

ZONDERVAN

But God

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1

We Wander ... But God Finds Us

*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

ROMANS 5:8

Wewoka, Oklahoma, is the kind of town where teenage excitement on the weekend consists of cruising the main drag in your pickup truck (cool), your parents' SUV (not so cool), or a friend's pimped-up hatchback (the coolest). I'm proud to say that growing up there, I knew every dusty square inch of asphalt from the IGA supermarket at one end all the way to the mini-mart convenience store and gas station a couple miles down the road. Of course, this was back when gas was 89 cents a gallon, and you could afford to drive around without a reason.

High school football and basketball games captured everyone's attention, along with the team's record and stats on its star players. Otherwise, there wasn't much going on. Needless to say, when teens go looking for fun in a small town, they sometimes find it in the wrong places or create their own out of the perceived building blocks of bliss: alcohol, drugs, partying, and sex. For some reason, I never cared about alcohol or drugs, but I had my own form of searching for fun. As one of the star athletes of the football team, my full-time job was working on my image as a player off the field as much as I was one on the field. I chased girls, pumped my mind full of filthy music, dabbled in pornography, and engaged in sex outside of marriage with numerous young women.

Although it seemed exciting at first, it became exhausting to maintain this lifestyle. I had to always think about how I looked and how others might view me. It was like leading a double life. Yet I couldn't let go of the importance of making sure my peers viewed me a certain way — you know, cool beyond cool, original but standing out only for the right reasons, a man all the guys envied and all the women wanted to be with.

As a result, I made sure everything I did added to this persona — like rolling up to the school parking lot in the mornings, windows down, bass pumpin', hip-hop blatin', making sure everyone knew I was *there*. Yes, I was well liked, but honestly, I knew it and it showed. I was not only a bit too sexy for my shirt (remember that song?), but for my jeans and leather Nikes as well!

Part of my need to build up my image stemmed from how vulnerable I felt on the inside. I wanted to make sure

stories about my upbringing and home life never made it to the school grapevine. The events sound like last week's episode of *The Real Housewives of Wewoka*. I'll try to fill you in on my world then.

Turning Points

My mom and dad's marriage was the second for both of them. My older half brother, who lived with us, resulted from my mom's previous marriage. My father had two kids from previous relationships, but they were fifteen or twenty years older than I was and lived in a different city, so we didn't see them much. And then I had a sister who was eleven months younger than I was.

So growing up, we three kids shared the house, and we were close. I shared a room and bunk beds with my older brother until he moved out after high school. Every Friday night my mom, sister, brother, and I would have a family burrito night — forget bean burritos, I'm talking BBQ burritos! As much fun as those meals were, though, we eventually had to leave the restaurant and return home. And our home was in shambles.

There, alcoholism and abuse presided. Frequently, my parents exploded into fits of screaming, yelling, and fighting. Aware that an emotional bomb might go off any minute, I constantly dodged land mines of tension, fear, and anger. I even installed a lock on my bedroom door to feel safer while I was at home, but many times, it was just easier for me to leave, to be anywhere else but in the midst of my parents' collateral damage.

So can you see why I felt like two different people?

When I was at home, I felt vulnerable, unsure, afraid. When I was on the football field, at school, or cruising the boulevard, I could create that “cool jock” image. This image gave me a sense of confidence and acceptance, so I worked to maintain it no matter what it took.

During my junior year, my parents went through a horrible split. The time had finally come when my mom decided she needed to leave.

I’ll never forget the day I helped her load up her car after my dad left the house. She had decided to take my brother and sister to Rochester, New York, where her sister lived and where she could put thousands of miles between herself and my father.

She wanted me to go with them, of course. And, honestly, being something of a “mama’s boy,” I was torn.

But I knew that if I wanted any shot at a football scholarship, I had to stay put. I couldn’t risk trading the rest of my junior year and senior season at Wewoka for starting over in a place where my talent was unknown.

As I stood watching the car roll away from the house that day, I wondered what life would be like after the people I cared about most were no longer in it. I had chosen to stay with my dad, gambling on a future that remained uncertain, but at least offered the possibility of permanent escape. If I could get noticed by college scouts and offered a football scholarship, then I could leave behind the scared boy I was on the inside and become the cool jock I wanted to be.

