

Starting Over

God is the God of Second Chances.



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Desperately Needed: A Fresh Start

Laying down the guilt and beginning again.

by Karen Arneson

I distinctly remember the words I spoke when I turned my back on God, “God, this isn’t working. I can’t do this anymore.” I was a teenager living in a marginally Christian home, attending a small church with only a few other teens—boys. I had no one of my gender or age to encourage me to stand firm in a world full of temptations

I turned away from God to seek the “fun” I believed others had found. My spirit was in rebellion. I began living for pleasure and self-gratification. Although God never turned his back on me, I continually quenched the Spirit’s attempts to beckon me back. This went on for over twenty years.

I married and had children. My mother began to speak to me about the eternal destiny of my son’s souls. Life caught up with me, and the guilt and consequences of my poor choices threatened to overwhelm me.

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From time-to-time the guilt led me to local churches, but I kept the shield up. Surrender was too painful. I left more than one church in tears—humiliated and unable to ask for help, unable to believe God would really forgive me. Still foolishly believing *I* had to make the changes—not trusting God to bring them about in me.

I distinctly remember the Lord saying, “Karen, your way isn’t working. Are you ready to come home?”

I was 39, carrying around a load of sin and desperately needing to start over. God in his mercy led me to a church with a group of women who surrounded me in love and prayer. I found forgiveness. I found my fresh start.

Maybe you’ve been carrying a load of guilt and, like me; you’re desperate to put it down. Don’t wait! This download offers you the opportunity to see that you are not alone. Others have sought and found new beginnings. Come read their experiences, explore your circumstances with the help of thought provoking questions, and find the help you need to start over.

God bless!

Karen Arneson

*Contributing Editor, Gifted For Leadership
Christianity Today International*

Introduction





THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

The Baby I'll Never Forget

Would I ever be able to forgive myself
for having an abortion?

by Amanda Jenkins

The foil of the pregnancy-test package crinkled between my fingers. While reading through the directions and glancing at the drawings on the box, I couldn't help but think back to eight years earlier, when I was in college.

My then-steady boyfriend had swept me off my feet. So even though I'd been taught that God's Word set premarital sex aside as sin, I'd engaged in inappropriate intimacy with him, seeking love and affection to fill my emptiness from old childhood wounds.

The fears that accompanied a pregnancy test in those days were immense and real. I always feared it would be positive. And one time, it was.

That day I begged my roommate to buy me three more tests. I was humiliated and terrified. The additional tests confirmed the same: I was pregnant. As I crouched in my dorm's empty bathroom, I secretly hoped that if I never came out, it wouldn't be true. It was a moment of ruthless reality.





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A Seeming Solution

My roommate consoled me. I told no one else. Not my boyfriend, not my Christian parents. This journey was too shameful to share with them. My roommate guaranteed she knew a way out. A harmless way ... almost. And the next thing I knew, I was signing in at the nearest abortion clinic just off our college campus. I held a wad of cash in my hand, hurriedly collected from a dwindling savings account from a part-time job.

Three hours later, it was over. I recuperated over Christmas break at my mom's house, half an hour from campus. She thought I was recovering from the flu. As I lay around on the couch, my mind raged against what I'd done. I realized, with startling clarity, that there was nothing harmless about that procedure. It was just a cruel trade-off, one problem—my unwanted pregnancy—for another—the guilt and shame of taking my baby's life.

Grace and Guilt

Remorse dogged me in the following years. But from the bottom of the pit, the only place I had to look was up. My choice to have an abortion catapulted me into God's arms. What had always been my father's faith now became my own.

Yet, every time a sermon or conversation mentioned the word abortion, I stared a hole in the ground, sure that those around me would suddenly point their fingers at me. A knife stayed in my heart.

I couldn't comprehend ever making peace with this horror in my past. The Enemy was so good at reminding me of his lies that I never felt safe or close to God or anyone else. While I was passionate about my relationship with Christ, I held back my dark secrets. My past was a constant threat to my spiritual life.

Reaching for Help

One morning, two years after my abortion, I finally prayed for help. I asked God to lead me to a volunteer organization where I could help others and hopefully escape some of my pain. I had to get my mind off myself. I marched up to the counter at my church and picked up the only brochure that caught my eye. It was for a pregnancy care center. Ouch.

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Pain gripped my heart. Was this some kind of sick joke, God? But the more I thought about it, the more I realized this could provide the perfect opportunity to redeem myself. The director spoke to me on the phone and asked me to come right over.

Midway through the mini-interview, she asked the unthinkable: “Have you ever had an abortion?” I entertained lying. Surely, she would kick me out if I told the truth. But I answered honestly. “Yes,” I said, staring at the floor.

She took my hand. Here it comes, I thought. But she surprised me. She explained how God often brought wounded victims to her doorstep in order for them to be healed and to help others. She offered me warmth and compassion. Through all those years, I hadn’t spoken a word about my abortion to anyone. Now her kind words washed over me like the warmth of baptismal water.

