

A TRANSFORMATIONAL ADVENTURE STORY, VOLUME 1
ADVANCE COPY

THE

HEART

OF IT ALL

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The Hole

Years ago if someone would've told me that one day I would share this story, I would've told them, "You're crazy!" It's personal. My business. Something I never thought I would tell. But now that I'm older, I realize that my journey may be able to help others who are desperately looking for something. Maybe they realize there is supposed to be more to life than what they are experiencing. Maybe they are constantly searching for more. Maybe they don't even know what it is they are looking for. This is where I spent most of my life. Like I had a hole in my soul that never could be filled. In all honesty, I think the hole differs for different people. I mean, the hole can have varying likes and cravings. For example, possibly the hole longs to be filled with more money, toys, or possessions. For another, the hole may be an obsession with alcohol, sex, power, or drugs. Why, the hole can even be something rather ordinary, like wanting more time to go fishing or workout. It's anything. It's whatever steals our time and attention away from God. And the ultimate deception is that we do not readily see it. We don't even realize that the deception exists.

You see, I grew up going to church every once in awhile. In high school, I dated a church-going girl. She was nice, most of the time. But there was a part of me that surrendered to naivety, not realizing that she only wanted to hang out with me when I was a starting player on the football team. I should've clued in when she quickly dumped me to date a starter on the basketball team and within months, dumped him in order to date a starter on the baseball team. I had no idea I was being a pawn in her chess game. Our relationship rode wildly like a roller coaster dependent on the varying sports season. Nonetheless, she, along with two of my friends, convinced me to attend an evangelical revival one evening in the high school football stadium. That night, I was introduced to the power of Jesus. The passion of this evangelist was impressive with all the foot stomping and yelling. Like my football coach would yell, I found myself oddly relating. He said my long hair and rock and roll music were from the devil and somehow...I believed him and was challenged by his words.

I was young. Sixteen at the time.

Easily persuaded.

And pulled by the hype and excitement consuming the air.

I found my lips repeating after the evangelist, saying a sinner's prayer. I was doing what I was told to do. Asking Jesus to come live in my heart. I thought that is what it meant to become a Christian. Simply say a prayer and go on living however you please. I figured I might as well get my eternity taken care of right then and there.

Years passed...twenty-seven to be exact...and all this time I thought I was a Christian. But yet, something was missing. Like a hole in my soul that was ever quenching, yet never satisfied. I tried to fill it with stuff. Lots of worldly stuff. I wanted to be as comfortable as I could be. In my never-ending quest for happiness, I found myself

growing more discontented when I looked around at what everyone else had. Hence, as a competitor, I was determined to have more. More than my neighbor. More than my friends. And most certainly more than anyone next to kin.

Arguably one of the most well-known Scriptures is found in John 3:16, which says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son that whoever *believes* in Him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.” Another frequently quoted verse located in Romans 10:9 states, “That if you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and *believe* in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Italics added)

I did confess with my mouth that I was a Christian. To a very selective audience. When I wanted to. If I wasn’t embarrassed. Or out of my comfort zone.

Sure, I understood with my mind that Jesus died for my sins and that He is God’s very own Son. And so, for the next several years, I set out to make my mark in this world *thinking* that I *believed*.

I lived my life with high aspirations, setting many goals.

Receive high school MVP athletic awards	Check
Obtain a football scholarship at a major university	Got it
Become a starter on the UT Football team	Did it
Complete a Finance degree	Accomplished
Do not make a D or F in college	Almost
Marry a great lady	Exceeded the mark!
Find a good job	For sure
Have two healthy children	Yes
Go hunting and fishing often	As much as possible
Become an active contributing member of this world, helping people and their causes	I think so
Catch a 300 lb Blue Marlin off the coast of Cozumel	Maybe some day
And my ultimate goal...Hit certain financial goals before I hit 40 years old	Done

From my perspective, everything was exactly how I wanted it to be. Everything was under my control. I was a good person and lived a good life. I kept high moral standards and only deviated when I really had to...or needed to...or felt like it. My distorted view told me sin is cheap and God’s grace is abundant. Therefore, live however you please as long as your sin is considered permissible. You know, the kind of sin that everyone does. A little white lie. A small burst of anger. The kind of sin that we all consider as no big deal. We went to church occasionally on Christmas and Easter when there was nothing

better to do. I was confident I was going to heaven because I was a nice guy. There was only a tinge of doubt. But I was pretty sure. After all, I thought I *believed*.