That day will forever stand out in my mind. Not just because my mother and siblings moved out, but also because she had left it to me to inform my dad of their

departure. When my dad returned home that day and discovered his wife had left him, I saw him cry for one of the few times in my life.

Friday Night Lights

My parents' divorce shattered my world. When I recall the emotions of this part of my past, tears still come to my eyes. This mama's boy had to learn how to cook, clean, do my own laundry, get myself up for school on time, meet my homework deadlines, and do other chores my mom had always done. It was time to grow up — fast — to survive. I felt angry, confused, isolated, and so lonely.

Not only was I trapped by the pursuit of my image, but now my family was torn apart and my heart ached more than ever. I didn't want our home life to continue on as it had been, but neither did I want my mom, brother, and sister living all the way across the country. They had moved in the fall, and I remember waking up on that first Christmas morning without them. If I could have skipped that day, I would have. What was the point of Christmas if our whole family wasn't going to be together? Once one of my favorite times of the year when I'd count down the days until the twenty-fifth, now Christmas was just another day — no, worse, since I felt more miserable than ever.

So I devoted myself to sports — especially football. I couldn't wait to put those pads on. I lived to get out on the field and score a touchdown or grab an interception. It was my outlet, my escape from the pain I was feeling at home. I lived for Thursdays and Fridays when I could wear my jersey to school. I lived for those pep rallies. I

lived for Friday nights under the white lights of a cool autumn night. I felt like a winner out there, in control of my destiny, in a world where I belonged.

For a few hours on Friday night, all felt right with the world. Seemed like the whole town showed up to cheer for our team, my dad included. He would scream at the top of his lungs and run back and forth in front of the bleachers, providing some of the affirmation every boy craves from his dad. This game — and all it included — was what I had stayed behind for. But no matter how many touchdowns I scored or how many games our team won, off the field nothing changed. My life was still a mess.

Angry and confused, I continued my lifestyle, not caring much *about* other people — just about what they thought of me. From all outward appearances, I was on a roll: a good student, a star athlete, student council president, National Honor Society member, and never without a beautiful young woman by my side. Most people thought I had it all together — which, as you can imagine, could not be further from the truth. I was actually hanging on by a thread.

One day I found myself in a shouting match with one of my coaches and realized how low I had sunk. Though I can't remember what triggered it, I do remember that I had a bad attitude at practice, and he rightly called me on it. My thinking clouded by my pain, I couldn't understand why the coach would single me out like that. I just kept insisting, "You don't understand what I've been going through! You don't understand!"

Normally, I never would have had an outburst like that, but my volatile emotions just erupted. No one

seemed able to look beyond my external facade and figure out what was really going on with me. Football was the only great thing left in my life, and suddenly I was losing control of that too! To top it off, my teammates witnessed my outburst, which went against the carefully crafted cool image I had worked so hard to construct.

I couldn't take much more.

Wandering Alone

I don't know what your story is or how you grew up, but I'm guessing you know what it means to wander without going anywhere. Doesn't matter if you're a star on the high school football field or an executive in a corner office, an unwed mother in a small town or a career mom in the 'burbs, we all create an image of how we want others to see us. We all struggle to know who we really are and why we're here. As we travel down this journey toward discovering who God made us to be, we often take a few detours in pursuit of what we think will fulfill us. When we don't know who we are in Christ, we're prone to experiment, to wander, to get lost along the way.

We rarely want to admit these struggles. We're unhappy, searching for something more, so we wander, trying to find happiness in the wrong things. We look for comfort wherever we can find it, whether in the arms of an illicit lover, or the taste of triple-fudge ice cream, or the thrill of our latest online purchase. Our distractions keep us from asking the hard questions and having an honest conversation with God.

But there's one thing you need to know about the way

God rolls. He will never force you to have a “but God” encounter. He’s always present in your life, willing to help you, to welcome you home, to provide for your needs, to comfort and protect you.

But we have to admit that we need him. We have to acknowledge our fear, unhappiness, and loneliness and recognize that we’re lost. We have to invite God to butt into our business if we want to experience the healing he wants to bring. This requires telling ourselves, and others around us, the truth. Our most important “but God” experience occurs when we recognize just how empty our lives are without him.

