Chapter 1: The Light Comes On

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

(Ps 139-23-24 NIV)

Dave was a handsome, highly successful businessman. He had always been able to live life on his own terms. To Dave, being strong meant being in control. He had a way of controlling his wife and intimidating his children to keep them from being much of a bother to him.

It wasn’t that he didn’t know how he affected his wife and children. It wasn’t even that he didn’t notice how isolated and alone he really was. He had just concluded that this was simply how he was and everyone would just have to tolerate him.

But now he wept like a small child. Life had caught up with Dave. Gone were his wife, his children, and much of everything he had worked so hard for. He just repeated over and over how he would be different if only he could have another chance. Reality had turned on the light in Dave’s dark world, and he realized that the worst part of his world was himself. He just couldn’t believe that he had been so wrong for so long.

Hopefully, we won’t find ourselves in Dave’s situation with all its consequences. However, if we are honest with ourselves, from time to time, we find the light being turned on in our world, and we are amazed (and sometimes embarrassed) at what we see. It isn’t that we don’t now that certain things are not right. We just don’t realize how destructive these things are until the light comes on.

Many of us are hurt emotionally, relationally, and spiritually, but because we are unaware of the extent of our wounds, we don’t take steps toward healing and health. Our problem is not stupidity but a lack of objectivity. Because of this, we fail to see the reality of pain, hurt, and anger in our lives.

A college student is considered “the life of the party.” She is intelligent, witty, and sociable, but when she is alone, she experiences deep loneliness and seething resentment.

A businessman who, as a child, was neglected by his ambitious father thinks, If I can just get that promotion, then I’ll be happy. Success is what really counts in life! He gets many promotions and raises because he is driven to perform well, but happiness continues to elude him.

A housewife with three children painfully wonders, Why don’t I feel close to my husband? Having grown up with an alcoholic father and a demanding mother, this woman never felt lovable and therefore isn’t able to receive her husband’s love.

An articulate pastor speaks powerfully about the unconditional love and grace of God, yet he is plagued by guilt. He is driven to succeed in his public ministry but is passive and
withdrawn around his family. He has never understood how to apply his own teaching to his own life and relationships.

Why do some of us lack objectivity? Why can’t we see the reality in our lives? Why are we afraid to turn on the light? There are a number of answers to these questions, and they vary for each person. Perhaps we feel that our situations are “normal,” that experiencing loneliness, hurt, and anger is really all there is to life. Perhaps we want to be “good” Christians, and believing that good Christians don’t have problems or feelings like ours, we deny the existence of our emotions. Perhaps our lack of objectivity is a learned response from childhood. All of us desperately want our parents to be loving and supportive. If ours aren’t (or weren’t), we may protect our concept of them by blaming ourselves for their lack of love, and we may deny that we have been hurt by their behavior.

We all develop elaborate defense mechanisms to block pain and gain significance. We suppress emotions; we are compulsive perfectionists; we drive ourselves to succeed, or we withdraw and become passive; we attach people who hurt us; we punish ourselves when we fail; we try to say clever things to be accepted; we help people so that we will be appreciated; and we say and do countless other things.

A sense of need usually propels us to look for an alternative. We may have the courage to examine ourselves and may desperately want to change but may be unsure of how and where to start. We may refuse to look honestly within for fear of what we’ll find, or we may be afraid that even if we can discover what’s wrong, nothing can help us.

It is difficult—if not impossible—to turn on the light of objectivity by ourselves. We need guidance from the Holy Spirit and usually the honesty, love, and encouragement of at least one other person who is willing to help us. Even then, we may become depressed as we begin to discover the effects of our wounds. Some of us have deep emotional and spiritual scars resulting from the neglect, abuse, and manipulation that often accompany living in a dysfunctional family (alcoholism, drug abuse, divorce, absent father or mother, excessive anger, verbal and/or physical abuse, and so on), but all of us bear the effects of our own sinful nature and the imperfections of other. Whether your hurts are deep or relatively mild, it is wise to be honest about them in the context of affirming relationships so that healing can begin.