The Freedom of Forgiveness

The director suggested I heal before counseling other women, so I quickly joined the post-abortion Bible study the care center offered. I dove into the material and poured through my Bible. I clung to my small group leader and committed to the weekend retreat. I wanted this victory and knew the desire was in line with God’s will.

I cried when my leaders humbly washed my feet. But it was another exercise at the retreat that finally offered healing. We picked out rocks and loaded them into a sack that we wore around our necks the entire weekend. It signified the enormous weight of the shame and guilt we were carrying.

At first, the extra weight was unbearable. The sack knocked into things and dragged me down. I slept, ate, and worshiped with the rocks around my neck. Slowly, though, I got used to the physical reminder. Inwardly, I thought I deserved it. I could accept personal pain and hardship in order to repay my sin. It was much harder to accept God’s free gift of forgiveness.

On the final day of the retreat, we were instructed to sit alone on the bank of the lake and take each rock out, one by one. As I threw each one into the water, confessing my burdens, sins, and unfinished





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business to the Lord, I felt free for the first time in years and so close to God.

Jesus Christ died for my sin of abortion. The richness of his blood washed over my detestableness and cleansed me. I was purified and redeemed by the One who unfailingly keeps every one of his promises. He had forgiven me. Now I finally could forgive myself.

Passing It On

Upon my return home, I felt the Holy Spirit prompting me to tell my story. I felt as though I needed to complete the circle and tell others what Jesus had done for me. The first person I called was my mom. I shared my cleansed sin with her and cried as she spoke reassuringly over my wounds and sorrow.

What she said next shocked me: My mom revealed she also had gotten pregnant before she was married. It happened decades ago when she was in college. She also chose to have an abortion. This generational sin had landed at my feet 20 years later, but now was the time for healing. And that healing was already reaching further than I could have imagined.

I spent the next years counseling women at the pregnancy care center—talking them through unwanted pregnancies, ministering to them in their crisis, sharing Christ's love. I had no better platform than my story, and the women were enthralled with what Jesus could do. We often prayed together by the end of our encounter, acknowledging the Lord is bigger than all our problems. I relished being able to give back. I volunteered for three years before the Lord moved me on to a new ministry, but I never forgot the lessons of love I learned there.

God's Finale of Grace

The ringing phone brought me back to the present. I glanced at the pregnancy test in my hand and saw the act of true redemption. Mercifully, God had given me a husband, Tom, to walk through this healing process alongside me. He wept over me when I told him my testimony. Now, four years into our marriage, the test confirmed we were expecting our first child.

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Sensitive to my past, my husband knew as well as I did that this pregnancy was a gift from God. Tom was overjoyed as I shared the news with him. We'd become pregnant naturally, easily, and, as God would have it, in the anniversary month of my abortion, exactly eight years later.

Only through God's restoration was it possible for me to hold a child in my womb after such horrible life choices. I sank to my knees, a place I now feel most comfortable. At the base of the Great Redeemer's throne, my face awash with tears, I praised him for deliverance. My life had come full circle. His blood had wiped me clean.

*Amanda Jenkins lives in Texas. This article first appeared in the January/February 2006 issue of **Today's Christian Woman**.*

Thought Provokers

- *Think of a time when you experienced a "journey too painful to share." How do these journeys threaten our spiritual lives?*
- *Confession may be good for the soul, but without acceptance of God's forgiveness starting over may prove to be futile. Why is forgiveness at the heart of new beginnings?*
- *What results might we experience in starting over? How does God use our pain to produce fruit in our lives and impact the lives of others?*





PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Starting Over



With God's help, it's possible to rebuild trust—even after a painful betrayal.

by Louis McBurney

When you promised “for better or for worse,” maybe you momentarily considered the possibilities of “worse”: illness, problems with children, financial difficulties. You probably never imagined you might one day face betrayal, but it's not uncommon for marital trust to be shattered by secretive behavior or broken promises.

In my counseling office, my own heart was breaking as I watched Barbara suffer in the moments after James, her husband of 21 years, confessed his infidelity. Her sobs wracked her whole body. She trembled in a corner, holding her knees to her chest as if to shield herself from the emotional assault.

James had been involved sexually with Barb's best friend, so she felt doubly betrayed. She had sensed a growing distance between her and James, but she'd never suspected adultery. Once Barb regained control, we returned to the counseling session to begin a process that would, at first, seem completely impossible: rebuilding her ruined trust.





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Sexual unfaithfulness inflicts profound wounds, but in our years of counseling, my wife and I have seen deep pain caused by all kinds of betrayal: financial mismanagement, gambling or embezzlement, drug or alcohol abuse, a so-called emotional affair, any habitual hidden behavior. It's devastating to find that your spouse has kept a part of his or her life a secret. Initially, the sense of betrayal is so strong that re-establishing trust seems an unreachable goal. But it is possible, as Barb and James found, to find a way to trust again.

Restoring trust takes place in four areas of your life. The process demands a lot of you, involving your emotions, your mind, your behaviors and your time. But the reward comes when you are able once again to put your faith in your mate.