Divine Appointment

I recognized this truth in a high school locker room. At the beginning of my senior year, a scout from an East Coast school scheduled a visit to watch me play. His interest was exactly what I’d been hoping for — the chance to be recruited to play college football. Stopping first in Oklahoma City, he called on the night we were supposed to meet and informed me that he wouldn’t arrive in Wewoka until the following day.

My night and plans were blown. I was disappointed, but I tried to be patient and hold myself together. So with nothing else to do that evening, I decided to make an appearance in our locker room for a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting. Truth be told, I went because they were serving free pizza. Yep, if you want old Coop to show up, all you have to do is offer a deluxe with extra cheese!

Todd Thompson, former kicker for the Oklahoma

Sooners, was the guest speaker that night. As an avid Sooners fan, I knew who Thompson was, but since I was still angry, hurting, and confused — as well as self-conscious of my precious image — I remained aloof. But despite the protective wall around my battered heart, Thompson commanded my attention.

For one thing, I was surprised to see him simply sit in a chair and speak to us conversationally, rather than jumping up and screaming at us about Jesus or hell or both as I expected. He communicated the simple gospel message: Jesus came, died, and rose again. He explained that all of us have done things that are wrong; no one is innocent or even close to perfect. But God loves us so much that he gave up what was most precious to him — his only Son — as payment for our sins. He cares for us so much that no matter what we've done, he still welcomes us as his sons and daughters.

Listening to Todd talk, I wondered if maybe what I needed was what he was talking about. Here was someone explaining to me that God had made me for something more than what I was chasing. I caught a glimpse of something that felt like that first gulp of air after being underwater for a long time. Hope. Suddenly, I could breathe again for the first time since I was a little kid.

Then I felt tears coursing down my face. I could feel them not just on my cheeks, but landing on my hands, dropping to the floor. Before I knew it, I had passed the point of no return. I wasn't just crying — this was blubbering! And strangest of all, I didn't even care that a locker room full of teammates could see the captain of their football team weeping.

This was *bigger*.

Finally, I found something I wanted more than being cool.

That night, I gave my life to Christ, beginning a complete change in my life. There's no doubt about it. Without that moment, I would have headed down a very different road. Sure, I may have ended up with a football scholarship, yet I would have continued to live a reckless lifestyle that would have destroyed me in the end. But God had a better plan for my college years. I ended up with a football scholarship that helped pay for my education, but I also took an opportunity to transfer to another university to pursue a biblical studies degree. And there I met the woman who became my wife!

Without that life-changing encounter with God in high school, I would not be the man I am now, the man God created me to be. I would not have the amazing family I have now. And I definitely would not have the privilege of pastoring a church — something that not only challenged me but also fulfilled me.

But God had a plan for finding me, a plan that involved a college scout canceling our meeting and a young man's hunger for more than just free pizza. I was lost, wandering from one bad choice to another, but God cared enough about me to schedule a divine appointment in that locker room, an encounter that forever changed my life.

But God Runs to Meet You

I'm certainly not the only one who has had a "but God" moment. As I mentioned earlier, the Bible is full of them.

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One of my favorites serves as a good starting point because it reminds us that no matter how far away we may wander, God always runs to meet us. We can be off somewhere doing our own thing, maybe rebelling outright like a prodigal son or daughter, or maybe just trying to make life work on our own terms. But regardless of where we are or what other people think of us, God knows our heart. He knows the desperate loneliness and aching need we carry around inside. He knows our fears and dreams as well as our worst mistakes and best efforts.

One of Jesus' best-known parables captures our Father's love, compassion, and mercy in a simple story of rebellion and reconciliation. An ambitious son, eager to grab life by the tail and enjoy all of the world's pleasures, insults his father and goes off in pursuit of what he thinks will make him happy. But after the money dries up and the parties end, after the friends-for-hire and the groupies fade away, the lost son hits rock bottom. He's lost everything — including his own dignity. Then one day he remembers something that's more powerful than his mistakes:

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“*But* the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

LUKE 15:17–24, emphasis mine

See the “but God” moments? This busted, disgusted, frustrated, and brokenhearted young man had to recognize his need in order to come to his senses. He was tired of chasing his addictions and wandering farther and farther away from home. He had fallen about as low as he could imagine falling — from partying like a player to slopping pigs like a beggar. He must have felt miserable when he realized his wandering had led to this dead end. He may even have wondered if he had wandered too far, if it was too late for his life to change.