Many of us mistakenly believe that God doesn’t want us to be honest about our lives. We think that He will be upset with us if we tell Him how we really feel. But the Scriptures tell us that God does not want us to be superficial in our relationship with Him, with others, or in our own lives. David wrote, “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place” (Ps. 51:6 NIV).

The Lord desires truth and honesty at the deepest level and wants us to experience His love, forgiveness, and power in all areas of our lives. Experiencing His love does not mean that all of our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors will be pleasant and pure. It means that we can be real, feeling pain and joy, love and anger, confidence and confusion. The Psalms give us tremendous insight about what it means that we can be real, feeling pain and joy, love and anger, confidence and confusion. The Psalms give us tremendous insight about what it means to be honest with the
Lord, David and other psalmists wrote and spoke honestly about the full range of their responses to situations. For example, David expressed his anger with the Lord because he felt abandoned by Him.

*I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?”* (Ps. 42:9 NIV)

At times, David was very angry with others, and he expressed his anger to the Lord in terms that reveal the depth of his feelings:

*Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O Lord, the fangs of the lions! Let them vanish like water that flows away; when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted. Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun. Before your pots can feel the heat of the thorns whether they be green or dry the wicked will be swept away.* (Ps. 58:6-9)

David wrote of his despair about difficult situations:

*My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.* (Ps. 55:4-5 NIV)

And he communicated his despair to the Lord:

*Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.* (Ps. 44:24-25 NIV)

Sometimes he was confused:

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?* (Ps. 13:1-2 NIV)

Sometimes David communicated his love for the Lord:

*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?* (Ps. 42:1-2 NIV)

At times David trusted in the Lord:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident.* (Ps. 27:1-3 NIV)

At other times he was filled with praise for God:
I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom. (P. 145:1-3 NIV)

These passages demonstrate that God, who spoke of David as a man after His own heart, wants us to be open and honest with Him about all of our emotions, not just the pleasant ones.

Many read and study, go to seminars and meetings— they may even be in relationships in which they are loved and encouraged—but they may not see substantive change in their lives and patterns of behavior. One reason for this spiritual and emotional inertia is a sense of hopelessness. For various reasons (family background, past experiences, poor modeling), we may have negative presumptions that determine our receptivity to love and truth. In some cases, God’s light may have revealed our pain and wall of defenses, but it may not yet have penetrated to our deepest thoughts and belief about ourselves. These beliefs may not be clearly articulated but often reflect misperceptions such as these:

- God doesn’t really care about me.
- I am unlovable, worthless person.
- Nobody will ever love me.
- I’ll never be able to change.
- I’ve been a failure all my life guess I’ll always be a failure.
- If people really knew me, they wouldn’t like me.

When the light of love and honesty shines on thoughts of hopelessness, it is often very painful. We begin to admit that we really do feel negatively about ourselves—and have for a long time. But God’s love, expressed through His people and woven into our lives by His Spirit and His Word, can, over a period of time, bring healing even to our deepest wounds and instill within us an appropriate sense of self-worth.

This is a process that we will examine throughout the following pages. At this point, simply ask the Lord to give you the courage to be honest. Give Him permission to shine His Spirit’s light on your thoughts, feelings, and actions. You may be surprised by additional pain as you realize the extent of your wounds, but our experience of healing can only be as deep as our awareness of the need for it. This takes the power of God’s light.

When the light does come on in our lives, we will discover that we have tried to meet certain needs in the wrong way. It isn’t that the needs are not real, it is just that we have tried to meet these needs in inappropriate ways.

How do we know if something we want is really something we need, we find ourselves uncomfortable, sometimes even miserable, perhaps even at the point of death. Without water we become very thirsty; without sleep we stay very sleepy. When we find that we perceive our lives as having no value, purpose, or significance, we become miserable. May have even killed themselves to avoid living a life such as this. I find it amazing to discover Christians who believe (at least intellectually) that value, purpose, and significance are unimportant to life.
individuals usually have deadened themselves to their own feelings to the point that they have many relational problems they do not even recognize.

