

Pure Heart

Restoration of the Heart through the Beatitudes

By Tom and Donna Cole

Pure Heart: Restoration of the Heart through the Beatitudes
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Edited by Jennifer Sansom

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Acknowledgements

From Tom: Firstly, I thank my Lord, Jesus Christ, for rescuing me from a life of sin and death in November 1986. Second, I want to thank Rosie and Ron Smith for loving me in spite of my sin and praying me into God's Kingdom. Your love and prayers pulled me into the safety of Jesus' arms. Next, I thank my dear wife, Donna, who loved me in my brokenness. I honestly don't believe I would be alive today if it weren't for your tenacious love for me and for your Savior. You are the godliest person I know; you are my love and my beauty. I thank Jerry McLaughlin and Steve Van Conant for teaching me how to be a man and how to be comfortable in the world of men. Your friendships have been a life-line to me. And of course, I have to thank Jennifer Sansom, our editor. Your incredible skills made this a much better book.

From Donna: I want to thank Jesus for loving me, believing in me and for never letting me go. You are my closest friend and lover. To my mom—thank you for your love and the godly example you set for my life. You have sought the Lord with all your heart ever since you first met Him. To my friends—Brenda, who has always been there for me in the good and the hard times; Cookie, whose love for her Lord is an example to me; and all my “single mother” friends who have the hardest job out of anyone I know, but who still trust in the Lord. May the Lord heal your hearts more and more. And lastly, to my husband, who has always pressed on and accomplished great exploits for his God. You are a great leader. I love you.

Introduction

We want to welcome you to a wonderful journey of greater wholeness. This journey is sometimes difficult, sometimes painful, but always rewarding. The Father's supreme pleasure is to bring wholeness to His people, and He desires to remove everything that hinders love. This study is designed to remove the obstacles that keep us from receiving God's love and thus from giving that love away in whole and healthy ways.

When Jesus preached in his hometown, He opened the scroll for that day and read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty the oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18–19). After reading this, Jesus proclaimed to a stunned audience, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). This is the Lord's mission statement and His greatest desire: to heal the brokenhearted and to set the captives free. Psalm 147:3 tells us, "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." Embrace this truth; know that He loves you and desires you to be free to love Him and others.

In this book, we are going to examine one of the most powerful sermons ever given: the Sermon on the Mount—and more specifically, the Beatitudes, a series of eight proclamations that are the keys to living a triumphant Christian life. These eight statements have challenged men and women of God for the last 2,000 years of Christian history. We will look at how they relate to us concerning the condition of our heart before God and before man. This book is not to be considered an in-depth study of the Beatitudes; it is merely one view of an inexhaustible passage of Scripture.

Throughout the book you will read testimonies of healing, both mine and my wife's. To make it easier for you to know whose voice is telling the story, we will place "Tom's Story" or "Donna's Story" before the testimony sections of the book.

We encourage you to read each chapter prayerfully; to pray the prayers at the end of the chapters; to answer the thought-provoking questions; and to allow yourself to go deeper in your relationship with God. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal your need, and then to bring comfort, love and security to your heart.

Rejoice! He is the Healing God, and you are His beloved!

In Him,

Tom and Donna Cole

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit: True Poverty

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

The first word used in the Beatitudes is “blessed.” This powerful word speaks a wonderful promise. It tells us that the recipient will be happy, fortunate, blessed, entitled to great prosperity and unending joy. A good definition of “blessed” would be “to possess an inward contentedness and joy that is not affected by physical circumstances.”¹ The Jewish audience that Jesus was addressing understood the importance of the blessing; the history of Judaism is rich in the narrative of blessing and the lengths to which many will go to in order to receive blessing. These particular blessings are conditional. Jesus gives the conditions for receiving that blessing as He states each Beatitude.

Blessed Are the Poor

Jesus begins the Beatitudes with the promise, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” We can see immediately that Jesus was not saying that the poor are rich, prosperous, blessed and full of unending joy at this very moment. I believe that the promised blessings of the eight beatitudes do have some fulfillment in this life, although the greatest fulfillment will be in the Kingdom to come—when Jesus will return and rule on this earth as King of kings and Lord of lords.

The word that Jesus chose for “poor” in the Sermon on the Mount was one of two words in the Greek language used to describe the poor. The first is *penes*, which refers to the laboring poor. This people worked for their daily bread. They had nothing left over after they bought their meager meals to save and hope for a better future. This is a type of poverty that is difficult for people in developed countries to imagine or contemplate. Even the wealthiest of the people whom Christ addressed in His day did not have running water, electricity, toilets or relatively safe water to drink and food to eat, and the *penes* poor had even less; they could barely afford to buy bread and drink for their family on a daily basis.