How certain are you in your eternity?

We don't always know what is coming around the next bend. We can't see into our future. We never know when our road will take an unexpected detour. We just don't really know.

First Heart Surgery

In May 1996, at the age of thirty-seven, I began having some minor chest pains. Maybe it was due to something I ate. Maybe I was getting older or out of shape. But the pains persisted from May to September despite several trips to the doctor. After numerous work-ups, the doctor ruled out all heart-related issues. My blood pressure was 120/80; heart rate of 65 beats per minute; cholesterol level at 126; and a perfectly normal EKG. I was in fine physical condition. Therefore, I was treated for some stomach and esophagus related problems and spasms and sent on my merry way.

I prided myself on being tough and taking care of myself. For months, I continued my 4 to 5 day a week workout regime. I tried to run through the pain. I bought into this world's philosophy: No pain, No gain. I was going to keep on keeping on.

On an early September morning, I was determined to run until the pain subsided. After a few minutes, I found myself on the side of the road before sun up, curled up in a ball. Clutching my chest tightly. Gasping for air. During the time of recovery, I counted my heart rate in order to accurately report my findings to the doctor. It took nine minutes for the pain to diminish so I could stand up.

But of course, I'm not a quitter.

Immediately, I resumed my running routine.

After my run, I went home, changed into my business suit, and went straight to my doctor. He asked a few questions, including "On a scale of one to ten, can you rate the pain in your chest?" I replied that I have had several broken bones, partially torn ligaments and cartilage, cuts, stretched nerves in my neck that numbed my right hand for a few months, concussions and the like and none of these were even close in comparison. The pain I was feeling in my chest was off the scale. Unbearable. Horrible. I told him I much rather have a few swings with a baseball bat to my chest than endure the current pain. My pain threshold had been exceeded. I don't know if words can adequately explain. It felt like an extreme muscle contraction...like you would have in the thigh muscle...but multiplied ten times over.

My general practice doctor sent me to Dr. Williams, a cardiologist in south Austin, for an initial visit and screening. Given a heart-monitoring device to wear for the next 24 hours, I set out to ensure they received a complete reading. The following morning I went to the gym, hopped on the treadmill, and ran until I could not run one inch more due to excruciating pain exuding from the chest. Again, I collapsed in a chair until the pain subsided and I could get up again. Proud of my achievement, I excitedly turned in my monitoring device that afternoon and exclaimed, "I got you a good reading!" However, when the nurse tried to retrieve my data she quickly discovered that the batteries were dead. And so was my enthusiasm. No data. No answers. Crap!

A follow-up appointment was scheduled in two weeks, but due to a misunderstanding, I showed up a week early. My pain had substantially increased over this time period and now I felt chest pains when I stood up too quickly from a relaxed sitting position. I was taking Nitro pills for the pain and they were working. Well, somewhat anyways. Keeping me alive while unknowingly, indicating that a serious heart condition was lurking. Coincidentally, someone did not show up for an appointment time at the cardiologist that morning at the exact same time that I was scheduled one week later, and I was able to take a stress test. They hooked me up to countless sensors and within a couple of minutes into the stress test, I felt a twinge of pain. It was like someone thumped me in the chest but quite honestly, nothing compared to the pain I had experienced a few days earlier. As the readings were being observed, the cardiologist and nurse unexpectedly grabbed me and thrust me onto the table. Their eyes were dazed like a deer in headlights. I didn't have a clue what was going on, but later discovered they were planning to administer CPR. I guess they thought I was going to die. The following day, an angiogram was performed.

My nurse, a very friendly and outgoing guy, made light of the possibility that someone at my age (thirty-seven years young to be exact) and in my tip-top physical condition could have any problem with clogged arteries. After all, it would be extremely rare. During the procedure, I was eerily awake, fully aware of what was going on in my surroundings. They gave me a mild sedative to soothe my nerves and boy oh boy, I thought of asking them for a six-pack to go! As I was lying still on the table, the contrasting dye was injected into my catheter. I remember being told the dye would highlight any blockages of blood flow to my heart. Abruptly I heard my nurse say, "Oh shit!" under his breath, however in a quiet room, everyone heard it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the doctor give an extremely stern look toward the nurse. Subsequently, complete, unbearable silence settled in like the calm before a storm. For some strange reason, I felt concerned, yet peaceful.