Healing the Emotions

When secrets are exposed, they leave a trail of pain and shattered emotions. Healing begins through honest communication and a growing understanding of the emotions both partners are dealing with. It's essential that the offending spouse acknowledge the hurt that he or she has caused. And I'm not talking about a casual "I'm sorry" followed by an implied "get over it."

Andy and Becky came to counseling soon after Becky found an X-rated video hidden in her husband's closet. When confronted, Andy reluctantly confessed that he'd been looking at porn since he was about 12. To his surprise, the confession actually relieved the tremendous guilt he had suffered, and he expected Becky to share his gladness that now they had no more secrets. He was understandably embarrassed, but once he had apologized, he felt the whole thing was over. He couldn't figure out why his wife couldn't let it go.

To Becky, Andy's revelation was a land mine that ripped apart her life. She couldn't believe he didn't understand how devastated she felt. She now doubted her sexual attractiveness. She was obsessed with questions about where his mind went when they were making love. She wondered if there had been physical infidelities as well as his fantasized affairs. Most difficult was the unnerving realization that while she thought they had shared all of life's most intimate moments, Andy had kept a secret part of himself from which she'd been totally excluded.





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Andy wanted to get on with life, so he tried to avoid Becky's emotional struggle. But soon he realized that his eagerness to get beyond his shame was short-circuiting his wife's need for him to acknowledge the shame and hurt his addiction had caused her.

The healing began for Becky when Andy started to really listen. His care and attention helped her begin to risk intimacy again. As she started to lower her protective barriers, she began to sense what it must have been like for Andy to struggle with his secret shame for 20 years.

Freeing the Mind

People often mistake forgiveness for a feeling, but fundamentally forgiveness is a choice, an act of the will. That's why we are commanded to forgive. Forgiving involves acknowledging your own hurt, releasing your thoughts about the violation and giving up the desire to pay the offender back. If you are the spouse who has been wronged, it may seem strange that the burden of this stage of healing falls to you. But forgiving has more to do with the health of your spiritual and mental life than it does with your spouse's. Forgiving releases your spouse from your wrath, but—more importantly—it frees you from the destructive bondage of unforgiveness.

For a time, Becky got stuck in a painful recycling of Andy's betrayal, complete with vivid instant replay of the initial shock and her imagined scenarios of revenge. She finally left behind the incessant rehearsal of Andy's betrayal by choosing, again and again, to shut out negative, angry thoughts. She asked God to help keep those ideas from dominating her thinking. She substituted good memories and feelings about their relationship when those thoughts crept back in. She found it becoming easier, especially since Andy seemed more aware of the hurt he had caused. Forgiveness is much tougher if the offending spouse doesn't acknowledge his or her sin and the pain it causes, but it's still necessary.

Changing Behaviors

Most couples eagerly watch for changes in behavior to signal that trust is growing again. Barb found herself doubting James any time he was late coming home or not available when she called him at work. For years she had never questioned him about those things, but with his infidelity fresh in her mind, she had a hard time believing his explanations.





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To build trust, James worked on changing his pattern; he tried to let Barb know if he was going to be later than usual or away from the office. After a while, though, having to check in with his wife began to make him feel stifled and controlled. By then, Barb could see James's efforts to be accountable, so she didn't need to check on him so much. After that, it felt good when James did call. It was more an act of love than of duty.

Becky and Andy changed some behaviors, too. Andy told Becky the times of day when he typically felt tempted. They made a pact that he could call her for encouragement any time his mind began to wander into improper fantasies. Eventually, these calls became opportunities to express their love and passion for each other, instead of just an update on his struggle to overcome an addiction.

At home, they became more open about their sexual relationship. Andy was surprised to find that Becky was more adventuresome and interested in a greater variety of pleasurable experiences. Plus, she began to take more initiative sexually, which made Andy feel more accepted and desired. The new behaviors didn't promise an instant fix, but they were necessary steps in learning new skills.

Taking Time

There are rarely instantaneous reversals in behavior, so a crucial ingredient to rebuilding trust is time that is generously undergirded with God's grace. Having a spirit of grace doesn't mean you don't need tough love with clearly defined limits—especially when disastrous consequences (such as sexually transmitted disease, physical abuse, financial ruin or criminal activity) might result.

During your rebuilding time, you will deal with occasional new revelations of past failure, admissions of ongoing temptations, expressions of anger and other traces of the original betrayal. Expect these temporary setbacks, and keep on accepting one another with grace. Don't let the difficulty of the task prevent you from achieving your goal.

As you invest time in the healing process, make sure you celebrate your victories. Call attention to the positive milestones: a day when you no longer feel angry or guilty, an encouraging time of intimacy, a number





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of months free from an addictive behavior. Another way to celebrate is to check in periodically with a counselor or an accountability and support group. Rejoice together in the progress you make.

It's incredible to see what once appeared to be an irreparable wound transformed into a stimulus for growth. If you've been struggling with a betrayal of trust, be encouraged. You're already living with the "worse" in "for better or worse." With God's help, even the most serious betrayal can be overcome when you honor your vows and commit to making right what has gone wrong.