Can you relate to this young man’s experience? Have you wandered farther and farther away from where you want to be? From where God wants you to be? Sometimes we think that it’s too late for us, that we can’t change our life’s direction and return to God. We fear we’ve crossed a point of no return, that we can never change. But this is not true. Not only can we change direction, but we can go home.

At his lowest point, this young man remembers something that pierces through the fog of his depression, frus-

tration, and self-contempt. He remembers his father's character. While the young man believes he's no longer worthy to be called a son, he knows that his father will at least allow him to work in a more respectful environment. He can beg for forgiveness and try to regain his dignity.

So he returns home — tired, hungry, filthy, humbled, and alone. But instead of an angry, judgmental father claiming, "I told you so," the young man sees his dad running to meet him, to hold him, to love him just the way he is. His father is thrilled because his son has come home.

The young man cannot believe how much his father loves him. He knows that his father has every right to be angry, hurt, and justified in holding a grudge. But his father doesn't.

But God doesn't hold grudges against us either. Just the opposite! We're still a long way from home, but God runs out to meet us. We're aware of how we've sinned against him, but God welcomes us with open arms.

You don't have to wander anymore, my friend. No matter what you've done or not done. How high you've risen or how low you've crashed. If you're weary of wandering, then come home. You can keep chasing things you hope will fulfill you, but only God can satisfy the hunger in your heart.

You've wandered far enough.

But God is ready to welcome you home.

Coming Home

I realize you may be thinking, *That's a great story, Herbert — both your own and the prodigal's. But you don't*

understand what I'm dealing with. I'm not a kid anymore — it's too late for me to change. I've wandered a long, long way from home. Made a lot of mistakes with consequences I'm still paying for. You don't know what I've done or who I am.

No, I get it. We've all messed up and had our moments of deep personal shame. Maybe it's not sex outside of marriage, but a bitter, hate-filled desire to get back at someone who hurt you. Maybe you abuse alcohol. Maybe you're caught up in cheating and lying. Maybe you find yourself stuck in a web of these sins and even more.

Or maybe your sins are subtler and seemingly not as severe. You smile in front of your friend at church but gossip about her at work. You look at images online that ignite your lust. You secretly wish harm to your abusive boss. In case you don't realize it, you're still wandering. You need a "but God" moment just as much as anyone else.

Maybe you feel like your life is falling apart. You're portraying one thing on the outside and living something else on the inside. Maybe you present yourself as one person in public, but in private you are completely different. Maybe you are going through the motions of a life that's not what you hoped it would be. You're chasing money, success, relationships, sex, status symbols — anything to help you escape the truth of what you need the most.

You need something to happen in your life.

You need a "but God" moment.

You need to come home.

Ever since that night in a high school locker room when I decided to give the rest of my life to God, he has

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taken every area of my life and turned it around, blessing it in ways I could never have imagined – personal relationships, parenting, career choices, to name only a few. These two little words have radically changed the direction of my life. I'm no longer wandering around, trying to pretend that I've got it together, secretly wondering who I am and why I'm here.

If you need a new direction in your life, if you need a change, if you need a radical breakthrough, if you need to break free from an addiction, if you need the old to go and the new to come, if you're tired of wandering away from the very purpose for which you were created, then you've picked up the right book. While your most important "but God" encounter comes down to the moment when you choose to let him into your life, the process of transformation usually occurs over time. Your salvation is secured instantly, but the process of becoming more like Jesus is lived out day to day.

You feel lost and alone ... but God knows and cares for you. These two words can make your "after" radically different from your "before."

You feel lost and broken, but God sees you and knows your heart. He loves you and wants to change you. He's calling you in from where you've been wandering. He's calling you to stand before him and accept your divine destiny, to become the person he created you to be for the purpose that you alone can fulfill. He loves you and wants to welcome you home, to heal your heart, and to transform you into the person you were meant to be.

Will you let him?

2

We're Wounded ... But God Heals Us

*He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.*

PSALM 147:3

The first time it happened, I was thirteen years old. I remember thinking, *What was that? It has to be wrong! But it felt good ... does that make me a horrible person? Should I tell my parents what happened? Will they believe me?* An uncomfortable mix of fear, shame, and confusion enveloped me. *Why did this happen? And what should I do about it?*

It doesn't take long to learn that hurt comes in all kinds of forms. It hurts when you make a mistake and cause pain for someone you care about. It hurts when you

get into an argument with someone. It hurts to get passed over for a job promotion. It hurts if you find out someone you trusted has been talking behind your back.