After I was moved into recovery, Dr. Williams explained that the test revealed I had two 90-degree bends in my Left Anterior Descending coronary artery (LAD, nicknamed "the widow maker"). These bends were within a one-inch space, which was 98% blocked. He said it was one of the strangest things he had every seen, especially since he saw less than 5% blockage in my remaining coronary arteries.

The following day, Dr. Chip Oswalt, who was coincidentally available because of a postponed out-of-town trip, performed a heart bypass surgery to repair the LAD. Dr. Oswalt was one of the leading heart surgeons in the state of Texas and also, one of the few surgeons who had the expertise to perform this new type of single artery bypass without breaking open the chest cavity. I was his lucky #7 surgery of this kind. In summary, he broke and displaced two ribs, cut the mammary artery, and then “T’ed” it into the LAD below the blockage. No breaking open the sternum. No harvesting a vein from the leg. My heart was still beating the entire time. I consider him a superstar!

The Miracle

From diagnosis to surgery, things happened in such rapid succession that I didn’t really understand what was going on. Dr. Williams later explained that once this particular LAD artery becomes clogged and stressed to the point of the readings he saw on my stress test, the artery usually explodes off the heart. The patient is basically dead before he even has a chance to lie down. He said that most of his patients with this kind of condition might have two, three, or at the most, four warning signs before a fatal heart attack. As he was speaking, his words penetrated deep within. I knew. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I shouldn’t be here on this earth alive anymore. I had been feeling severe chest pain (much more intense than I experienced during the stress test at his office) multiple times per week for the past four months.

Why in the world wasn’t I dead?

Some would say my survival was “luck” or “several coincidences” or a “second chance.” At the time, I seriously thought God might be sending me a wake-up call. Maybe God had a different path for me than the one I had been on. Wasting no time, I started taking my family to church on a more regular basis.

The Big Deception

Shortly thereafter, a man I met at the church began disciplining me one-on-one in God’s Word. More than ever before, I thought I was a Christian because I was trying to live a moral life according to God’s standards. I didn’t realize it at the time, but in reality, I was trying to earn my salvation through my religious endeavors, moral character, commitment, and performance. I joined the church and become more involved. Ina and I attended Sunday school class, our two boys engaged in the youth group, and I even became a youth group leader as a result of some turnover within the church. Since I coached many of these kids in youth sports, I figured I could lead them in Bible study too. And oddly enough, our youth director was in such dire need for help at the time that he gladly accepted my offer. No interview. No personal testimony. God bless him...he had no idea that I wasn’t saved.

*If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and **believe** in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9*

Although I believed that Christ had been raised from the dead, I had not yet made Him my Lord. That was the real issue. I was all about the freebie. I wanted my salvation secured for eternity as long as I didn't have to change much of anything. I had no idea that salvation was to evoke a response in my heart that would inspire me to turn my life over to Him. I did not understand the difference between head knowledge and heart application. Despite my salvation status, God is a powerful God who worked through me in the lives of our church youth. God can speak through anyone or anything at any time. Why, He has been known to use an ass to speak before (Numbers 22:28). I guess that means He can use me. Come to think about it, some people who have been in my wake might draw a very direct comparison.

I wonder how many people today think they are saved, but instead, unsuspectingly are fooled. Scripture teaches us that satan is a master deceiver, the father of lies, full of evil, and consumed with pride. He is relentless, not willing to give up the fight. Playing counterfeit to all that God does. He must believe he'll win with considerable odds, or hate God so much that when he goes down, he will take as many with him as he possible. satan (I refuse to respect satan with a capital "S" even at the beginning of a sentence) will do anything and everything within his power to oppose God and all those who follow after Him. For thousands of years he has practiced deception...creating cults, stirring up evil, and pulling the wool over the eyes of the common man. I wish it weren't so. I wish no one would perish. I really do. And God wants all His children to come home to Him! In 2 Peter 3:9, we are told that God does "not wish that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." However, we are also told in Matthew 7:21-23, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." In reality, many who think they are disciples will perish. Forever. Damned to burn in hell.

Like many of his original hearers, we find the sayings of Jesus hard.

That was once me. I thought I was saved because I said a prayer asking Jesus to come into my heart. I wonder how many others have fallen for satan's trickery. Maybe they attend church religiously and base their chances of getting into heaven on sound rationale. Maybe they go about doing a lot of good things. Maybe they've even spent hours studying God's Word. But have they really changed?