*Louis McBurney, M.D., is a psychiatrist and marital therapist. He and his wife, Melissa, counsel clergy couples at Marble Retreat in Marble, Colorado. This article first appeared in the summer 1998 issue of **Marriage Partnership** magazine.*

Thought Provokers

- *Betrayal comes in many forms. It can come through the words or deeds of a loved one. We can feel betrayed by God. Sometimes the two are bound together. Betrayal requires a decisive response: do we walk away, or do we work to rebuild trust? When the betrayal occurs within a covenant relationship, it's worth it to rebuild. When have you suffered betrayal? What were the circumstances? How did your suffering impact your relationship with God?*
- *What actions might we take to seek healing of our emotions? What actions might we require of the offender?*
- *Why is forgiveness important to rebuilding trust? How is God involved in our ability to forgive?*
- *What changes might we make to our own behaviors to encourage the growth of trust both in the offender and in God?*





GETTING DEEPER

The Gift of a Second Chance

Finding redemption where
least expected.

by Corrie Cutrer

Ashley Smith, 27, still remembers the day she received a copy of Pastor Rick Warren's bestseller, *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

She'd walked in late to her aunt's church in Augusta, Georgia. A struggling widow, Christian, and drug addict, Ashley had released custody of her five-year-old daughter, Paige, to her aunt, Kim Rogers, and was there for a visit.

The church was distributing *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and people could take one even if they didn't have money, Ashley remembers. She looked in her wallet and found a dollar bill—the same dollar she'd used to roll and snort crystal methamphetamine, her latest drug of choice. Ashley placed the dollar bill in the offering plate. For years she'd wanted to come clean, so she picked up the book on her way out and started using it as a daily devotional in an attempt to get her life back on track.





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A month later, Ashley made headlines around the world for using *The Purpose-Driven Life* to help calm Brian Nichols, the alleged Atlanta courthouse killer who murdered four people, including a judge. Nichols held Ashley hostage for seven hours before miraculously letting her go. Ashley was hailed a hero as television news cameras broadcasted Nichols being led away from her apartment in handcuffs.

What everyone didn't know at the time, however, was that Ashley felt like the last person in the world who should be so celebrated. In recent years, she'd been arrested for shoplifting and driving under the influence, witnessed the brutal murder of her husband, lost custody of her daughter, and still struggled with a serious drug addiction that started in high school.

Yet somehow, as Ashley discovered that night, God still was willing to use her for good. And in the process, Ashley found her life would never be the same.

A Moment of Truth

On March 11, 2004, Brian Nichols, a prisoner on trial for rape, killed four people at the Fulton County Courthouse in Atlanta, then escaped and randomly made his way to Ashley's apartment complex in nearby Duluth, looking for a place to hide. Ashley had been up late unpacking boxes in her new apartment and left at 2 A.M. to purchase cigarettes at a nearby gas station. Upon her return, she became Nichols' target.

"I was standing in the doorway with a gun pointed at my head, being forced into my apartment with the door locked behind me, thinking, I'm going to die. Why am I going to die?" she says.

Once Ashley realized Nichols' identity, she repeatedly pleaded with him to not hurt her for her daughter Paige's sake. "My little girl doesn't have a daddy, and if you kill me, she won't have a mommy either," she cried to him.

Ashley slowly earned Nichols' trust by revealing her painful past. She'd become pregnant at 20 and gave birth to a premature, two-pound baby girl. She and her boyfriend, Mack (who later became her husband), ran wild—partying on the weekends, drinking and dabbling in drugs. Both spent time in jail for driving under the influence. Then, when Ashley was 23, Mack became involved in a brawl and was stabbed right in front of her. He died in her arms.





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Ashley told Nichols how Mack's death sent her spiraling. "I didn't care about anything anymore," she says. That's when crystal meth entered the picture. Using the drug became an everyday habit. Her teeth began to rot and her hair thinned. Ashley surrendered custody of her daughter, started experiencing paranoia, and ultimately ended up in a mental hospital after a hallucination brought on a near-fatal car accident. She went through three drug recovery programs before she finally started making progress. That's when she moved to Atlanta, determined to get her life on track.

As a student working two jobs, Ashley still used meth occasionally when she was stressed or wanted to lose weight. She had a stash in her bedroom the night she was held hostage—something she offered to Nichols and later regretted. He wanted to relax and decided to use the meth. He also asked Ashley to do it with him. As Ashley began telling Nichols what a struggle drugs had been for her for so many years, she realized something for the first time: She truly was an addict. And she didn't want to be one any longer.

"It was the first time I ever said 'no' to drugs," Ashley remembers. "I was faced with a life-or-death situation. All I could think was, If I'm going to die tonight, I'm not going to meet my heavenly Father with those drugs in my nose."

Ashley, who had been raised in a Christian family and accepted Christ when she was seven, struggled to maintain her walk with God as a rebellious teen. But that night, God finally caught her full attention for the first time. "I could sense him telling me, choose the drugs or choose me," Ashley remembers. "I heard him loud and clear—and I chose him. Immediately I heard him say, I'm here. It's OK. I'll get you out of here if you just trust me."