But some wounds run deeper than others. Sometimes we experience the greatest amount of pain when something happens that never should have occurred in the first place — something we had no control over.

Silent Misery

This is the kind of wound I experienced at thirteen when an adult female sexually molested me. As a friend of our family, she came over regularly, which meant this abuse was not a one-time event. My parents had no idea and obviously trusted this woman, which only compounded my fear and shame. Somehow it felt like my fault, but how could that be true?

The molestation occurred over several months. Whenever I'd walk into a room where this woman was present, I'd churn inside with a sick sense of dread and negative anticipation. As a teen too young to get his license, it wasn't like I could just drive off and leave whenever I encountered her. Before long, I wondered and worried every day when I would have to face her again.

Finally, after months of dealing with this misery, I worked up the courage to tell this woman to leave me alone. To say I was terrified is an understatement; after all, she was the grown-up, someone I had once liked and respected. With a shaky voice, I told her, "I don't want this to continue. Please leave me alone."

We stood next to one another in a doorway, with our

backs turned so that no one would overhear us. At first she tilted her head and spoke softly, "I want to be with you. I care about you." My body began to shake, maybe from fear, maybe from anxiety. Through tears, once again I said, "Please leave me alone."

This time the tenderness in her voice turned to rage. "This relationship *is* going to continue because if you cut this off, I'll tell your parents about us. About how you started this."

Stunned, I felt my knees almost buckle beneath me.

Looking back now as an adult, I know that, of course, she wasn't going to tell anyone and expose her crime. But at the time, I was terrified and felt so very alone. Nonetheless, I stood my ground.

With renewed determination, I firmly said, "Then tell them. But this is over." I shut the door in her face, collapsed on my bed, and began to sob. I had such fear in my heart that my parents would find out. And I felt so confused, which only made the ache inside more intense. But the abuse stopped. She left me alone.

Those months have forever affected my life. I developed a poor view of women. I fostered a great mistrust for people. The abuse resulted in my harboring anger and hostility, insecurity, and shame. Becoming sexually active at such a young age also propelled me down a road of promiscuity. Like an old war injury that continues to ache long after the battle has ended, my wound reverberated across many years of my life.

I would have remained broken and ashamed, but God healed my wound and restored my heart. The healing has been a process, not an instant overnight change like

I sometimes hoped. Nevertheless, his faithfulness, grace, and love have filled that hurt inside me where something had been taken away at such a young age.

The Process of Healing

Without a doubt, some of you reading this have suffered your own kind of hurt and damage. Like me, you may have been sexually abused as a child. Sadly, one in four girls and one in six boys will be abused before the age of eighteen.

Or perhaps you were emotionally abused by listening to a barrage of negative ideas about yourself from your parents while growing up. Maybe someone close to you betrayed you. Maybe your parents divorced, or perhaps a friend or family member lied to you about an important issue. Maybe your spouse has been unfaithful, or maybe you have suffered physical or sexual abuse from someone who was supposed to love and care for you. In whatever package your hurt arrived, the consequences can include anything from trust issues to a fear of intimacy to bitterness to limitless other challenges. If you've dealt with a major hurt in your life, it's likely controlled your life since it happened. If you don't take the steps to deal with it, it could keep controlling your future as well.

But God tells us that we don't have to remain wounded and suffering, limping along in pain and misery. You can be free of your hurt. You can recover emotionally. You can prevent this hurt from controlling your decisions and directions. You may still bear the scars, but God can heal you.

After my experience, I carried around unhealthy

thoughts and emotions for years. But eventually I realized that in order to have a better future, I was going to have to work through the hurt from my past. And I couldn't deal with it all by myself. My "but God" encounter in this area has been slow and steady. After I gave my heart to God and accepted Jesus as my Savior, I began the process of restoration. While each person's recovery may be unique, taking certain steps often allows God's healing presence to begin the process. Let me share with you the ones that were instrumental in my "but God" healing.