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." Matthew 16:24-25

We can think we know God and yet know very little. We can go about doing our own thing. For the longest time, I had made up my own religion. I just didn't realize it at the time. I did exactly what the pastor told me. I diligently studied my Bible. I talked a lot

about God in my Christian circles. I obeyed Him...but only so far and not a step further. As long as it fit into my perimeters. As long as it sounded soothing to my ears.

What does it mean to "lose your life?"

I am so grateful God gave me a second chance and yet, so disturbed that some will die without knowing Him due to this deep deception. In business, war, and politics, I watched and learned that the most effective way to defeat the rival is to ambush them when least expecting. In other words, beat them to the punch before they're ready or aware. One of satan's most common tactics is to tempt us in such a way that we become self-absorbed. He somehow convinces us to get comfortable and self-sufficient on this planet called Earth. To make it our forever home. Through lies, manipulation, distortion, and exaggeration, he tricks us to be pre-occupied with our success, fame, comfort, recreation, and outward appearance. We don't even realize how often our thoughts are concentrated on the one thing we call "Self."

Cleverly, sin starts small. It's a slow fade. Sin is so disguisable that it cunningly appears as no big deal. Everyone else is doing it. Why would God care? Personally, satan deceived me with worldly objects and pleasures that will never satisfy. I chased after the things of this world to fill a void in my heart, a place that should be reserved only for God. The things I chased after weren't necessarily bad on their own, however, I gave them a position of high value. I once heard it said in reference to satan's trickery, "Why use adultery when golf will do?" Before I placed God as number one, my weekend joy hinged on a Saturday Longhorn's win, a Sunday Cowboy's performance, followed by the Monday morning's national football rankings. My attitude towards my family and work was contingent on the game. However, I found I was never satisfied. All the stuff I tried to be happy, left me longing for something more.

I discovered the hole in my soul was too small for anything other than God.

It's not our activities, but rather the priority we place on them. Pride creeps in, telling us we must have more than the guy next door. We play this game called life not to be rich, or famous, or good-looking. No, we play this game much like Monopoly. We want to be richer, smarter, and better looking than anyone else around. Our worldly egos find temporary contentment and joy by comparing ourselves to others. For this reason, I always wanted to win. The hole within was telling me, "You must have more."

In order to find life, I had to lose it. I had to not only think less of me, but also think about me less. I started to connect my personal endeavors to Jesus Christ, my Lord. And suddenly, I viewed life from a different perspective. I could go to a Longhorn football game and enjoy the evening, regardless of the score. I could behold the giftedness of the athletes as a reflection of God's handiwork, whether or not they were on my team. I could breathe. Simply breathe...because my Creator put breath in my lungs.

For six long years, the deceiver, swindler, and fraud sucked the life out of me. He conned me to think I had a relationship with Jesus when, in actuality, I was a lost, unsaved soul.

“The gospel is not just a truth about us that we affirm with our minds, it is also a reality we must experience in our hearts and souls.” –Timothy Keller

Authentic Faith

The Greek word for “believe” is *pisteuo* and it means an “absolute belief or confidence in certain divine truths.” John 3:16 says, “Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” Rather than simply stating, “whoever **believes** Him” (in other words, **believe** what He says is the truth), John makes a sharp distinction and says, “whoever **believes IN** Him.” True saving faith requires us to trust *in* Jesus, not in ourselves. For myself, I thought I fully understood the doctrine of salvation. I could explain the concept to just about anyone. But all the while, I did not have an intimate relationship with Jesus. A relationship that is more certain than that with my wife, children, relatives, or friends. A relationship where I know that I know that I know...and He knows me.

The word **belief** in our society and language is so watered down, nothing like the true Greek meaning of “absolute belief.” An absolute is something you have a surety about. You know it will come to be. Like a warranty or guarantee. According to Webster, absolute means, “not qualified or diminished in any way; total.” Unfortunately today, we seldom think of salvation in this manner. It does not imply a sense of commitment or understanding at all. The word **believe** is used as a general attitude, thought, and even hope. It is commonly misunderstood. For example:

- I **believe** I can pass this next test.
- I **believe** I will get a good job.
- I **believe** I will be rich.
- I **believe** I will win a championship.
- I **believe** I will go to heaven.
- I **believe** that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who died for my sins and rose from the dead.

As an English-speaking nation, we can easily swap out the word **believe** with **think** in the sentences above. I **think** I will be rich. I **think** I will win a championship. And yes...I **think** I will go to heaven.

But do you really know?