Afterward, Ashley read Nichols the chapter "Using What God Gave You" from *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Nichols asked Ashley what she thought God's purpose was for his life. "Turn yourself in," she told him. "Stop running. You killed some people. You've got to pay for that."

She also offered words of promise. "No matter what you've done, God can still forgive you," she said. "In God's eyes, what you've done is no different than me doing drugs. If God can forgive me, he can forgive you. Wherever you are, there's hope."

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Moving Forward

Ashley continued to talk with Nichols through the night. And just as she'd planned on and prayed for all along, she walked out of her apartment unharmed the next morning to be reunited with her daughter.

She still can't believe Nichols let her go. Ashley believes God allowed her to survive the ordeal in order to fulfill a purpose of her own—sharing with others that the Lord never gives up on those he loves.

"I want people to know God has a plan for their lives if they'll let him work," Ashley says. "None of us is perfect. But it's never too late to turn your life around."

Today Ashley is a testament to her own words. She underwent voluntary drug testing regularly for the first three months after her ordeal with Nichols, joined a Bible study at her church, and has remained drug-free. "I take it day by day," she says. "But I haven't felt the need or desire to do drugs. It's as if God reached down that night and said, I believe you. I believe you want to be done with it."

Currently, Ashley is learning how to be a mom again to Paige. And she's helping her mom, 49-year-old Mary Jo, a smoker of 30 years, face a different terrifying ordeal: lung cancer. "The cancer is inoperable," says Ashley, who has since given up smoking herself. "The only thing that's going to help her is chemo, radiation, and prayer."

Once again, Ashley finds herself thinking back to that night with Brian Nichols. As much as she felt like she helped him, God ended up using him to help her. "Had that not happened to me, I may still be out there, smoking, dabbling in drugs," she says. "I don't think I would have been able to handle my mom having cancer. But now God's getting me through it. He's been my rock."

Ashley also wrote a book about her ordeal, *Unlikely Angel*, in which she shared about the seven hours she spent with Nichols. Upon its release, newspapers and television outlets immediately spotlighted Ashley's drug addiction and the fact she gave meth to Nichols.





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“I expected some criticism for being completely honest,” Ashley says. “I’ve received tons of e-mails from recovering meth addicts and their families encouraging me to raise awareness so others can get help.”

In the future Ashley says she’d like to help other addicts come clean. She plans to work with Celebrate Recovery, a faith-based recovery program Rick Warren’s church, Saddleback, founded in 1991.

“I feel as though God wants me to be a role model for other meth addicts who are ashamed of the hold this drug has on their lives,” she says. “I used to think God wasn’t big enough for my addiction. Now I know he’s big enough for any sin if we just believe and turn to him for help. We’re all imperfect. And yet God uses broken people to do his work.”

*Corrie Cutrer is a TCW regular contributor who lives with her family in Illinois. This article first appeared in the **March/April 2006** issue of **Today’s Christian Woman**.*

Thought Provokers

- *The idea of starting over calls to mind first quitting or failing. The author states that she became a Christian as a 7-year-old child, but she quit walking with the Lord in her rebellious teen years. What has interrupted our walks of faith?*
- *Walking away from God often causes a downward spiral of sin. The author stated that she came to believe “God wasn’t big enough” to help her. When have we felt as though God was too small for our problems?*
- *What change is necessary in our hearts before God gives us a second chance? Why is that change necessary?*
- *God went to extreme measures to get the author’s attention. What has He done to in our lives to draw us back to a fresh start in Him?*





BIBLICALLY SPEAKING

The Flight of Your Life

What God teaches through
faith's ups and downs.

by Ruth E. Van Reken

Life with Jesus hasn't turned out quite the way I thought it would.

As a child, "testimony time" was my favorite feature of Sunday evening church. Each week the white-haired ladies and gentlemen around me would grab the pew ahead, pull themselves to a slightly stooped stand, and proclaim, "I accepted Jesus forty years ago, and it's been glory ever since." I figured "glory" must be great, and couldn't wait to follow in their steps. I expected to soar through life with unswerving faith.

Instead of soaring, however, my faith journey has more closely resembled the flight of my first homemade kite: first rising, then dipping and crashing, so I'd have to start over again. Why couldn't I be more "spiritual" like those saints I'd known as a child?





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I decided to study the Old Testament heroes listed in Hebrews 11 as members of the New Testament “hall of faith.” At first, their stories puzzled me. How could God possibly put Jacob in that list? He’d stolen his brother’s birthright through treachery. What about Samson? He spent his life chasing women such as Delilah. David had committed adultery and murder. None were people I’d choose as an example of faithful living. So why did God?

But as I read more carefully, I saw how those listed shared a common story: God worked through their lives to shape them into individuals who trusted him despite seemingly impossible situations. Each experienced the same ups and downs of faith I knew so well, yet God used those events to build strong faith in him.