The second way we know if something is critical to our lives is to see if God gives much emphasis in His Word regarding a particular need. Reading Scripture from this perspective, we find this emphasized over and over. For instance, Jesus gives His life as a ransom for our lives. The price is too high for us to even calculate. God tells us that we are so significant to Him that He always keeps an eye on us. He manages to be so sensitive to our situation that He even keeps track of the hairs on our head. There is obviously nothing more important to God than our welfare. Even His commands to us are designed for our good. The Father says to His children, “Be careful concerning your choices. You are so precious to Me.” God knows we need to know how valuable our lives are, and He spends much of His Word telling us so.

From life’s outset, we find ourselves on the prowl, searching to satisfy some inner, unexplained yearning. Our hunger causes us to search for people who will love us. Our desire for acceptance pressures us to perform to gain praise from others. We strive for success, driving our minds and bodies harder and further, hoping that because of our sweat and sacrifice others will appreciate us more.

But the man or woman who lives only for the love and attention of others is never satisfied—at least, not for long. Despite our efforts, we will never find lasting, fulfilling peace if we must continually prove ourselves to others. Our desire to be loved and accepted is a symptom of a deeper need—the need that frequently governs our behavior and is the primary source of our emotional pain. Often unrecognized, this is our need for self-worth.

The case of Mark and Beth aptly demonstrates this great need. During their final semester at Cornell University, Mark and Beth fell in love. Beth’s eyes sparkled, her walk had that certain lightness, and she found it difficult to concentrate on her studies. As she and Mark gazed into each other’s eyes, Beth saw the special affection she had always desired. She felt that her need to feel valued and loved would be fulfilled through their relationship. Likewise, Mark was encouraged and motivated by Beth’s acceptance and admiration of him. With her support, Mark thought he could boldly begin a successful career after graduation.

The summer after they graduated from Cornell, Mark and Beth married, believing their love would provide them both with a permanent sense of self-worth. Unfortunately, they were depending on each other to fill a void that could only be filled by their Creator. Each expected the other always to be loing, accepting, and forgiving, no matter what the circumstances were. Soon both were disillusioned and even felt betrayed by the other. As the years passed, affirmation was replaced by sarcasm and ridicule. Each failure to provide love and acceptance was another brick in their wall of hurt and separation. Recently, Mark and Beth celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary. Sadly, although they had shared ten years together, they had experienced very little true, unconditional love. Their search for self-worth and significance ended in despair.

Another example illustrates how the promise of fulfillment through success is an empty one, often resulting in tragic consequences for ourselves and those around us. Brad and Lisa had
been married for twelve years. Brad was a successful lawyer, and Lisa was a homemaker extensively involved in church activities. Their two sons, six-year-old Kyle and eight-year-old David, were well-behaved boys. Although their family appeared to be a model of perfection to those around them, Brad and Lisa were beginning to experience some real problems. True, Brad’s law practice was flourishing, but at the expense of Lisa and the boys. He arrived home later and later each evening and often spend the weekend locked in his office. Brad was driven to succeed, believing that satisfaction and contentment were always just one more trial victory away. But each success gave him only temporary fulfillment. Maybe the next one…

Brad would not allow anything to interfere with his success, not even the needs of his family. At first, Lisa seemed to understand. She knew Brad’s work was important and hated to protest when he was so busy. Not wanting to burden him, she began to feel guilty for talking to him about family problems. But as the weeks turned into months and Brad remained obsessed with his work, Lisa became resentful. She could overlook her own needs even though it was painful, but the boys needed their father. The family never had time to be together anymore, and Brad’s promises sounded hollow. “When this big case is over, the pressure will be off,” he’d say, but there was always another case. Brad was continually solving other people’s problems but never those of his own family. Realizing that she and the boys weren’t important to him, Lisa became bitter and depressed.