The problem is that if I think I have a relationship with God because I am living a moral life, I am not moved to think of my salvation. The focus is shifted away from the work Jesus performed on the cross and instead, attention is turned to me. My behavior. My accomplishments. My performance. My head knowledge. There is little joy, amazement, tears, or transformational life change without Jesus at the center. We are not galvanized

and transformed from the inside-out. And unfortunately, like me, many people think they are saved, but according to the Bible many will spend eternity in an everlasting lake of fire. That breaks my heart!

And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' Luke 13:23-27 ESV

As a master of deception, satan had told me a lie. I thought knowing facts about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was enough. I thought verbally agreeing with God's Word is what it meant to be saved. I knew a lot about God, but I didn't really know God. I was in a lukewarm place as described in Revelation.

*"I know your works, that you are neither cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, neither cold or hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth."
Revelation 3:15-16*

Eighty-three percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians. Contrastingly, Scripture tells us the gate to heaven is narrow and few find it (Matthew 7:13-14). This inconsistency should create dissonance in us. It should cause us to dig deeper. Here's why...we can know facts about a person and never have a personal relationship with them. For example, we may feel like we know our favorite celebrity, musician, or athlete. Indeed, we know detailed and specific facts about them. Where they were born. Their favorite food. What they like to do in their spare time. We follow them on social media. We track their every move through Instagram and Twitter. We watch them on television and read about their weekend activities and hobbies in magazine articles. However, there is a big difference in knowing *about* a person versus *relationally* knowing them. And as much as I would know this person, he wouldn't know a thing about me. There is no relationship.

The verses above describe a church and culture that are abundantly rich and comfortable. In many ways, much like the United States where I reside. I had fallen into the trap of thinking I was a Christian without the full relational commitment of **believing**. By no means was I sold-out. I wonder how many of us end up in this predicament.

What is holding us back from trusting in Jesus with our all?

In chapter 6 of his book “*All In*,” Mark Batterson recounts a story of the Spanish Explorer Hernán Cortés who set sail for Mexico with an entourage of 11 ships, 13 horses, 110 sailors, and 553 soldiers. The indigenous population had an overwhelming population of approximately 5 million. The odds were overwhelmingly against them by a ratio of 7,541 to 1. Now, at this point, most people would stay on the boat or be looking for another option. But Cortes commands the troops to do the unthinkable. *Burn the ships!* He makes sure that everyone on board is committed. Risk everything or die in the process. There was no other alternative.

“Nine times out of ten, failure is resorting to Plan B when Plan A gets too risky, too costly, too difficult. That’s why most people are living their Plan B. They don’t burn their ships. Plan A people don’t have a Plan B. It’s Plan A or bust. They would rather crash and burn going after their God ordained dreams than succeed at something else.”

–Mark Batterson

God’s Word tells us to give up everything and yet, we find ourselves tightly clinching on. This world tells us to seek wealth, health, and prosperity, whereas Jesus tells us He is our all. Our modern day culture lures us into thinking we will never have enough while Jesus proclaims the only way we will ever be satisfied is *in* Him and Him alone. Meanwhile, the world around us is dying as we self-indulge in our faith rather than believe in a self-denying faith telling us to let go. Jesus detests those who are lukewarm and states they will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Lukewarm people will not act like or bear fruit like true believers. And worse yet, may deter others from being drawn into a relationship with our Lord.

Has our faith become so commercialized, customized, and calculated that it no longer reflects the true Gospel? Are we able to detach from a made-up, modernized faith in America to one that is authentic and Christ-centered? Should we be bothered that the Bible never tells us to “ask Jesus to come live in our hearts” or say magical words referred to as “the sinner’s prayer?” And yet, that is exactly what we have validated as a ticket to our salvation.

In the Bible, several verses helped me understand what ***believing*** in Jesus really means:

Jesus says, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father and I too will love him and show myself to him.” John 14:21

Since I didn’t read the Bible much, I didn’t know what His commandments were. How could I obey them if I didn’t care enough to know them?

“If anyone loves me he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teachings.” John 14:23-24

We are more messy and flawed than we ever imagined, and simultaneously more accepted and loved than we could ever hope for. And because of God’s abounding love, unending grace, and continuous forgiveness...we respond with sincere, heart-felt obedience. The more we grasp what salvation truly means, the more we want to lay it all down and serve. We are reconciled to God through the debt paid by Jesus, something we could never afford. Therefore, we obey because He first loved us. However, on the contrary, lukewarm religion teaches that acceptance from God is based on how we perform.