Why does God often seem to take us back to square one in our journey with him? What can we learn only when we have nothing left but God himself and his promises? Here are some answers.

Faith and feelings aren’t the same. Throughout high school I promised God I’d follow him fervently, no matter what. God’s presence seemed palpable as our school Bible club grew from 15 to 115 members. We prayed. God answered. It was great.

Soon after beginning college, however, I found myself seated alone in a dorm prayer room, wondering what had happened to God. The same Bible that had been savory meat for my soul now tasted like cold French fries. Prayers seemed to bounce off the walls with mocking echoes: “God isn’t LISTENING ... listening ... listening.” How could this be?

That’s when I glanced up to see a plaque on the wall quoting a verse from Job: “I do not see him ... but he knows the way that I take.” I opened my Bible to read the whole chapter, and it described my situation perfectly. No matter where Job looked, he couldn’t find God—yet God always knew where to find him. Based on that, Job determined to continue trusting God through the darkness.

That fact—that God knows where I am when I have no idea where he is—has been one of the most stabilizing truths in my life. I can





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pray, “God, I haven’t a clue where you are in this mess, but I thank you that you know where I am. Please hold on to me when I can’t seem to hold on to you.”

God isn’t a system to be learned. Following my first year in college, I went into a nursing program and worked with people in life-and-death situations. Seeing many of them face life’s starkest moments without Jesus restored my faith—I knew I’d never doubt again.

Wrong. A few years later my husband, Dave, began his pediatric residency. We moved with our eight-month-old daughter to a new city where I didn’t know one person. Dave took calls at the hospital every second or third night, and I became a stay-at-home mom. Depression set in. This time God didn’t merely disappear; it felt as though he’d died.

I did what I’d done before. I asked God to keep his eyes on me when I didn’t know how to find him. I read my Bible. I prayed. I even followed the advice of a book that promised if I’d praise God no matter what, all my problems would go away. I still felt awful.

Finally I confessed my struggle to a friend. “I’m sure if I’d only pray more or read my Bible more, I’d be okay, but I can’t seem to do it like I should.”

My friend gave me a strange look. “Did you hear what you just said, Ruth? If you do this or that exactly right, then God must perform according to your dictates. Why don’t you ask God to be God in your life, and stop trying to control him?”

With that simple question, I realized while I’d always believed my salvation came by God’s grace through faith in Jesus rather than through anything I could do, that’s not how I lived. Instead, I’d started believing that if I just met certain standards of performance such as Bible reading and prayer (both good things in themselves), then God would essentially become my fairy godparent and do my bidding. My friend was right. I’d turned God’s means for knowing him better into a method to keep control of my life.

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Childish or immature perceptions of God need replacing. As a child I somehow picked up the skewed idea that really good soldiers in God's army barely notice the wounds they suffer while serving him, if they feel them at all.

Years later, Dave and I moved to Liberia, Africa, as missionaries. During our first year there, Uncle El, a fellow missionary, and his daughter, Rhoda, were in a terrible motorcycle accident. While Dave and I stayed with them all night at the hospital, robbers completely ransacked our home. Here we were, serving Jesus, and life had never been so catastrophic.

I knew I should pray—but how? For what? I had no faith that Uncle El would survive and Rhoda already had multiple fractures. Finally, as I tried to pray, an amazing thing happened. Somehow, in a way I can't explain, I saw Jesus weeping in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified. What an incredible paradox. There, in the midst of Christ's greatest act of faith, he suffered his greatest moment of pain. Faith didn't prevent his pain, but pain also didn't prevent his faith. By his Spirit, Jesus said to me, "Ruth, I know what it's like not to want the Father's will. Sometimes the Father's will is very hard. So I'm not going to push you through this; I'm going to carry you."

I've learned as I've matured that true faith not only acknowledges pain, but agrees to God's plan despite it. After Uncle El's death, Aunt Lois told me, "No reason is worth the price of my husband's life except one. Somehow God has allowed this to happen for his glory, though I may never understand why before heaven. With that, my heart can rest."

God's character is trustworthy. After my encounter with Jesus in the Garden, life continued to tumble from one crisis to another. We were robbed nine more times. Five close friends or relatives, including my father, died in the next two years. Just a few short years later, I had to face the biggest question of my life so far: "Have I given my life to God for a joke?"

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My husband and I were living back in the States, but our two adopted Liberian sons, William and James, had returned to Liberia just before a civil war began there in 1990. For months, we had no idea if our sons were alive or dead. No matter how hard I prayed, the news got worse: “Cholera Sweeps the City.” “Six Hundred Killed in Church Massacre.” Even if I’d known where William and James were, I had no way to send help or rescue them. I felt numb inside. Each day I waited for a breakthrough from God. Each day—silence.

After many weeks, God finally impressed one thought in my heart: Ruth, you’ve come to trust what you know about me, but you don’t trust me.

That puzzled me. So I prayed, “God, I have no idea what that means, but if it’s true, would you teach me about yourself from scratch, as if I’ve never known you at all?”

