**Welcome to Me: From the Gutter to God**

***(personal testimony)***

**-Part One: Rough Start-**

 Life began on a sour note for me, as I entered the world with only one parent; a single mom who was forced not only to raise two boys alone, but inevitably attempt to offer answer when we asked the questions she had little answer for. It was a source of confusion for me, wondering who my dad was; and why he hated me so much he didn't even want to meet me. For years I battled low self confidence, bitterness, anger, resentment, and confusion; wounded and scarred by the abandonment. For many of those years this emotional baggage led me to a life of hatred, envy, and outrage.

 Before I was even 2 years old, I had almost died; having spent six weeks in ICU/burn ward with severe burns due to a pan of 350 degree grease being dumped on me. While I am now too old to remember this; for years I endured terrible nightmares that depicted that day, the incredible pain, and the concern from never being sure if it was accident-or intended. Thankfully I was given a second chance at life, though the medical professionals said it was nothing short of a miracle. The burns had melted 90% of the skin and tissue on my back; even searing the tiny lungs and organs inside. Doctors said 3 things saved me: 1). Apparently I had a stubborn and undeniable will to live. 2). Since I was so young, my body was creating and even regenerating tissue at an accelerated rate; this helped the grafting set. 3). God obviously had a hand in this, because physicians were quite at a loss as to how I was even still alive when I arrived at the ER at all.

 I remember little from those first 5 years, except some pretty poor babysitters. One as I recall, would let the daughter tie me to chairs and beat on me with pots, pans, or any object that amused her to throw at me; needless to say, it was not an ideal environment. The other I recall was far, far worse. When mom was there, the babysitter was all sugar and spice, but as soon as mom left; things changed. We were yelled at, abused, belittled, and forced to sit without food or drink as we watched her daughter gleefully eat in front of us. If we asked for anything,we were sent to "'the room." This seemed like a setup to me and my brother; as though tempted to ask in order to merit discipline.

 The room was a small bedroom, more of a large closet truly. It was filthy; with broken glass, sharp metal, rusty nails all over the floor. Mice, roaches, and spiders were all over-which to a three year old is quite disturbing I assure you. The only furniture at all was a small urine-stained mattress with springs poking out. Once in the room; I'd be stuck there until mom came, sometimes for 8 hours or more. I remember standing at the one window in the room crying in terror for hours; watching, hoping for mom to come around the corner. My hands and fingers would be full of splinters from the decaying windowsill. It didn't matter how long it took, I cried and waited; desperately afraid of the room behind me and the evil it was. It took quite some time before mom finally came to realize my terror and despair were not just melodrama, but sincere; eventually she saw "'the room," and knew.

 Until I was about 6, mom tried a few times to have a romantic life; to add a potential father figure to our lives. Sadly, abuse and alcohol were commonplace; as these men took out their frustrations on us. We were beaten simply if we showed face, we were beaten if we were hungry, we were beaten if we weren't completely silent; and if we cried at all, (even from the beer bottles upside the head,) we were beaten all the more. To her credit, mom tried to defend us, but got just as bad or worse in return.

 Finally things culminated when the last guy threw mom from the car as we were driving over a bridge. I remember her crying as she screamed at us to be sure we were buckled in. One moment she was reaching back to secure our seat belts; the next she was pushed out of the car. My brother jumped out of the moving car after her-at 6 years old. I couldn't undo my seatbelt to do likewise; but the man skidded to a halt, opened my door and yanked me from the car before speeding off.

 Some time later, the man tried to return; but for the first time in his life got exactly what he deserved. Though mom was easily 100 pounds lighter and far shorter, she cocked back and blasted that guy so hard he literally was sent backwards off the porch. I'm not sure what was said, but we never had problems with him again.

 This however, was the last straw; and as mom later explained, she decided that being single was safer for all of us than adding another temporary " uncle, " that would only hurt us. We lived on the cusp of complete poverty, but thanks to mom's hard work and constant sacrifice we at least had what we needed in the most basic sense. Looking back; mom went weeks sometimes, with little more than a bite of bread or soup so we could eat. She sacrificed any chance at romance, any shot at social life; but for all her incredible effort, she also had her demons.

 I was often told I was hated; told she wished I'd never been born, called worthless, and constantly bore the brunt of her anger and judgment-as my brother was highly favored and could do no wrong it seemed. Of course I know now that mom was overwhelmed, she was bitter, she was hurt, and she was venting; that these things were not literally sincere, at least not every time. However, given the lack of a father, the abuse and evil I'd already grown tragically accustomed to; piling on the "I hate you," " You're worthless," and " I wish you were never born," caused a great deal of harm.