Demons believe God exists. However, that doesn’t mean they are saved.

“You believe that there is one God; even the Demons believe -- and shudder.” James 2:19

King Agrippa knew the Scriptures and approved of the Old Testament Scriptures. Yet, he did not **believe** in Jesus.

King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Acts 26:27-28

Even satan knows who God is but refuses to **believe** He is Lord. Salvation is more than knowing there is a God; we have to **believe** in Him by relationship, in addition to, understanding and accepting His teachings. And when we have authentic faith, it shows. Not in flashy, outwardly service but rather in our sacrificial love for Him and this lost world.

*“You see that a person is justified by what he does, not by faith alone.”
James 2:24*

Real faith changes you. Dead faith drains you. Authentic faith gives you new life and bears the fruit of love. It feeds the homeless, loves the unlovely, cares deeply about lost souls, and willingly meets the needs of those around you.

Jesus, in answering the Pharisee’s question as to which of the ten commandments are most important, says; “Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, this is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, love your neighbor as

*yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.”
Matt 22:37-40*

This kind of love is unnatural. To love someone as much as you love yourself. If we are instructed to live this way, then something supernatural, earth-shattering, unbelievable, and incomprehensible must have to happen inside of our souls. Something we cannot possibly construct on our own. Something vastly different from the me-seeking, me-preserving, me-advancing, me-centered mortal beings we familiarly call “self.” The kind of love God is talking about takes me completely out of the equation and puts it on someone else. It is the kind of love that puts God first, others second, and me last.

*“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self seeking, it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always hopes, always preserves.”
I Corinthians 13:4-6*

When you love this way, others know. It is not pretentious or looking for a pat on the back. To love like this means walking into a room and rather than thinking about yourself, you begin thinking about what is best for those around you. Do they know Jesus? How can you let your light shine for Him, for their benefit?

“Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Matt 5:16

By depending entirely on Jesus, we become changed into new, loving people. We begin to realize that He is our ample supply. He is our abundant Provider. He changes everything...even our pocket books. By directing our thoughts to the cost of grace afforded to us on the cross, we become generous people. Our stingy thoughts are re-oriented by reminding ourselves of Christ’s generosity. Something we could never afford or pay on our own. At the cross, He poured out His wealth for us. The cross proves that God’s love for us is serious, unending, and unconditional. Salvation, therefore, confers to us an extraordinary status—one that money cannot buy. I spent the majority of my adult life trying to provide for my family because the world told me to, but God shatters this common misconception.

“Do not store up treasures on Earth but in heaven....you cannot serve both God and money.” Matthew 6:19-20

I was incredibly off track. Not until I became a **believer** did I understand that with God first in our worldly relationships, our relationship between family and friends are better too. I did not understand that He wanted to be first in my life for me to receive His love so that I had love to give to others. It’s like money; I can’t give what I don’t have. And

the only pure source of love is from our relationship with our Heavenly Father. There is no middle ground.

“Anyone who loves his father, mother, sons or daughters more than me is not worthy of me....and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Matthew 10:37-39

“He who is not with me is against me and he who does not gather with me scatters.” Matthew 12:30

To be a **believer** doesn't mean to be affiliated with a certain denomination or to regularly attend church. It doesn't mean to be involved with a Christian movement or bear the name of Christianity. It means to be changed by the power of the Holy Spirit into a person with a new heart of love for our Heavenly Father and for Jesus and for fellow believers and for those who are lost. And when we love like this, we know we are saved. Salvation and love go hand-in-hand. Love confirms that our confession of faith is the real deal.

“My command is this, love each other as I have loved you, greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:12-13

The first time I read this verse, there were only three people I would lay my life down for: my wife and my two sons. I could never imagine loving anyone else to this extent. This kind of love-one-another love sounds strange and yet, compelling. Is it really possible to love others this much?

Would you willingly lay your life down?

There was a time I had a very contentious relationship with a guy I felt was hurting others. He was always condescending and very divisive. I was at my wit's end. I could feel the anger simmering, waiting to come to a full boil. Inwardly I dreamed of how I could provoke him into throwing the first punch so I could beat the crud out of him. I felt he needed a thorough butt-whipping.