Removing Fig Leaves

Based on my own experience, I suspect we frequently try to hide our wounds from God. Whether our wound is from something that was done to us or from something sinful that we've selfishly pursued, we avoid coming before God. We begin to believe the lies of our enemy and wonder if God can love us after what we've experienced. After all, if we can't love ourselves, how could God, who's perfect and holy, love us?

Apparently, it's our human nature, dating back to the first time it happened with our first parents. After they blew it, Adam and Eve tried to hide their shame and guilt from God too. When they ate the forbidden fruit that God specifically instructed them to leave alone, they tried to hide in the garden. Not only did they hide, but they also covered their nakedness — something once beautifully innocent that now brought them shame — with fig leaves. They tried to hide who they were and what they had done from their Creator.

It seems absurd when we read that story now. Really? God's not going to see them hiding behind those bushes? He's not going to notice the new his-and-her green outfits? How did they think they could possibly hide from God? Yet as crazy as it may seem for Adam and Eve to hide from the all-knowing, all-seeing God, we do the same from time to time.

We put our own fig leaves over our wounds and try to cover up our transgressions. Instead of running to the one who can forgive and heal us, we push God away. We don't want to let him into our personal pain and major messes. Yet Jesus came to earth to be in the middle of your mess: "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Ps. 34:18).

If you feel God wouldn't want any part of your brokenness, or you feel that because of what happened to you in your past you are not worthy of asking him into your trouble, you need to think again. God wants to be there! He wants to help you! The Bible tells us, "By his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). *His* wounds — not ours! Without the Lord's healing power, our pain can cause us to lash out. You see, wounded people wound others, whether they intend to or not.

Don't stiff-arm God. Give up that pain. Your wounds and your past do not shock him. He knows, he understands, and he will help you. If you want to experience the healing of a "but God" encounter, then invite him into your secrets, your issues, and your pain, and see what happens.

I'm a living example that God draws near to the brokenhearted. He's healed my life and my heart. Today I am whole. Not perfect by any means, but *whole*. I get

to love God, love people, love my wife, my kids, and my church. As I've stressed, God did not heal me overnight. "But God" encounters can happen in the blink of an eye, or they can take place over time, especially when they involve allowing God to heal our deepest wounds.

The Healing Presence of God

Another key factor in my healing was cultivating a deeper relationship with God. In fact, the way I've experienced his healing presence the most is by spending time with him — *in his Word, in prayer, and in worship*. Before I became a Christian and began practicing my faith, I was bitter and mad at the world — yelling at my coach, being a jerk to my friends, acting disrespectful to my parents, and acting out sexually. I was much more concerned about appearances than what was going on inside my heart. Although my life looked radically different after that locker room encounter with God, I discovered that the more time I spent learning about, talking to, and praising God, the more peace, joy, and healing I experienced in my heart.

At first, I learned to set aside time each day to spend reading the Bible, meditating on its meaning, application, and truth in my life. I realized that prayer is as simple as talking directly to God, having a conversation with him throughout each day. And worship is the combination of our gratitude, appreciation, and recognition of who God is and what he's done for us. It too became a part of my "daily diet." Each practice is vitally important, but together they provide a soothing balm filled with the

peace that passes understanding. Let's consider each one in a little more detail.

I cannot overstate the importance of the *Word*. Like bread for the starving and water for the parched, the Bible provides powerful healing to us as we encounter God's timeless truth. We're told, "He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave" (Ps. 107:20). The Word has healing power! The Bible is not just an ordinary book. It's not just historical literature with lots of stories and poems. It's called the "living Word" because it is alive, it penetrates the heart, and it heals!

If you're going through pain or trauma, then fall in love with the Word. Consume it daily. As a young adult trying to experience healing, I was so hungry for the Word of God that I read through the Bible four or five times. I devoured it even as it changed and delivered me.

So many verses reveal how God is a healer and lifts us up when we are weak. One verse in particular never ceased to refresh and strengthen me: "[God] heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Ps. 147:3). I was hurt and broken, and reading that verse helped lessen the pain I felt.

Prayer is also so important to the healing process. We are told many times in the Bible that God hears us: "If . . . they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry" (Ex. 22:23). God hears our anguish and our pain. When we're distraught, he's there to heal our broken hearts. Some of the most well-known prayers in the Bible are from David, a powerful leader who wrote heartfelt prayers and songs. He reminds us that we can pray anytime: "Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice"

(Ps. 55:17). David also demonstrated that we can express every emotion in prayer — our anger, our fear, our confusion, and our despair — not just our joy and gratitude.