True Poverty

But Jesus did not use this word. Instead, he chose the Greek word *ptochos*. This word means to crouch, bend down under a burden, to beg or to be absolutely destitute. *Ptochos* implies a person who has no hope, let alone their daily bread. This person was at the complete mercy of those to whom they bowed low, begging for a scrap in order to survive. The *ptochos* poor knew hunger intimately; they lived in a constant state of starvation and need.

This is whom Jesus wants us to become like. I believe that this Beatitude did give hope to those who physically were the poorest of the poor, but it is exhorting each of us to be in a place of spiritual poverty. We must come to the Father with absolutely nothing—with empty hands. We cannot think that we have anything to offer Him. We must bow low before God and receive from Him that which He desires to give us.

The Eastern Orthodox Church offers the Jesus Prayer to those who don't know how or what to pray. The prayer is this: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This prayer is taken from Luke 18, in which Jesus tells a story about grace: a Pharisee stands in the house of prayer and thanks God he is not a sinner like the tax collector he sees bowing down in the temple. The tax collector beats his chest and bows low, unable to look up at God, and says, "Lord, be merciful unto me, a sinner." Jesus says that only the tax collector went away justified, because he understood his true condition in relation to God.

A rabbi once said to his students, "In olden days, there were men who saw the face of God."

"Why don't they any more?" a young student asked.

"Because, nowadays no one stoops so low," he replied.

Going Low

One way in which we can bow low so that we might see the face of God is through admitting our need. For many of us, need represents that which is weak and detestable. We want to be strong and independent. The mantra of Western society is that we can overcome anything; whatever we strive for, we can have. To be aware of our weaknesses, vulnerabilities and needs is not considered a virtue in the Western world or in the Western Church.

God has a different view. When He created the world and everything in it, He proclaimed "It is good." But when he created Adam, he saw that Adam was alone and said, "It is not good that man be alone." Although Adam had perfect fellowship with God and walked in the garden with Him, having only God's companionship wasn't enough. God created us for Him *and* for one another.

So God created Eve—someone who would share life, work and pleasure with Adam. God created man to be in relationship with Him and with others. This legitimate need lies within each of us. This need is both what causes us to seek God, even when we don't have a full revelation of who He is and what causes us to reach out to others for relationship. We have two basic needs: to know and be known; to love and be loved. Adam and Eve were each created with this basic need in their hearts. God's design was that they would find their needs met in right relationship with Him and with each other.

Sin Enters In

Unfortunately, sin entered into the picture. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, sin entered their hearts. They would still have the same fundamental need, but they would seek to fill it outside of God's design. We see this immediately after Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They suddenly knew that they were naked and they were ashamed. They had a true need, one that could only be met by their Maker. Instead of going to the One who created them, Adam and Eve hid from God and covered their nakedness with clothes made from fig leaves. They met their legitimate needs in illegitimate ways.

Meeting their needs through their brokenness had consequences. What few people realize is that fig leaves contain oils that cause skin to be exceptionally sensitive and irritated. The resulting rash is extremely painful. I'll let you do the math. Just think about where they put those leaves.

We do much the same thing as Adam and Eve. We have a legitimate need, but all too often we meet that need through sinful and addictive ways. We reach out to alcohol, drugs, food, unhealthy relationships, broken forms of sexuality (heterosexual as well as homosexual) and countless other ways. The resulting consequences cause pain in our lives.

Acknowledging Our Sin

The result of Adam and Eve's sin could only find resolution in the Creator Himself. Acknowledging our sin, our illegitimate ways of meeting our needs, is not something that comes naturally to our fallen natures. Most of us keep our sin a secret. The enemy of our souls, the accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10), longs for us to keep our sin to ourselves. Society, and often the Church, leads us to believe that exposing our weaknesses is not something particularly virtuous.

Men are more acutely affected by the inability to expose their weaknesses. It is anathema for men to truly reveal who they are on the inside. The advertising world knows well that strength sells and weakness does not. A good example is one campaign for Marlboro. Their cigarettes were primarily a woman's cigarette, but they wanted to expand their market to men. They devised an ad campaign that showed a tough cowboy smoking this brand. Today, this brand is known as a man's cigarette and their advertisement is focused on strong, hyper-masculine men. The message to men is that any sign of weakness is unmanly.