At the time, Christ was pursuing me into a deeper relationship, but I had not yet surrendered my life over to Him. I was not a Christian. Nonetheless, I thought the Bible would specifically answer my question, “At what point can I beat the snot out of someone?” I visualized myself in the ring. Eye for an eye. Tooth for a tooth. Man, I was so ready. I knew there were tons of wars and conflicts, especially in the Old Testament portion of the Bible. But to my surprise, this is where God sent me:

Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and

persecute you that you may be sons of your Father. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you, do not even the tax collectors do the same?" Matthew 5:43-44, 46

This was not the answer I wanted to find! But I began praying for my enemy and I found a place of peace that was beyond my understanding. I was now better suited to respond to this conflict. Not getting his way and no longer getting a rise out of me, he began attacking others who disagreed with him. And then, he finally went away.

We are required to do much more: Love each other, even our enemies. We do so by allowing the Holy Spirit to enter in all facets of our relationships. Who knows, God may want to use you to bring an enemy to Him. I did not understand this gospel of love. The commandment to love one another was not only a command for imitation, but also for participation. *His* love is being perfected *in* us.

Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive; Jesus replied, "I tell you, not seven times but seventy-seven times." Matthew 18:21-22

Up to this point in my life, I was so competitive that if someone wronged me, I was going to get even and then some. I was a fighter. I was determined to win.

Jesus speaking to the disciples ... "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-just as the son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as ransom for many." Matthew 20:26-28

For years, I led with "It's my way or the wrong way" mentality rather than "I will love and support those who work with me to help them become the best that they can be." I needed a serious mind shift.

When Jesus comes, he will separate the people like sheep. He will consider the way we treat each other as if we were treating Him the same way. He says to us "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these people in need, you did not do for me." Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. Matt 25:31-46

Second Heart Surgery

After reading these verses, I came to the realization that the Bible was a great resource for improving relationships with others. On a Sunday afternoon in the spring of 2003, as I was in the middle of preparing for one of the youth group classes, I felt Jesus and the Holy Spirit enter my heart. I was forty-three years old at the time. He was like a blanket

that covered me in strength, peace, comfort, and assurance. I began to understand and comprehend the meaning of Scriptures in the Bible like never before. From that moment on, I began trying to live my life with God in front, following His lead every step of the way. It was the most incredible personal experience I have ever had! This second heart surgery is when God's grace supernaturally changed my heart. I am human and still sin, but by His grace, I am forgiven and righteous in His eyes. To God be the glory! My heart's desire is to serve Him and Him alone. Not me. Not anyone else. Just Jesus. And at that moment, I **believed** in Jesus with my whole heart, accepting what He did for me on the cross rather than **thinking** only in my mind.

"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." Ezekiel 36:26-27

"The acts of a sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, self ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." Galatians 5:19-23

Before the Holy Spirit resided in me, I had several of these characteristics. But I didn't see it. I wanted to distance myself from sin. When I read these verses, I read them as if they applied to someone else or a bunch of really bad sinners. Certainly not me! I didn't see the need to apply all of the Scripture to my personal life. When I finally made less of me and more of Jesus, I began to see my own sinfulness. As a Christian, I no longer wanted to do these things, but I had to allow God's love to break the habits of my former nature...and it is a continual life long journey.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control." Galatians 5:22

It wasn't until I became a Christian that the fruit of the Spirit started becoming self-evident in me. Because my life is His, there is nothing I will intentionally do or say to dishonor God. Not to say I don't ever sin. Yes, I do. But the Holy Spirit quickly convicts me of sin and draws me towards repentance. He helps me live a holier, more abundant life than I could ever live on my own. My heart's desire is to have a stronger relationship with God. The wants and desires I once had in this world have dissipated...not vanished...and have been replaced with the fruit of the Spirit. I have been in a continual transition from my way to God's way and it has been a fullness of life that transcends understanding!

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God”. Romans 12:2

And this was the beginning of my Transformational Adventure.

God has shown me that the way we should reveal ourselves is through the walk on our everyday path. Humbly. Patiently. Joyously. Faithfully. And without selfish-ambition.

Opening up like this to others is out of my comfort zone, but Jesus has convicted me to share my story. The reason I am doing this is because I love you and want to spend eternity with you in heaven. Throughout my life, I thought my faith was private and should remain that way. Hush-hush. Top secret. However, I have learned that satan deceived me. My faith is personal but my journey is public so that others will be given eternal hope. To God be all the glory.