Like David, I cried out to God with all of my pain, hurt, abuse, and confusion. Instead of turning to sex, as I had in the past, I turned to the Lord. I called to the Lord, and he continued to heal my heart. I was broken, but prayer opened my heart to God and his healing power.

And finally, *worship* played a huge part in my healing. I can remember my freshman year in college at Arkansas Tech. I was there on a football scholarship, and a lot of my teammates were partiers, chasing the girls. Instead of joining them, I'd drive around in my car on Friday nights, headed for the Burger King, having a private worship session there in my car.

When I transferred to Oral Roberts University my sophomore year, I'd sit in my dorm room, listening to Kirk Franklin's album *God Is Able*. I would sing along: "I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me." These early, intimate worship times I had with God drew me closer to him and, again, opened my heart to his healing. I can't overstate it: I would not be who I am today if I hadn't had these moments with God through reading his Word, in prayer, and in worship. These are key ingredients in receiving his healing power. So is forgiveness.

Forgive to Move Forward

Healing from deep wounds involves forgiving those who have hurt and betrayed you. Easier said than done, right?

When someone wrongs us, we feel justified in our anger and bitterness. Some of us walk around for years spewing hate about the person in our past.

Yes, forgiveness is hard, but hate is harder. I'm not telling you this as a biblically based pastor; I'm telling you from my own experience. Holding on to a grudge is harder than letting it go. It takes a lot more energy to carry around that anger than to release it. Ironically, the person who caused the pain often ends up walking around with no repercussions!

No matter how justified we feel in our judgment, hatred, and condemnation of the person who wounded us, in the end we're all sinners needing repair. By and through the grace of God, not one of us gets what we deserve. We're all damaged, looking for redemption. But it doesn't end there.

Once we have been saved, it's not okay to keep sinning because of the grudges we carry. We're called — no, commanded — to love and forgive others the same way God loves and forgives us. We're told, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13). As hard as it was to forgive my abuser, I pray she is able to experience grace at the foot of the cross not only for her redemption, but also so she can forgive someone who likely abused her in the same way.

When we decide not to forgive, it is like going through life carrying around a dumbbell. But instead of making you stronger, it just makes you weary. Holding on to anger cannot do anything beneficial for you, but letting go of anger can. So many times people hold a grudge, and when they finally decide to forgive, they realize they had imprisoned themselves, not the other person, with

their anger. Forgiveness unlocks the door to your own freedom. There is something cathartic in letting go of the bitterness and anger that you've been holding on to for so long.

Boundaries of Forgiveness

After I committed my life to Christ, I knew I was forgiven, yet it was still hard to forgive the woman who had abused me. For a while it was easier just to try to not think about it. But eventually, I knew that to experience a “but God” encounter, to experience all that God had for me, I had to forgive.

The Bible says that if we have truly experienced God's forgiveness, then we will be able to forgive others the same way (Matt. 18:21 – 22). When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he included, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). If we want to experience the kind of healing that comes from a “but God” encounter, then we must forgive. Forgiving others invites God's forgiveness and healing into our hearts. I knew that I would never be completely healed if I didn't forgive the woman who abused me.

In my junior year of college, I often hosted prayer meetings in my dorm room. These were great times of prayer, worship, and fellowship with other young men who were followers of Jesus. During this time, I realized that if I wanted to grow and become stronger in my faith, then I couldn't ignore any longer my need to forgive this woman. So I made the choice to forgive. While my painful emotions remained buried inside me until I later told

Tiffany, my fiancée, I had at least taken a huge step toward healing by making forgiveness a deliberate decision.

I need to clarify a crucial point. Forgiveness doesn't mean you have to be the person's best friend. Let me be clear: The woman who hurt me — we are not friends. I wasn't seeking any kind of relationship with her. She even tried to contact me on a few occasions after I became an adult, and I once took her call. Because I had forgiven her, I was able to be kind as well as clear. I have forgiven her, but forgiveness and restoration are not the same.