A few months later, still numb, I opened my Bible once more to Hebrews 11. In verse 6 I read, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

Do you really?! My mind began to rage at God as I compared that verse to the circumstances around me. I’ve sought you and sought you this year, but you remain silent, and everything I’ve prayed about has only gotten worse. You haven’t rewarded me with one thing!

Hadn’t we given up family, country, and professional opportunities to follow God? Now look. Because of the war in Liberia, our mission buildings had been destroyed and our two sons were likely dead and gone. Instead of a plentiful harvest, we had a sun-scorched land. Had I, in fact, spent my life for nothing?

As I stared at the passage again, the Shepherd’s voice popped up once more in my mind. Do you believe I’m faithful and true and good, not for what you see me do, but for who I am?

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The greatest wrestling match of my life followed. If I said “Yes, God is faithful, true, and good,” it meant I believed he was keeping his promises in this awful situation—even if I didn’t understand why or how. It meant I had to trust him; I had to leave all my unanswered questions with him. That seemed like an impossible choice.

But if I decided “No, God isn’t faithful,” then I was saying God was a liar and none of his promises were true—including that Jesus is my Savior. In that case, my life was a joke and there was no point in continuing the deception. That seemed like a hopeless choice.

Thankfully, I finally bowed before God, trusting his character, whether William and James lived or died. In God’s mercy, both of them survived the war, but many others didn’t. However, like the stories in , where some people were rescued from the lion’s den while others were martyred by being sawn in two, God is equally faithful, true, and good in all cases.

I once heard George Verwer, head of Operation Mobilization, say, “Christians have to relearn their faith from scratch at every stage of life.” How true. And how wonderful that as God teaches us more about who he is within the circumstances of our life, our relationship to him becomes deeper and stronger. We can trust, no matter what we feel. Maybe that’s the “glory” part after all.

*Ruth Van Reken is a speaker and author of several books and Bible studies, including Who Is Jesus? (Shaw) and The Third Culture Kid Experience: Growing Up Among Worlds with David C. Pollock (Intercultural Press). She lives in Indiana. This article first appeared in the **May/June 1998** issue of **Today’s Christian Woman**.*

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Thought Provokers

- *The author likens her faith journey to the flight of a homemade kite—rising, dipping, crashing, and starting over. How would you describe your faith journey?*
- *The author has experienced God taking her back to the start of faith over and over. She gives four possible reasons. Which of those four can you relate to and why?*
- *What seems to be the primary lesson God wants to teach us through life circumstances that require us to go back to the beginnings of our faith?*

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BRINGING IT HOME

Parents with a Past

Should I tell my teen daughters about
the sins of my youth?

by Jodi Washington

I looked into the antique jar full of seashells my family and I had gathered on our vacations, and tried to ignore the nudging I felt from God. I held in my hand pieces of sea glass my children, my husband, and I had collected on our recent visit to Glass Beach. Nearly a century ago, this rocky shore served as the city dump. But today, herds of people comb the sand and rocks for sea glass. After much refinement in the ocean, these broken pieces of old glass garbage have become sought-after stones that sparkle like jewels in the surf.

As I placed this onetime trash into the jar, I felt God speaking to me about the “garbage” of my life—my past sins.

“I can use those transgressions now,” he seemed to tell me. “Just as the sea has refined this glass, I’ve shaped and refined your mistakes into valuable gems for you to share with other people.”





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Specifically, I felt the Lord prompting me to tell my teenage daughters about the costly blunders I'd made when I was their age.

But the suggestion wasn't appealing to me. I didn't want to confess my past to them.

What I Was Hiding

My adolescence—and my husband's—was dark and dangerous compared to my children's coming-of-age years. My girls planned to be virgins on their wedding nights. They wore purity rings and at their youth groups had signed contracts with God not to have sex before marriage. While I knew my kids might not be able to hold to such ideal aspirations, I prayed they would. And so far, they were untainted by promiscuity, alcohol and drugs, or raunchy movies.

Polished by Christ's love and forgiveness, my past sins had become lessons in redemption.

In contrast, my husband and I had watched every vulgar movie Hollywood made. During our teens we went to parties, got drunk, tried drugs. Because we weren't Christians, we never thought we were doing anything bad.

I'd been somewhat open with our kids about that period of our lives, so they already knew their proper Christian mother had a past. But they didn't know details. They didn't know that I had friends who'd died in drunk-driving accidents. That I'd driven drunk many times myself. My daughters didn't know that I'd taken friends to get abortions. Or that their grandpa had kicked me out of his house when I was 18 because he'd caught me sleeping with my boyfriend—their dad.

The lessons from those years were painful. I'd learned boyfriends love girls less after they put out, not more as the boys promise. That drunken bashes leave the partygoer feeling sick and empty the next morning. That drugs harm the body, but not nearly as much as they harm the soul.

Of course, I didn't want my daughters to suffer the scars of such sinful choices. But since my girls showed no signs of such perilous behavior, why would I need to share my old sins?