Deeper Reflection

As I reflect on my story, John 10:10 resonates deep within me. Jesus says, “The thief does not come except to steal, kill and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”

I pray that those who read this will be aware of the spiritual war going on right now! I pray we realize God is with us now, and so is satan. I pray our eyes are opened in order for our faith to persevere for an abundant life with Jesus. For living a life without Jesus is not life at all, but rather results in eternal damnation in a lake of fire.

In the six years between my first heart surgery and second, my saving faith, I began pondering these questions and finally came to grips with the disconnect between my head and my heart:

- What is my top priority? Do I spend more time chasing after money or power than time with God?
- Do I consider Christians self-righteous if they do not go along with the crowd and have fun? Or do I honor them as one who has such a commitment to their Lord that he or she would not break their relationship with God?
- Do I admire celebrities above God?
- Do I spend more time reading about my favorite sports team than with God?
- Do I spend more time on the phone or Internet gossiping about other people than the time I spend with God?
- Do I love *anything* more than God?
- Do I love *anyone* more than God, including spouse or children?

I seriously re-evaluated my relationships. As I began studying and learning how Scripture should apply to my life, I had more questions:

- Do I possess the acts of a sinful nature: sexual immorality or impurity?
- Do I think more of money than of God? Do I hate anyone? Am I jealous? Do I have fits of rage? Am I full of self-ambition? Do I instigate dissension or factions between others? Do I envy? Do I engage in drunkenness?
- How do I handle conflicts--with self-righteousness or anger? Or with so much love that I will draw the person and the occasion to God?
- Has anyone that doesn't know me ever asked if I am a Christian or recognize me as one? Why or why not?
- Do I contemplate that I have a 50%, 75%, or 95% chance of getting into heaven or do I know, without a doubt, where I will spend eternity?
- As a husband and father, am I the spiritual leader of my house, or do I outsource that responsibility to my wife, pastor, or youth leader?
- And finally, am I reluctant or embarrassed to speak the name of God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit in front of others? Do I honestly think God will claim me as His for eternity if I am remotely embarrassed to be His now?

*If we haven't **BELIEVED IN Him before, we must BELIEVE IN Him now!***

A Heartfelt Prayer

Maybe the Holy Spirit has opened your eyes today. Maybe you want to live differently than you are right now. Salvation is simple. It is free to those who confess that Jesus Christ is their Savior and lay down their lives to Him as their Lord.

There are no magical words.

No secret handshake.

No oath to be sworn in.

God sees the sincerity of your heart. I am standing in agreement with you today. And you may be wondering what to do. What to say. Go ahead and talk to God as if He were in the room with you. Ask Him to transform you from the inside-out.

*Today I want to receive God's grace and His Kingdom; I open my heart to You, Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to come in. Please come into my heart so that I can receive the love that You so freely give. Thank you for washing away my sins on the cross. I love you, Jesus, because You loved me first. I am willing to **believe in** you and your Word. I will not be embarrassed to be Yours, Father God. Help me Lord, help me. I cry out to You! Thank you, God, for this time in fellowship and thank you for your son, Jesus, who died for my transgressions. I trust and **believe** He was raised from the dead. I love you God, I love you God, (as many times as fills your heart). In Jesus name I pray. Amen.*

The Next Step

If you have said this prayer in agreement with me, you have a new or renewed relationship with Jesus Christ. For starters, I suggest reading the Bible daily. My favorite versions of the Bible are the New King James, NASB, and NIV, although another easy-to-read interpretation is The Message. The first book that you might consider reading is James, written by the half-brother of Jesus. James didn't believe Jesus was who He said He was until Jesus died (see John 7:5) and was raised from the dead (see 1 Cor. 15:7). The transfigured Jesus personally appeared to James and the other disciples and finally, James believed. (There is always hope for those of us who are slow to clue in)! The book of James also teaches wonderful life application lessons. Then, I would go to the beginning of the New Testament and read Matthew and dive into the Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5-7. You might also read the rest of the Gospels: Mark, Luke, and John. And each time you read, pray for the Holy Spirit to teach you. He is the best teacher ever!

And one more very important thing taught by Jesus in John 17 is for us to be in unity with each other. We need each other and are here to help each other. Satan would tell us we can do this life on our own. We can, but we can't live it abundantly, and in the end we will find ourselves very disappointed. Please find a Bible **believing** church or home group and join in...frequently. No pastor is perfect and no church is either, but **believing** in Jesus is key to finding a good fit. Ask God to direct your path and give you peace and comfort for where He wants you to go and grow. Congratulations brother or sister! All of heaven rejoices when one person decides to receive Jesus!