

A Severe Mercy

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This is a chapter from my book, "The Treasures of Darkness."

"I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass and cut in sunder the bars of iron: And I will give thee the treasures of darkness,

and hidden riches of secret places, that you mayest know that I, the Lord, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel.""

Isaiah 45:2-3

I used to picture myself like a twisted ball of yarn, knotted, tangled, and rolled real tight. I always wanted to be free, but my fears caused me to hold tight to the only life I knew. All the knots of my life were painfully but gently untangled with love, and lay at my Master's feet. Only my Creator, the one who made me, could heal such a tangled mess and recreate a new me.

Only God could break the bars of iron that held me fast. Yet, it is in darkness that the Master does his best work. That is why I love these verses of promise in Isaiah 45:2-3, "I will go before you, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: And I will give you the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that I, the Lord, which call you by your name, am the God of Israel."

Darkness has become my best friend, for it stripped me and caused me to be humble and weak. Then my Jesus could make everything about me all right. And being made all right by Jesus is the sweetest, most refreshing resting place in the universe.

I have not always known that I was all right, though. For some of my earliest recollections are that of dislike of myself. As a child I hated myself; I always thought I was dumb and a terrible misfit. In reality I had a learning disability, which is dyslexia. But my misconceptions of myself probably account for my low self-esteem and a lot of why I thought I was such a stupid misfit.

As a child, I tried to read my school lessons to my mother, but because I couldn't read very well, she would slap me and tell me how dumb I was. In those days, my mother, herself, also lived in self-hatred which, of course, breeds itself. Self-hatred is so insidious. What we hate about ourselves we take out on others. Most of my childhood was spent listening to my mother preach at me. Somehow, everything I did was wrong, and that made me hate her. Yet hating her made me feel guilty. The horror of it all was that it left me feeling worthless, dumb, rejected, and very fearful.

As a teen I fought constantly with my mother and promised myself that I would never be like her. Ironically, years later I would only hope to be exactly like her. But in those days all I could do was dream of leaving home. At sixteen I ran away from home and got married to the first boy that came along. That was a total disaster because I returned home after just three months, deserted by my husband, and pregnant. This compounded my hell. Not only did I have my mother telling me what a horrible person I was, I was now telling myself as well. Failure and rejection flooded my agonizing soul. Yet, what can anyone do in that state of spiritual ignorance, except just try to cope.

Somehow I finished high school, suffering the disgrace of being without a husband, and had my baby alone at only 17. In that day and time it was very disgraceful to be divorced and raising a child, especially at my young age. It says of Jesus in Isaiah 53:3 that he was, "despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Jesus was sinless, and I was a sinner, yet he had the same feelings of rejection that I had. That comforts me to know that my Savior knew the same sufferings that I knew.

My only solace was to go to school and try to get the best education I could. So I started into training as an X-ray technician. During the second year of my two-year course, I started dating my

present husband, Scott. Mom insisted on breaking us up, which eventually forced us together. When she found out that I was as adamant as she was, she threw me out of the house again. As I was leaving I grabbed my son, David. She was not going to have him. This infuriated her, for by then, she had grown very attached to him and considered David her own.

Scott took us to his stepmother's house. It was there that my first husband (paid by my parents to kidnap David) picked him up on a "visit." It was several hours later I found out that they had taken him out of town. I was devastated.

My parents were planning to try to get David from me by trying to prove that I was an unfit mother. Finally, the tension broke when my Dad came to me in tears, deciding that he could not do such a thing. They gave my baby back to me. Now I was finally away from my nemesis. Or was I? If we don't resolve our problems in God, then we can't leave them behind. They will reappear in other forms, because the only real problem we have is our own unbelief.

Scott and I got married soon after that. We had fallen in love and I dreamed of happiness and fulfillment through marriage to him. My friend Harriet calls it the "Cinderella Syndrome." I was determined to make this marriage work, no matter what it took. I was not ever going back to my mother's house to live with her again. It wasn't long into my marriage when my dreams got dashed because my prince charming was not fitting into my ideal of happiness.