 How could a child not feel unloved, worthless? I felt like a complete failure and waste of space; I felt as though something I'd done had caused this. This is a terrible weight no child should EVER have to bear. These things began to take a serious toll on my worldview of society, of proper family dynamics, and of God. The bitterness, the hurt, the confusion began to create a supremely defiant, vengeful and vindictive nature in me. I became a cold and uncaring child by age 7, and was already having severe behavioral, mental and emotional issues that manifested in moments of rebellion and outrage. These were moments that became increasingly numerous; almost commonplace.

 By fifth grade I'd been banned from the school bus system and expelled from several schools; finally landing in a behavioral modification environment in school. I often assaulted other children, teachers, even police; and by age 11 I was adjudicated "CHINA" (CHild In Need of Assistance.) Guardianship was relinquished by mom as I became a "ward," of the state, and thus began the next stage of my life. From age 11 to just prior to my 18th birthday, I was bounced from one placement home or detention facility to another. Very few times did I even get to see mom, and the removal of me from home, the constant relocation from one unloving place to another; further added to the scars that already were sadly too numerous to imagine.

 I recall that on my 12th birthday, in a place called C5; mom brought me a birthday cake. After she left, staff made me sit in silence and watch as all the other children ate my cake; all the while staff belittled and bashed me for being such a defiant and worthless child. For a couple months I simply stayed in the "control room,'' a large padded closet used to discipline children who were uncontrollable. To me, it was a safer place; so I frequently gave cause to be placed in it...at least in there I was not being hurt.

 Folks, I caution any parent considering throwing their hands up and surrendering their children to the system. While there are some environments that aren't so dark, and situations calling for extreme measure; there are just as many places that greatly destroy a child's worldview, hope, self worth and ability to develop a healthy emotional and mental outlook. This also piled on more scars and baggage to a jaded child all too accustomed to pain and suffering; warranted or not. From that point on, I was unceremoniously uprooted from one soul crushing habitat to another until 18; seeing mom but one time from 13-18. I can hardly even look back upon this period as an adult, and keep from completely breaking down in sorrow; imagine what it felt like for a child.

**-Part 2: Finally Adult-**

 Having spent almost all my adolescence and teenage years in institutions and facilities, I had promised myself that when I turned 18 I was going to go out and see/experience the world. For a couple of

years I traveled with a door to door sales company, selling magazines, books, and other publications. We were paid 20$ a day IF we made our sales quota; but we had to pay $17.50 per night for our share of the hotel room fees, and were required to make a $3 bet each day to promote competition and inspire greater effort in sales. If you do the math, I actually lost 50 cents per day working. The only way to eat, clothe and provide for myself was to hustle, lie, cheat people, steal, or sell drugs. That being said, I stayed on for so long because I liked the travel, seeing new places, meeting new people, and the constant "party," atmosphere. We would go to one city for a week or two, work it's suburbs and move on, so no city ever really got boring.

 At some point I just couldn't take it anymore, and wanted to quit; to return to my home state, and try to start over. Little did I realize, quitting was not an approved action; and upon resignation I was kicked from the hotel room I'd helped pay for-forced to figure things out on my own. I was 19, I knew nobody where I was, and I was stranded in Tuscon Arizona; with no ID, no money, and just two duffel bags full of clothing. I had virtually no family to speak of, and the childhood in facilities had left me little room to make friends; I was alone and without any resource. So I hitchhiked back.

 Thirty-six hours later, having walked through the desert along I10 to the point of exhaustion and near dehydration; I finally got a lift. It took me close to three weeks to make it back to the sinkhole I had always called home. Once there, my problems did not simply go away. Over the next several years I found myself homeless and stranded in St. Louis, New Orleans, Chicago, San Diego, Phoenix, Memphis, and other places. I was addicted to drugs; not "A," drug, but any drug. I had no prejudice, if it was in front of me I did it. I stole, I vandalized, I hurt people, I used people, I did anything I wanted, and I did it without regret or hesitation. I simply had become so jaded and calloused that I didn't care.

 My only motivation was to make others as miserable in suffering as I had been in the tragic farce of my life. I made it a focal point to especially hurt, belittle, bash, abuse and compromise Christians. I often would be proactive; seeking opportunity to kill the spirit of these deceptive believers who preached an imaginary tale of a loving Father in heaven. In my experience fathers hated their children, abandoned them, abused them, and sought to completely destroy them; if not merely create endless suffering. Thus, it was easy to condemn this message of Christians as a load of hogwash.

 What's more, each believer that tried to witness to me left swearing, cursing, threatening violence, being violent, casting condemnation, and even a few competely fell way from Christ on my account. In those cases my defiant, hateful, and bitter nature held stronger than their superfluous show of love and grace. I hated God, hated man, hated society, hated anyone who had any kind of joy or contentment in life; and I displayed that quite extravagantly. For many years my life continued this course as history repeated itself time and time again. New place..new people...it didn't matter; I was a worthless, hopeless soul hell bent on returning the hard knocks life had given me. I had no desire to change, and greatly looked forward to a death that would bring at least some measure of peace and fulfillment to what could scarcely be called life.