Forgiveness is what I like to call an “inside job.” Only you can do it, from the inside out. Your heart has to make the leap of forgiveness, and you have to work through the hurt in order to get to the point of forgiveness. You can forgive someone whether or not they ask you to. This is a process you go through yourself, dealing with feelings and attitudes on the inside. It's your decision, not your offender's.

If you truly forgive someone, you can be kind and compassionate, and even extend God's love to that person. You can want what's best for the person who hurt you. Forgiveness means that you're no longer walking around with bitterness, hatred, or animosity in your heart toward the person who hurt you.

But restoration is an “outside job.” This is the external interaction between you and your offender. If the relationship is restored, by definition it goes back to the way it was. The person regains your trust, your respect, and your admiration. While we're commanded to forgive others, the Bible does not tell us that we must resume that relationship as if nothing happened. Forgiveness does not

automatically produce restoration. So if this misunderstanding on restoration has been holding you back from forgiving someone, don't let it anymore.

My relationship with my abuser has not been restored back to what it was before the abuse occurred. In other words, I'm not inviting her over to play with my kids! That's called being unwise, not forgiveness. But I have forgiven her. I've released it. I trust and pray that she has asked God to forgive her for those actions.

The alternative leaves us trapped in victimhood. When we choose not to forgive, we blame that person or that event for what's happening to us today. We don't take responsibility for what we can do and instead blame that person or event for the bad things that happen in our life.

But when we forgive, we remove the blame. We show mercy. We exonerate that person, and we let go of the blame, bitterness, and grudge we have been holding. This is real freedom! It is the chance to move forward and stop looking backward. "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13–14).

Think about it this way. The windshield of a car is a lot bigger than the rearview mirror. When we stop looking at the past, our future gets larger, more expansive. We realize that looking over our shoulder makes it difficult to move forward. Once we forgive, we can let go of that past and have freedom to achieve the future God has in store for us.

Another step in my healing process was recognizing the side effects of the abuse I suffered.

Address the Side Effects

Not only does our pain linger, but it also produces ongoing side effects. We have broken hearts, weary spirits, and aching bodies. Pain can make it hard to trust again. It can result in bitterness, fear, insecurities, and bad attitudes. Most of these effects are the result of not wanting to get hurt again, so walls are constructed and defense mechanisms are put in place.

Remember, hurting people hurt other people. Even though you may have forgiven those people who hurt you, consequences remain. You still need to recognize that the restoration process requires time for your wounds to heal. When others betray us, hurt us, offend us, we're left with consequences that don't end even after we've forgiven them. Ninety-nine percent — okay, actually 100 percent — of people who are healed are still affected by their wounds in some way.

This has been true in my life. I see the world a little differently because of my experience. As much as I love people and want to trust them, I'm still cautious about who I allow around my kids. I'm super-careful about who watches them, who they're with, and where they are. Because of what happened to me, I realize another adult can look normal, have a good job, be in the church or on staff at school and still be someone who would prey on young kids, teenagers, or even other adults. Yes, I'm healed. But I'm also wiser and more protective of my own kids and others who may be as vulnerable as I was at a young age. From my own experience and after helping and interacting with other people who have been abused,

BUT GOD HEALS US

I believe it is important to understand the side effects of abuse.

When we have intimacy with God and choose to forgive, when we give the hurt, the pain, and the person who hurt us to God, he heals us. We not only grow wiser, but we live life with compassion, kindness, and a deep inner strength. We know God's peace, so there's no need to retaliate. Has this been the case in your life?

Or are you still living with the hurt? Even in the midst of healing, even after a "but God" encounter has started the process, you can still experience side effects. Don't let these side effects play tricks with your mind and cause you to think that you're not being healed or cause you to live under condemnation or think you're unworthy of God's love. Side effects are normal when you've been wounded deeply.

For instance, maybe a boyfriend once verbally and physically abused you. Unless you forgive him, you will likely remain fearful, defensive, angry, and hurt, and you will avoid anyone with a potential to hurt you. But when you let the healing power of God make you whole, you start reacting differently. The potential for bitterness, victimhood, rage, and retribution melts into forgiveness, compassion, and wisdom. You've forgiven him. You can handle it when you run into him. But you're still dealing with side effects. You're aware of being more cautious when going on a date or entering a new relationship, even a casual friendship. You're more aware of other people's words and body language and their response to conflict. You seem to share yourself in layers as you try to build a strong foundation of trust with this new person.