Eight years of marriage and two children later, I was failing miserably again. We never run away from our problems, because our real problems are inside of us. My insecurities and fears of another divorce drove me to seek and find refuge in Christ. Although I believe that I was saved at a Billy Graham Crusade at 18, I never knew that Christ lived in me until I was again in despair at the age of 28. At that time, I was having my third child in the hospital when I met Linda Bunting, who led me to know that Christ was living his life in me. Knowing Christ filled my empty life and heart with a long awaited peace.

As soon as I could, I made my way to my mother's house to share Christ with her. I can remember standing in her kitchen telling her that if she didn't have Jesus in her life, she was going to hell. (You know, I always wanted to tell her to go to hell, but I didn't expect it to be this way.) My zealous approach was somewhat overwhelming to her, so she threw me out of her house once more.

For three days she paced the floor as she built her case against me, not knowing she was really fighting God. "How could Sylvia say such a thing to me, she must be crazy, I'm a good person." After three days of being under strong conviction by the Spirit, my mother went to her basement to iron some clothes. As she ironed, she warred away with the Spirit.

Suddenly she felt and knew the presence of the Lord. The Lord said to her, "Everything that Sylvia said is true, you are going to hell without me, you are already there." That instant she fell to her knees by her ironing board repenting, and received Christ. Miracles of all miracles, my mother was gloriously born-again. My Dad's conversion soon followed. Immediately she called me by phone to share her experience. Our hearts touched each other in love for the first time in our lives. This was only the beginning of God's restoring us to each other. He promises restoration, "I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, my great army which I sent among you" (Joel 2:25).

My mother's conversion was wonderful, but it didn't cure my insecurities about myself or my resentments towards her. I still carried them deep inside like grave clothes from the past. Finally, I reasoned with the Lord, "If she would apologize to me now that she is saved, maybe then I would feel more secure about myself." What self-righteousness! I didn't want to look at my part in our hellish relationship. That conveniently left me off the hook. But of course, the Lord wouldn't let me get away with that.

Finally one day the Lord said to me, "Why does she have to apologize for what I call perfect? I dug those holes of insecurities and fears in you, so that I might fill them up with Myself Then you will really know me and the power of my resurrected life in you." I

wrestled with the Lord; "You mean that you meant all this hell in my life? It was really you who dug these deep scars of fear and self-hatred, and all that was a form of your perfect love for me?" Suddenly I remembered the story of Joseph in the Bible. He too was treated cruelly by his brothers, yet in the end he said to them, "you meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). The word "meant" is strong. It doesn't say *permitted* it for good, but "meant it for good."

The truth is that my whole life had been designed by God. All my scars and my hells were what He meant for me as my perfect past and necessary background for seeing the truth and knowing him as my total fulfillment. Psalms 139:8&13 says, "You did form my inward parts, you did knit me together in my mother's womb." "If I ascend up into Heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, you are there."

Sometimes I think if I had gone to a psychologist at that point, I would have gone crazy trying to analyze myself and my situation. Yes, I certainly was a victim and imprisoned by my own self-hatred and self-pity, but so was my mother. She also had a horrible past, and she was also victimized. If God had not stopped the chain of sin in our family, I would have treated my children the same way that she did. Her cruel treatment of us children was only a reflection of her own self-hatred and bondage. I thank God for his word to me that day; without it I would still be blaming her and hating myself. The truth is clear and simple when you hear it from God, and it instantly heals.

I simply agreed with God that day. "You, Father meant it all for my good." Flesh reason couldn't tell me that, but the Spirit's wisdom could. I would still be in the desert of psychoanalyzing if I had not found out the Spirit's truth. It didn't come easy for me to say though, because I had to die in order to say it. I couldn't feel sorry for myself anymore, or blame my mother for my misery. I think that people get their whole identities from being victims, which I call "the victim complex." I know I did. Perverted as it was, I loved being the one who got hurt, because it supported my self-righteousness by making someone else the problem instead of me. Self-pity became who I was. I could hide my own sins there under my hurt feelings while I pointed an accusing finger at my mother.

It's insidious because I didn't look like the bad person, I was the poor victim. She was the one who looked bad, and a part of me loved that she looked that way. But in truth, my self-pity and judgmental attitude about her was just as sinful.