 Then in May of 2002 things took an unexpected and dramatic turn; one that would redirect the course of my life entirely. I was traveling to a rainbow festival, which was basically a gathering of hippies and society's outcasts with the intention of getting majorly high and partying. However, I never made it there. One of the ladies I was traveling with came across a friend she hadn't seen in years in a small Arkansas town, and we went to visit with that woman.

 Shortly after arriving at her trailer, her significant other came barreling in the door, violent, loud and abusive to the woman and a child under the age of 2. After a period of yelling, arguing and general chaos; the man collected some belongings and left, still spewing threats and other vulgar things. I'd like to point out that given my childhood, this situation caused no small bit of anger to surface. It brought the old, familiar demons right to the surface again.

 The woman broke down completely, and began insisting she would simply grab her child and vanish; she just could not take his abuse and violence anymore. Oddly, I was the voice of reason; telling her not to make a hasty decision out of the intensity of her emotions. Instead, I suggested she should rather go into town with one of my friends, cool off and get her mind right; then return and make a less hasty decision as to what to do. I assured her that I and the other lady I was with would look after her child; so she could have the freedom to simply “get away,” from the situation and gather herself. Especially since she was on the verge of being a single parent, it was critical that she think clearly before committing to any action. She admitted it made sense and went into town as suggested.

 For a little while things seemed calm, and little man was no trouble at all. We watched some veggie tales, then went to the nearby lakeside and tormented some poor frogs and turtles for a bit. They were thoroughly unprepared for his enthusiastic will to chase them to no end! Then we returned to the trailer, and the kid shortly fell asleep watching cartoons. Yet this period of calm was simply the eye of the storm as it turned out; as the man soon after returned, barged in the door, and began threatening my life and health. I was conflicted; unwilling to simply leave the child with this man, but as he was a resident we really had no legal right to be there if he insisted we leave. In the end, we had to leave when he kept insisting we go; or die. So we left, killed time for an hour and returned; my hope being to gather my other friend and hit the bricks before the situation got any worse. Yet this was not to be, as things continued to snowball further into an even more dangerous and unenviable situation.

 When we returned, the man was sitting in his van, parked in front of the trailer; a beer in hand, a pile of empties before him, and a pile of unopened in the seat next to him. He immediately jumped down from his seat and pointed in my direction, saying; " She can go inside...but don't you even think about going near my trailer! " I looked at my companion and told her we should just get our friend and get out of there; so she wasted no time as she went back inside the trailer.

 Moments later, the man again points at me and starts telling me to come over and talk with him. The last thing I had any desire for was to interact with the man; but I knew that when an irate drunk expects something, it only further instigates the situation if one doesn't oblige. I know, because I too have been in that mentality; so I went over to see what wonderful surprise was awaiting me next. Apparently he had been dumped, kicked out and banned from returning; but he insisted it was all because of me. As it turns out, I did not change the child's diaper, and according to him; that was the sole cause of his deplorable situation. So he insisted I go inside and tell the woman it was my fault, not his. Needless to say, it's quite likely there were many more critical motivating factors behind her decision to be rid of him; but arguing with an angry drunk never results in anything of benefit.

 So I went inside, and I told the lady she needed to lock the door, call the police, and let this man go detox in jail at the very least. Here I am, a drug addict, with little or no concern for anything or anyone, just as likely to get incarcerated as anyone else; and I'm the one advising police action. Ironic. Sadly, her response is silent refusal to act in any manner; and moments later the man comes in again. Again he is violent, threatening all of us,even the child; finally demanding I come outside and take a beating, as he exited still gripping the tire iron that apparently had a reservation with my skull.

 For posterity's sake I must clarify; I did not know this man, I'd not said a cross word nor done anything against him. However, as the only male there it seemed I was the convenient scapegoat for all his rage and frustration. I took a long look at the ladies, then at the child, remembering the horror I experienced when I was young; the abuse mom also endured. Then I said, " If he comes in one more time trying to hurt anyone, I WILL stab him. "

 Sure enough, he did come back in, he did get violent, he did try to hurt us; and true to my word, I sure did stab him. Twice. Once in the arm, and once in the torso. Stumbling back trying to hold in the blood spraying out like a fire hose gone mad; he looks at me with a shocked look, saying, " You stabbed me!" I simply replied, "Damn right I stabbed you! Now get the hell outside before I do it again! I don't want to kill you but I will!"

 So he stumbled backwards, falling out the door; and lost consciousness as his life poured out. The woman who lived there simply shook in silent shock, one of my friends just openly stared at me with an oddly blank expression; the other being a nurse, went out to try to see to the man. Meanwhile, the impact of what had happened began to seep in through the adrenaline and rage, and something very peculiar occurred. I didn't grasp the weight and significance at the time; but something miraculous was happening.

