemed too good to be true! Knowing that He celebrated my return made every difficulty along the way easier to bear.

Dear one, come home and enjoy all the goodness of your Father. Can you believe that He will welcome you back so fully? Can you believe that He will restore what you walked away from? He wrote it in His book for you, so that you would dare to believe that He is as good as He has always said He is and better than we have ever comprehended Him to be.

This is not the End

My Scripture reference for this section is the whole Bible. It is filled with the stories of people who failed. They failed each other, and they failed God. Repeatedly. Yet I don't recall even one of them who, returning with repentance, was cast aside as useless. The prodigal wasn't allowed to come back as anything less than a son. Perhaps he was more useful and loyal to his father after having been received back with such love.

~~ *My Story* ~~

I had always loved being part of what God was doing and living a life useful and profitable to the kingdom of God. As I was going through the process of restoration, I had to deal with my disappointment over the loss of ministry opportunities. My reputation was ruined. Why would anyone want to listen to anything I had to say about spiritual things? The more the Lord worked in my life to heal all the broken parts, the more my heart burned to serve Him again. That's when I decided to write this booklet. I had learned some things through this ordeal that I could share with others. There were a few people I knew of who were in difficult situations, so I reached out to them. I did the things that were at hand. And then one day, to my absolute surprise, the Lord used my life in a supernatural way. I was left in awe of His kindness and filled with hope that my usefulness to God wasn't over.

Through my recent experience I have learned a great lesson regarding the cost of sin. I have also experienced significant victories over condemnation, despair and shame. I have gone through a great battle and, by the grace of God, have come through triumphant. I have something of value to share. This struggle was not the end.

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*Some of the spoils won in battles they dedicated to maintain the house of the Lord. 1
Chronicles 26:27*

Moving Forward

As you cooperate with the Holy Spirit, He will rebuild your life. His first priority will be to reestablish your spiritual communion with Jesus. Nothing is more important than this, and you will find that the more you focus on this part of your life, the easier it is to deal with the rest of it. There may be many difficult decisions that must be made and painful losses that must be faced. It was a time of many, many tears for me. One of the most challenging things for me was moving out from under the cloud of shame that covered my life after what I had done. Even though most of my Christian life was filled with wonderful things and glorious testimonies, I felt that I was now defined by my failure. Perhaps it would have been easier to move past this if my sin had been secret, but it wasn't.

I felt as though all eyes in the church judged me (they didn't). It was tempting to run away from the people who knew all the ugly stuff and just start over somewhere that I was unknown. That would have been easier, but I never felt like that was the right thing to do. God had placed me in my church family and He hadn't changed His mind about that. So I suffered through many months of feeling overwhelmed by my internal sense of humiliation whenever I was around people who knew what I had been through.

It took a while before life felt anything like normal again, but eventually it did. Joy returned as a daily companion instead of an occasional visitor. The tears never really stopped, but they changed to tears of thanksgiving! I had mourned over the many months of my life that I had wasted until I began to see how God could use even that for His glory. I began to believe that there was still a purpose for my life.

I am moving forward. Perhaps it is time for you to move forward also. Welcome to the journey.....

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

I wrote this booklet thinking it would be most helpful to people who, like me, are Christians who were coming back to Christ after a season of sin. However, maybe this book has come into your hands and you've never trusted in Jesus Christ as your Savior. I want to encourage you to do that now. I hope after reading a bit of my story, you'll find that there is no one so merciful, kind and good as Jesus. He is ready to forgive all who call upon Him. Are you ready to call upon Him today and experience the new life that Jesus offers you? If you are, I'm including a little prayer that might be helpful to you. There is nothing magic about these words, but if you find that they are echoed by the desire of your heart, then let them guide you in a prayer of repentance.

“Father, I acknowledge that I am a sinner and that my life has been lived to satisfy my own desires without any regard for You. I never realized that it was wrong to follow my heart, but now I understand that I need to follow Your ways. I believe that Jesus Christ is the sinless Son of God and that He was born into this world to save sinners. When He died on the cross, He paid the penalty for my sin so that I could be holy and blameless in Your sight. So I ask that You would forgive me for my life of sin, wash me in the blood of Jesus, fill me with Your Holy Spirit, and transform my life into what You want it to be. In Jesus' name, Amen.”