Brad and Lisa’s problems persisted, and soon they became obvious to others. Friends began asking Lisa what was wrong. At first she found it difficult to be honest about the situation, but Lisa eventually shared her feelings. She was both hurt and surprised by the glib responses she received from well-meaning but insensitive friends. “Just trust the Lord,” one said. Another close friend advised, “You shouldn’t have any problems, Lisa. You’re a Christian. With God’s help, you can work it out.”

Like falling on a jagged rock, these comments hurt deeply. Lisa began to doubt herself and wonder if she were capable of building a successful marriage and family. Feeling like a failure she reasoned that perhaps she deserved a broken marriage; perhaps her problems with Brad were her fault and God was punishing her for her sins.

Confused and frustrated, both Brad and Lisa were searching for significance in their own ways—Brad in his success as an attorney, and Lisa in her success as a wife and mother. Their lives began to reflect that strange combination of hopelessness and compulsion. Sadly, neither Brad nor Lisa realized that their search should both begin and end with God’s Word.

In the Scriptures, God supplies the essentials for discovering our true significance and worth. The first two chapters of Genesis recount man’s creation, revealing man’s intended purpose (to honor God) and man’s value (that he is a special creation of God). John 10:10 also reminds us of how much God treasures His creation, in that Christ came so that man might experience abundant life. However, as Christians, we need to realize that this abundant life is lived in a real world filled with pain, rejection, and failure. Therefore, experiencing the abundant life God intends for us does not mean that our lives will be problem-free. On the contrary, life itself is a series of problems that often act as obstacles to our search for significance, and the
abundant life is the experience of God’s love, forgiveness, and power in the midst of these problems. The Scriptures warn us that we live within a warfare that can destroy our faith, lower our self-esteem, and lead us into depression. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul instructs us to put on the armor of God so that we can be equipped for spiritual battle. However, it often seems that unsuspecting believers are the last to know this battle is occurring, and they don’t know that Christ has ultimately won the war. They are surprised and confused by difficulties, thinking that the Christian life is a playground, not a battlefield.

As Christians, our fulfillment in this life depends not on our skills to avoid life’s problems but on our ability to apply God’s specific solutions to those problems. An accurate understanding of God’s truth is the first step toward discovering our significance and worth.

Unfortunately, many of us have been exposed to inadequate teaching from both religious and secular sources concerning our self-worth. As a result, we may have a distorted self-perception and may be experiencing hopelessness rather than the rich and meaningful life God intends for us.

Christian psychologist Lawrence J. Crabb Jr. describes our need for self-esteem this way: “The basic personal need of each person is to regard himself as a worthwhile human being.” And, according to William Glasser, “Everyone aspires to have a happy, successful, pleasurable belief in himself.”

Some secular psychologists focus on self-worth with a goal of simply feeling good about ourselves. A biblical self-concept, however, goes far beyond that limited perspective. It is an accurate perception of ourselves, God, and others based on the truths of God’s Word. An accurate, biblical self-concept contains both strength and humility, both sorrow over sin and joy about forgiveness, a deep sense of our need for God’s grace and a deep sense of the reality of God’s grace.

Whether labeled self-esteem or self-worth, the feeling of significance is crucial to man’s emotional, spiritual, and social stability and is the driving element within the human spirit. Understanding this single need opens the door to understanding our actions and attitudes.

What a waste to attempt to change behavior without truly understanding the driving needs that cause such behavior! Yet millions of people spend a lifetime searching for love, acceptance, and success without understanding the need that compels them. We must understand that this hunger for self-worth is God-given and can only be satisfied by Him. Our value is not dependent on our ability to earn the fickle acceptance of people, but rather, its true source is the love and acceptance of God. He created us. He alone knows how to fulfill all of our needs.

In order to fully understand the provisions that God has made for our self-worth, we must look back to man’s beginning, the first man and woman, and their search for significance.