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Redeeming Revelations

Then a talk I heard at a Christian conference years ago came back to me. The speaker shared that her 12-year-old daughter had been flipping through television channels when she stopped on a talk show about women who'd had abortions. "Those women must be awful," her Christian daughter said scornfully. "How could anyone kill a baby like that?"

At that moment, the speaker said she knew she had to tell her daughter about her own dark past. She offered a silent prayer, then burst into her story.

"Those women aren't necessarily awful," the woman began.

"Sometimes they're simply trapped. Not everyone's dad and mom are Christians who love their kids and bring them up as protected as you are. Not everyone has the gift of growing up in a godly home."

Then the woman finally confessed her secret to her daughter: "I had an abortion when I was a teenager. I was young and scared, and I thought abortion was my only option. Eventually I met and married your awesome dad, and God blessed us with you."

"My daughter was crushed," the speaker shared. "She cried like a baby about my past. I felt terrible, but I knew I was right to tell her. I couldn't let her go on being judgmental toward women who've had abortions."

As I thought of this woman's words, suddenly God's point became crystal clear to me: Cleaned and polished by Christ's love and forgiveness, my past sins had become lessons in redemption for other people. "Look at your sins, your wounds," I once heard a pastor preach. "Wherever Jesus has delivered and healed you, the Lord has ordained you to help and comfort other people in those same difficult places."

My past could teach my daughters compassion for people who choose sin over the safety of God's unpolluted path. "Just be honest," Jesus seemed to say to me. "Tell your girls the truth." With eyes wide and stunned, they listened quietly and didn't ask any questions.





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I tried to explain why I'd gone down such a sinful path. "I didn't know the Lord when I was a teenager. My family drank. My friends drank. I thought everyone drank alcohol. I wasn't raised in a church like our family's. Nobody read the Bible to me when I was a kid."

I began to cry.

"It's OK, Mom. You aren't like that now," one of my daughters gently offered.

"We still love you, Mom," said my other daughter. "And Jesus loves and forgives you, too."

I could tell by my daughters' faces that this conversation was as hard for them as it was for me. But their compassionate replies were encouraging.

"Like me," I said, "many kids grow up in homes where nobody knows the Lord. Where people sin and think bad behavior is normal. These people need our prayers and our love."

Washed Clean

After I told my daughters of my past, I kept thinking about a tiny piece of red sea glass I'd found.

A serious sea glass hunter once told me red glass is the most valuable kind. And it's nearly impossible to find now after years of people picking over the beach.

This little shard looked like a drop of blood. It reminded me of the blood of the babies my friends aborted with my help. But the red glass also reminded me of the blood of my Savior. For when I placed the piece in my antique jar, the red glass disappeared into the white shells. In the same way, Christ's blood, when poured upon my sins, turned me white as those sun-bleached seashells.

And now I can use those old sins, soft and refined like the sea glass, to teach others—and my children—about Christ's amazing love.

*Jodi Washington is a pseudonym. Names and details have been changed. This article first appeared in the **July/August 2008** issue of **Today's Christian Woman**.*

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Thought Provokers

- *Why do you think the author used a pseudonym?*
- *What do we hide because of shame? What purpose might God have in redeeming those painful secrets?*
- *What areas of our lives need a new start?*

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Additional Resources

More places for more information.



Forgiveness, a downloadable resource from **GiftedforLeadership.com** helps you find the wisdom and practical insights you need to gain a better understanding of what forgiveness is, and learn how to experience a fresh start through the authenticity of life forgiveness brings.

Recovering Ministries, a downloadable resource from **BuildingChurchLeaders.com** that explores ways a church can minister to those seeking to start over. The gospel is all about the opportunity for every individual to experience restoration from sins and become reunited with Christ – the foundation of our “new start.” This resource will help leaders remember why recovery matters and give tools to lead people into life change.

Starting Over God’s Way by Clarence W. Walker, Xulon Press, 2003, paperback. Life can sometimes be incredibly hard. Sometimes we find ourselves at the bottom of a pit of despair, dejection, and possible defeat. Neither theological nor psychological, this is the work of one who has been there in his own life and in the lives of others. This book is for those seeking hope, meaning, purpose, and the hand of God to help them climb out of the darkness.





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Finding Fullness Again: What the Book of Ruth Teaches Us About

Starting Over by Ralph Douglas West, B & H Publishing Group, 2006, paperback. As in Naomi's case in the book of Ruth, there will likely be times when you'll arrive at a desolate place in the heart, truly crushed in spirit for whatever reason. Finding Fullness Again takes an encouraging look at the story of Naomi and Ruth to remind you that you too can keep pressing forward, not just running on empty, despite the weight of your concerns. "Let the old things pass away," Douglas says. "Let everything that God wants for you become new."

Out of the Ashes: A Handbook for Starting Over by Patrick McDonald, Paulist Press, 1997, paperback. Out of the Ashes deals with deep changes in life that are serious, difficult, and often painful. The reality of change confronts a person with questions about life, mortality, human destiny and meaning. An evolution from a state of helplessness to a mature spirituality will involve five processes: disintegration, sifting, reconstruction, reintegrating and transcendence.





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