A miracle happened to me that day, for God changed my heart towards my mother. I really loved her and forgave her, which of all things healed me. Immediately she changed towards me. I have since wondered who changed first, her or me? Or was it my perspective that changed? Somehow I think my new seeing transformed me as well as her. I have seen since that we hold people in their bondage, and are in bondage ourselves because we won't forgive others.

Christ transformed her self-hatred into self-love. Then from there it grew into love for other people. I will never forget her saying, "God loves me!" It sounds simple and elementary, but it certainly transformed her. She became the most positive, affirming person that I ever knew. So much so that she would never let me say a condemning word about myself. What a turn-around! Needless to say, we became very best friends. She will never die in my heart because we truly have each other forever.

(The rest of my mother's story is told in the chapter entitled, "The Fellowship of His Sufferings.")

The Spirit cleared me with my mother, but what about my insecurities and fears? Did they instantly disappear? No! I subconsciously operated in this false identity as if it were the truth. "Who is Sylvia Pearce? Well, she is a fearful, insecure, condemned person who is struggling and trying to improve herself." How was I going to get rid of me? The task was too big. I couldn't blame my mother anymore, now was I going to blame myself? Forgiving my mother and seeing her rightly, still didn't solve the big me problem. It didn't put me right with me. Spiritually, I was seeing that I had Christ as my Savior and He was living in me, but I had Christ and a me, and the "me" part was desperately failing again.

My first love and peace at conversion satisfied me for a while, but it wasn't enough to make me completely satisfied with myself. My jealousies and fears of losing my husband started to overwhelm

me again. I tried to hide them, but they had a way of creeping out, and it was escalating. My first thought was that I ought to be able to control myself; I shouldn't act that way. I would agree, yet the more I tried to conquer myself, the worse I got. I got sicker and sicker as the weeks went by. Finally I became a recluse, hiding away in my bedroom as much as I could.

How could I face my Christian friends? I was an embarrassment to myself and surely to them. Here I was a Bible teacher and counselor, yet I was a total mess at home with my husband and family. All I could do was hide.

My imagination was so wild that I dreamed up scenarios that were pure vanity. When I would face Scott with these false accusations, he would blow up and accuse me of being crazy. Then I would hate myself for being crazy. Around and around I went in the hell of trying to control myself and failing, only to end up back again in self-loathing. The one way God proves to us that we have never been in control of ourselves is to let us experience being out-of-control.

I tried confessing my sins, which I did constantly. I begged God to take them away, but nothing helped. God wouldn't take away my insanity just because I confessed sin. My whole identity was based on a lie, and that was my real root problem. God's mercy was bringing it all out into the obvious, for that lie was hidden deep in my consciousness. Painful as it was, I had to see it for what it was, so that I could finally be set free.

My madness soon led me to total depression. In desperation I found myself in my closet beating my head on the wall, screaming, "Please God, let me die, just let me die." I cried for hours. Then suddenly, the gentle voice of the Holy Spirit broke His silence and spoke into my parched consciousness. "You are already dead!" "Dead? I thought" The Spirit then asked me a question, "What can a dead person do?" Oh, now I see what God is after. "Nothing, I answered, a dead person can do nothing! A dead person has no life. A dead person has no power to control himself, nothing to improve about himself, and no life of his own." There was a great hesitation, then the Lord said, "Now, I am the real you." Through the deliverance won for me two thousand years ago at the Cross, I

was crucified with him, and I (the self I hated) no longer lived, but Christ lived as me (Galatians 2:20).

I had identified myself with a self, which was failing, out of control, wretched and miserable. God was now making me identify myself by his measuring stick, not mine. God sees me in union with Christ; perfect, whole, and complete (Colossians 1:22). Now I could begin to see myself as having that same new identity (Christ as me).

My problem was not that I was tempted to imagine vain things; my problem was that I wrongly thought I should have the power to conquer my thoughts and feelings. My trying by self-effort to conquer and control myself was my real sin. The patterns of self-sufficiency and self-effort run deep in our consciousness, so deep that it takes a great blow to our egos to prove to us that we humans are nothing but common vessels. I falsely thought that I was the one who should do good. That is a lie. The human Sylvia has no power to produce good, or evil. That power comes from what is in the vessel, and not the vessel itself.