Women can often allow their weakness to define their identity in the process of relating to others. Because women are by nature more relational, their weakness will often be in the area of relationship with others. For example, God created woman to come alongside of man. The fall caused her natural desire to become broken in her relating. When outsiders look at the relationship between an abusive husband and his wife, they wonder why she doesn't leave him. They don't understand that through the fall, the woman will find her identity in her relationships. She can't see any other option. She must "stand by her man." Women can also express the brokenness through broken relating with other women. If a woman has been wounded by men and a woman in her life shows understanding, compassion and love to her, the relationship can begin become unhealthy, even to the extent of falling into a sexual relationship.

In later chapters, we will discuss the dynamics of true femininity and true masculinity and the ways in which the Fall has distorted God's intent for man and woman.

Bringing Our Need to God

We must come to recognize our need as legitimate. We must bring that need to God and to trusted others. God is inviting us to bring our weaknesses into the light and find that, in our weakness, God is strong. We do not have to be ashamed of our need. We are all destitute and without hope outside of the grace of God, but He enables us to "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Paul the apostle learned this lesson well. God allowed Paul to experience incredible visions and even allowed him to go to Heaven. In order for Paul to remain humble, God allowed a weakness to plague Paul's life. Paul prayed three times that this

weakness might be removed. But God did not remove it. Instead He told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). What a statement! What a seeming contradiction! Only in God’s economy could this make any sense. God is glorified in our weaknesses because it is an opportunity for Him to display His strength through us. That is why Paul could say, “Therefore most gladly will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9–10). We must allow ourselves to become poor in spirit if we are ever going to be strong.

Tom’s Story

My history before I accepted Christ was a life of desperate need. I was rejected by my father and by my male peers. I was molested by two different men and never felt real love. The hole this left in my heart was large, and I sought to fill it through many broken ways. I reached out to alcohol, drugs, homosexuality, sexual addiction and food, but none of these things filled the void in my heart.

I came to know Christ as Savior and Sin-bearer in November of 1986. I immediately recognized my need for Him as He began the process of healing the wounds of my past and leading me towards a life of holiness. But this was no easy process, especially in one area. When I read the list of sins in 1 Corinthians 6:9 that keep us from the Kingdom of Heaven and saw that homosexuality was included, I felt my stomach sink. I had never heard of anyone forsaking homosexuality. As far as I knew, I was born that way and I would stay that way. But then I read further in the chapter. In verse 11, Paul states “. . . and such *were* some of you” (emphasis added). It said *were*! Past tense! For the first time I had hope. I realized that there had been homosexuals in the city of Corinth nearly 2,000 years ago, and they had *changed*. I had no idea how that would happen for me, but I had hope.

About two months after coming to Christ, I attended a men’s prayer breakfast. I noticed two other men who I suspected might have the same past as I had. When I went over to talk with them, they asked me if I was new to the church. I responded, “Yes, I am new. I just got saved two months ago and I’ve come out of homosexuality.”

Their eyes almost popped out of their heads. One of the men told me, “Brother, you can’t tell people that. Trust me, I know. I came out of homosexuality. If you tell people, the men will stop hugging you, the women will avoid you. Trust me and don’t tell anyone.” He had been out of homosexuality for quite a number of years and was now happily married. I believed him and took his advice. I told no one of my struggle for the next several months. But the struggle did not get easier, and I was feeling very alone in my battle. Finally, I ignored his advice and began to share my struggle with other believers in my church.

I found the opposite reaction to his warnings. People went out of their way to greet me and pray for me, and the men actually hugged me more. They let me know that, even though they didn’t fully understand my struggle, they were there for me. Through their love and support, I was able to walk in greater freedom than I ever imagined. It was only by sharing my weaknesses with brothers and sisters in Christ that I was able to find freedom and the strength to keep fighting.

Whatever your struggle, you cannot conquer it alone. The Lord has called us to

bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). We must bring our burdens first to God, becoming weak and poor in spirit, and then to each other. We were created for a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal relationship with others. We need Him and we need each other. That is true community.

Receiving the Kingdom of the Heavens

Jesus promises those who are poor (those who are destitute, needy and bowed low) that "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The literal translation, one that many scholars agree is the correct one, is "for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens" (Young's Literal Translation). It's a plural word with greater promise: Jesus is speaking of the Kingdom ruling in our hearts now and the Kingdom that will one day come in fullness. As we acknowledge our need and are faithful to Him in the face of adversity, poverty of spirit, and even poverty of life, He will bring His Kingdom rule of peace, joy, hope and love into our hearts and lives. His Kingdom rule will not end with this life. So ask the Lord to cause you to bow low, to make you poor in spirit, so that you might have a great reward in the Kingdom to come and a free heart today!