It was good news that came to me in my closet that day, for I finally heard with my Spiritual ears and saw with my Spiritual eyes. The one and only function of the human is simply to believe, to simply agree with God. God says that I am dead and another lives my life (Colossians 3:3-4), so I must say it. I hardly believed it, but I obeyed God and said it anyway.

I am always getting a new interpretation as I correlate my dark time with Paul's Romans 7 experience. There is no such thing as human resource or human-performance. I did not have the power to raise myself from death, but I could speak the word of faith--I could say with God, "Christ is my deliverance, my rescue, and the real me." Light flooded my soul that day, yet I had to learn how to Practice of the Presence of God, as Brother Lawrence entitled his book. God forced me daily to speak to my darkness, and say the opposite. It is what Paul said about Abraham in Romans 4:17, "He calls the things that be not, as though they are." God called him his friend, because Abraham operated just like God himself operates, "Who commanded the light to come out of darkness" (II Cor. 4:6) at creation.

There was a period of time when I looked like I had a split personality. I remember one day when I was walking with Scott and screaming accusations at him. I stopped mid sentence and said, "This is not me, I am really Christ, and Christ isn't a crazy person, so I'm not either." Ten minutes later I was back screaming at him again. It's a wonder that he didn't divorce me; thank God for His keeping power. It is far greater than we know.

The miracle of faith is that what you take by faith, takes you. Just as when we study to learn a profession, then, one day, the profession turns around, takes us and becomes our consciousness: we don't say "I have learned to be a doctor," we say, "I *am* a doctor". What we take, takes us. All we do is affirm the truth and God confirms it inside us.

As I took the truth by faith, my insecurities and fears fell away. A new person emerged. A person that I amazingly loved, and could trust, and really appreciate. It's funny though; I hardly noticed when it all happened. All I did was just walk in faith, and refuse to look at my flesh appearances.

A new sense of self-acceptance arose in my consciousness. I even began to accept my negative reactions as right, and not try to get out of them. I started to see that my humanity was right, even such flesh reactions as jealousies, angers, and tempers. I thought to myself one day, "God is jealous isn't He? God has a temper doesn't He? God hates and He gets angry, doesn't He?" There is a right use to all these strong desires.

Galatians 5:25 says, "They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lust," and Colossians 2:11 says, "You are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. This simply means that at the Cross of Christ the wrong use of our flesh, which was Satan in our members, was done away with. And by faith, we can believe the truth about ourselves and dare to accept ourselves. What God calls clean, we cannot call unclean, that is calling God a liar.

I began to see that my flesh was rightly used by the Spirit. By the miracle of the resurrected Christ as me, the Spirit transmuted

my flesh into right-Spirit-use, which is true righteousness or (right-use-ness).

Now my flesh tendencies are redirected. I am no longer coming from my need for fulfillment, because I know my own wholeness. So now my weaknesses, and jealousies are directed towards the needs of other. My weaknesses are a signal to me that the Spirit is up to something. Most of the time, God uses my reactions as an attention getter. I often think, "God, what are you up to in this situation--what can I believe for them?"

All the things that I hated about myself and considered my liabilities are really my greatest assets. Miraculously, my attitudes change from, "What is wrong with me?" to "What is right with me?"

Soren Kierkegaard once said, "Life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards." In retrospect, I can see that I am not the same person that I used to be at all. I do not hate myself, I can truly say that I love and accept myself, and in loving myself, I can love and accept others. That is a miracle!

I am forever grateful to my Father who put me through such darkness and agony. Now how can I be grateful for darkness and depression? I can, because I know it was God's mercy, His "Severe Mercy." Only God could love me enough to "make me to lie down in green pastures." For it was through failing to overcome myself, that I learned my greatest lessons.

Jesus said, "Whosoever shall loose his life, will find it" (Matt. 16:25b). In loosing my life of self-hatred, striving and misery, I could finally find my real life. I am thankful to loose the lies I lived by most of my life, and replace them with the truth of who I really am. "Thank you Father for giving me, back to me."