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

End notes:

1. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1-7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 142.

Prayer

Lord, I am becoming painfully aware of my need. There are places in my heart that are empty, filled with fear and darkness. In an attempt to fix myself, I have turned to _____ (*speaking out the things that keep you captive*) to fill the void and meet my needs. I have met legitimate needs in illegitimate ways. Forgive me, Father. I invite You in. I ask that You would fill the void; that You would open my heart to You. I ask that You would give me the grace to lay down false comfort; that I would let You take down the walls that I have built for protection. Help me to embrace my weaknesses and my need. Help me to be real before You and before others. I invite You in. In Jesus' name, amen.

Questions

1. What weakness is God highlighting in this season of your life? What areas do you need to surrender to God?
2. What keeps you from being real before God and others?
3. What is your “fig leaf”? What do you turn to for comfort and security? Is it food, alcohol, drugs, sex, pornography?

Blessed Are Those Who Mourn: The Mother Wound

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4)

The word for “mourn” in Matthew 5:4 is one of nine different words used for grief or mourning in New Testament Greek. Jesus could have chosen many words to express sorrow, sadness and grief. But the one He chose is the most severe word for mourning: the Greek word *pentheo*, which could literally be translated “to grieve with a grief which so takes possession of the whole being that it cannot be hid.”¹ This is an all-consuming grief, the kind of grief that we experience when we lose one who is dearest to us or when we are wounded by one who is dearest to us.

Jesus is speaking of an acute awareness of our lack and deep longing for the wholeness only God can provide. God longs to comfort us and to heal the broken places in our hearts. It is His desire to bring wholeness to His children. Wounds can come through any person or event, but the greatest damage done to our souls comes from those closest to us.

God’s Purpose for Parents

The two people who have the greatest level of influence on us—and therefore the greatest potential to hurt us—are our mothers and our fathers. It was God’s intent that we have perfect parents, but that no longer became possible when Adam and Eve’s fall caused sin to enter man and woman. Adam and Eve were no longer sinless, and so their parenting skills (and those of every parent who followed) would be less than perfect from that point forward. No matter how good our parents may have been, they are/were less than God’s intended perfection.

Although our parents are not perfect, God desires that we would learn about Him through them. Our mothers are to teach us how to receive love. Our fathers are to teach us how to grow and walk in maturity—they are to call us out and name us. They each express different aspects of God’s character.

We were created in God’s image: “. . . God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness . . .’ In the image of God He created them; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26–27). God shows us through the creation of man and woman that God is both masculine and feminine. He has attributes of both within Him. He even gives us word pictures that help us see His nurturing aspect. El Shaddai, one of the many names of God, has been translated by many Jewish scholars as “the many- or great-breasted one.” This word picture is not literal, but shows His sufficiency to provide for His children. The Lord wants parents to express and model this to their children.

Mother Love

While the masculine is often portrayed or recognized by action, the feminine is portrayed as “being” or “receiving.” Through our mothers, God teaches us how to

receive. Our mothers are our first source of life and our first source of femininity—of nurturing and tenderness.

Psalms 22:9–10 says, “But You are He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust while on My mother’s breasts. I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother’s womb You have been My God.” God, in His wisdom, designed our lives so that our first nine months would be spent in the safety and warmth of our mother’s womb, receiving life from her body in warmth and safety. After we are born, we are meant to feed from our mother’s breast. The feeling of skin-on-skin, the safe cradling of our mother’s arms, and her adoring gaze is meant to cause us to feel safe and to receive her unconditional love. We learn to trust at our mother’s breast. The picture of a nursing infant is one of comfort, love and safety. If we do not learn to trust and to receive our mother’s love, we will learn the opposite—to fear, and specifically to fear rejection.

The Greek language has four different words for love, whereas English has only one word for many different expressions (I love my wife, I love ice cream, I love God). In the Greek language, a mother’s love is known as *storge* love. The word *storge* denotes strong natural affections. It comes from the word for “stork” and is based on what the ancient Greeks observed about the gentle, tender love that storks had one for another. Storks would come back to the same nest each year with the same mate, and they would lovingly care for one another. The younger storks would care for the elderly by feeding them and letting them rest on their wings while flying long distances. This is a picture of what a mother’s love should be.

A mother’s love is administered in three primary ways: (1) large amounts of affectionate touch, (2) eye contact, and (3) tone of voice (not just the words “I love you”, as babies don’t understand language, but the tone of voice). These three expressions of love are vital for our wholeness. We must ask ourselves: did we hear a tender voice when we were small? Or did we hear yelling because our mothers were overwhelmed with life? When we had a need, did she meet that need? Or did she yell and tell us to be quiet and stop crying? Did we learn to trust on our mother’s breast?

Babies’ Awareness of Emotions

Tracing brokenness back to such an early stage in our lives may seem strange, but babies have more awareness than we realize. We read that, even in the womb, Jacob and Esau fought for their birthright (Genesis 25:22–26). The twins to whom Tamar gave birth fought for firstborn status (Genesis 38:27–30).

We know today that emotions are a complex series of chemical and hormonal reactions in our bodies. When a person feels fear, anxiety or depression, hormones and chemicals are released through his or her bloodstream. A mother’s hormones and chemicals pass through the walls of the placenta to the baby. Therefore, what the mother is feeling, a baby will feel on some level. If the mother is filled with anxiety, fear or depression, the baby could likewise feel those same emotions. Many of us felt rejection even in the womb. We knew that we were unwanted, or that our parents wanted a boy instead of a girl.

Our Need for Love

For many of us, our parents met our needs physically, but did not meet our needs for tenderness, love and affection. In order for us to trust God and receive His love, we must first learn to trust and receive from our mothers.

God is love. Since God is love, and we are made in His image, it makes sense that we are created for love. God created our parents to be a gift of love to us. They were to love us and to teach us to receive and give love. But the iniquities of our forefathers to the third and fourth generations (Exodus 34:7) brought devastation to our mothers' and fathers' lives. There is a saying that "hurt people hurt people." Our parents loved us in the only way they knew, after the pain and devastation of their own lives, but we were wounded because of their brokenness.

Storge love brings peace, rest and comfort. The lack of it fills us with anxiety, fear, sorrow and brokenness. God created us for this love. We must have it for our physical bodies to function normally and for our emotions to function normally. If we have not felt affectionate touch, heard a gentle tone of voice and saw eyes of love from our parents, we will often allow ourselves to be loved in a wrong way later in life. If *storge* love didn't flow freely to us when we were young, if we didn't feel wanted or cherished, if our parents didn't speak love and tenderness over us, then we often seek pleasure or other false comforts to cover up the pain and fill the void. We will reach out to anything that will comfort us in our pain, such as alcohol, drugs, sex, masturbation, pornography, food, television, internet relationships, cutting, gambling and other forms of false comfort.

Donna's Story

My mother grew up in an abusive home. She got married right after she finished high school to escape, but her new home repeated the same patterns of strife, anxiety and tension. My father was very demanding and was verbally and physically abusive both to my mom and to us children. We all lived in fear of his temper. Nothing I did seemed to be enough for either of my parents.

When I was eight, my parents were divorced and I stayed with my mother. She felt that now she could finally live the life she always wanted. She began years of wild living, drinking, drugs and sex. Our home was always filled with people partying, drugs and loose sexuality. My mother quickly married an eighteen-year-old man who could care less about the three little girls who came with her. If my father was abusive, this man was ten times as bad. Many times we thought he was going to kill us and/or our mother. These were not the musings of naïve young girls; this man is on death row today for the murder of two people.

Eventually my mother divorced this man and married another man. This man wasn't violent. However, he was an alcoholic who didn't work, and he molested my sisters and me when my mother wasn't at home. I can remember waking up and finding his hands all over me. I would cry inside, "God, please help me. Please have someone come home so he will stop."

After this stepfather, my mother didn't marry any of the men who came next. A series of men moved in and out of our lives. Many of them mistreated us girls and looked at us with lust in their eyes as we grew older. But one man, J.C., was different from the other men. He was kind to our mother and to us. He even gave us Christmas presents (we

didn't often get presents since we were on assisted living through the government). But my mother couldn't handle a man who was good to her. She had no self-respect and couldn't fathom someone truly loving her, so he left. The day he left, I took a marker and angrily wrote on all the Christmas presents he had given us "from J.C., from J.C." I made a vow that day to never trust another person—not men; not women. You see, I could handle when the bad men left. But when the good man left, this little girl said in her heart, "No more! I can't take any more!"

I had sought love through a broken relationship with an older man when I was eighteen. Then I began working with a group of lesbians who showed me friendship and kindness. Despite the vow I had made after J.C. left, I valued their kindness. I moved in with one of the women and let her know that I wasn't "that way." But, eventually, I gave into the life of homosexuality she was offering me. I decided that this was who I was. I was born this way and there was no way I could change. I was bold about my newfound life. But she ended up leaving me, and I ran from one broken lesbian relationship to another.

I was only nineteen years old when I was offered an internship at General Motors as a lab technician (I had gone to school for robotics and had excelled). I was the first woman to hold that position in the lab. Work was difficult and my relationships were not going well. I was hurting and lonely. One day at work, I walked into the bathroom and prayed a true prayer for the first time. I said, "God, I need your help. I can't do this. Please show me what life is all about. Who was Jesus? Does it really matter?" God heard my prayer that day, but He answered it in a way I never expected.

Good Friday came soon, and I asked my mother if we could go to mass. (We had been raised Catholic, though only nominally so.) Catholics traditionally observe a time of silence from noon to 3:00 PM to signify the time Christ spent on the cross, and I wanted to be there at that time. My mom probably thought to herself, "Go to church? Who, my gay, rebellious daughter?" But she packed up my little sisters and off we went.

We walked into the church, and a strange feeling came over me. It was that kind of sad feeling you get when someone dies. I thought to myself, "This is weird. I've never felt anything before when I came to church." There was an empty, life-sized wooden cross at the front of the church. At 3:00 PM, everyone would go before the cross, kneel and cross themselves in remembrance of Christ's death on the cross. But as I sat in my pew and looked up at the cross, I saw that it wasn't empty. A Man was hanging on it.

No one had ever told me about visions, and I had never had one before. But I was seeing Jesus dying on the cross for our sins as if it was actually happening. In one moment, it all made sense to me.

"This is why we go to church. It's all about Him, Jesus," I said to myself. I began to weep, but I hid it, not wanting my mom to think I was losing my mind or that I was on drugs. When it was my turn to go up to the cross, I continued to weep. I know now that what was happening was repentance, but all I could do then was cry. I went back to the pew, knelt and hid my face from the others.

That was when God spoke to me. All of my life God had seemed far away and distant. But this time He was near, very near. He said to me, "You've looked for love everywhere else, but I love you and I died for your sins."

No one had ever told me that God loved me. God had not pointed out the multitude of my sins, most especially my homosexuality. He told me He *loved* me.

I would never be the same after that revelation. Throughout my life, I had watched believers fall away and leave the church, but the love revealed to me that day was such that I would never leave Him. I walked out of that church and knew that I would never drink again or smoke pot again, and I *knew* that I wasn't gay anymore.

The journey toward wholeness didn't end on that day, however. God continued to renew me and to heal my heart. I eventually heard of some sweet Catholic ladies who prayed inner healing prayers over people. I wasn't even sure if I believed that inner healing was a valid thing, but when I saw that they had peace and inner joy, I allowed them to pray for me.

As horrible as my father, the stepfathers and other men had been in my life, I thought the bulk of my healing would be about them and the abuse they had hurled at me and my sisters. But God surprised me. I began to see that my main issue was not with the men, but with my mother. She never protected me. That was her job. She should have done everything in her strength to protect me. And she didn't. I had bitterness and unforgiveness in my heart toward my mother.

The Lord showed me that I had to release these feelings. As I forgave my mother, peace came into my heart and restoration worked in my life. Mine was not the only life affected—my mother is now a strong believer and a prayer warrior. My husband loves her as a mother; he sees her only as she is now and not as she was before.. Restoration and comfort came to both generations through the powerful, nurturing love of God and through the power of forgiveness.

The God of All Comfort

God is looking for a people who will allow Him to be their comfort: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). We all have love deficits in our life—many that come from woundings related to a lack of mother love—but we must be responsible in how we try to meet those needs. No human being can fully meet our love needs. We have to come to the realization that only God can meet our deepest need; we must turn away from counterfeit affections.

God is the source of all comfort. He desires to fill every void left by the pain of our past. His love is unfailing and everlasting. He has placed many verses in the Bible that, though they refer to specific people or nations, express His loving nature and are examples of the way in which He relates to us as His children. For example, He says, “Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you” (Jeremiah 31:3). He has loved you with an unfailing love and He has been drawing you to Himself out of His kindness ever since you were a child. There has never been a time when He did not love you. He says, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jeremiah 1:5). He promises to be with you always, saying in John 14:18, “I will not leave you [as] orphans; I will come to you” and in Isaiah 49:15–16, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands . . .”

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