 I had not been in any church since too young to clearly recall, I had never read a bible, and all of what I knew about Jesus was His name. Well, that and the general concept of who He was; what he allegedly had done for man. Yet as I looked down on blood covered hands, everything else went away for a timeless moment; and I received direct revelation of Christ in it's purest and most powerful form, straight from the Spirit. In that moment, God revealed to me that it wasn't just this man's blood and life on my hands, but Jesus' blood. Every sinful thought, action, intention steamrolled through my mind instantly, yet individually clear; and I realized that each thing was a hammer stroke as the nails drove through Jesus' flesh. I didn't merely stab a human, I had stabbed, and killed Jesus just as much. What's more is that I had done it again, and again.

 For a moment I stumbled over to the sink, semi-consciously trying to remove the blood from my hands, but it simply wouldn't go away. It was as though it was permanently stained into my flesh. Then it hit me; I'd been running from God all my life, and now this was something too serious-I could not simply run from it. The man might die, and if so; it would be at my hand, therefore I had to be accountable. So I wrapped the knife in a shirt, went outside, lit up a cigarette, and waited for the police. Shortly after; they arrived and questioned me, questioned the ladies, then cuffed me and placed me under arrest for attempted murder. The man was somehow still alive yet.

 For an hour or more I sat in the back of the cruiser and prayed the one and only sincere, selfless prayer I had ever prayed; likely the only sincere prayer period, to that point. The thought didn't even cross my mind to pray for myself, I knew I was guilty and deserved any consequence that came my way. I'd already accepted my fate; even if it were life in prison, or execution should the man die. For the first time since I was a young child, I actually cared about someone; it just so happened to be that man. The weight of human life was a burden I simply could not bear.

 No, on the contrary this is what I prayed: " God I have no right to expect you to even hear me, all my life has been against you; and I don't blame you if you don't care to hear it..BUT..if you ever hear just one prayer of mine, please hear this: let this man be alright. I don't care what happens to me; it's no more than what I deserve-just please let this man be alright. " I repeated that prayer again and again; until we pulled into the jail, sincere and without qualification. (By the way, the man miraculously was able to walk out of the hospital in pretty solid condition, albeit with a few internal stitches; in under 36 hours. The power of prayer.)

 During the 24 hours in holding, waiting to be moved to general population; I made a decision that was the critical turning point in the direction and intention of my life. Regardless what happened to me moving forward; I realized my whole life had been in rebellion, hatred, anger, and so much more against God. I had held on to hatred, bitterness, and a vindictive attitude for my entire life; rebelling against a loving Father I simply could not beleive in. However, in that holding cell I simply committed internally that whatever remaining life I had; imprisoned or not, I was going to live for God. I had no need for the sinner's prayer of repentance, no need for an altar call; I had just been born again simply based on the genuine and complete commitment in my heart. Jesus had come directly into my life just as he had to Saul/Paul.

 This committment wasn't simply a hasty defense mechanism to avoid accountability; I was completely and unwaveringly serious and committed to God, and the time spent in jail reflected that. I did not have a pastor or spiritual leader, I did not have the benefit of Sunday services expounding the word of God, I did not have fellow believers helping me learn, grow, and understand what I read, or what was occurring. What I did have was a complete and uninhibited commitment to seek and know this Father; who was truly the only fahter I'd ever had the chance to know.

 I literally spent every waking hour absorbing scripture, praying and meditating on everything I read. I was like a sponge, soaking up everything God was giving, and it was my ENTIRE and SOLITARY focus. I didn't just read the bible-I read, reread, prayed, meditated, and read again. The Word was alive to me, and it was not holding back it's power. I was growing exponentially despite my surroundings and lack of fellowship.

 A few days in, other inmates told me that there was a Jail Chaplain; and that he gave out bible studies and quizzes to those who were interested. Since I was so enthralled with bible study, they suggested I should ask for some; and I did just that. The Chaplain wanted to give me just one, but I begged him for a few. Though he insisted it took time, and most inmates were lucky to complete one a week; I eventually persauded him to give me three. Imagine his shock when the next day I handed him all three fully completed, with in- depth answers, keen scriptural insight, and the concept of application! He was quite baffled at the depth of understanding granted me given my infancy in Christ and lack of Christian background. Almost as though he now saw it as challenge, he tried to give me enough study guides to keep me busy. Yet my hunger knew no bounds, and within a couple weeks I had completed a year's worth of curriculum with an average score of 102%, (there was always an extra credit question.)

 Folks, I wish to clarify something here; I don't recount these things of a desire for glory or praise. This is not about boasting or seeking the praise and recognition of man. I am sharing this to illustrate the value of a sold out heart to God in Christ; I mean a completely unwavering commitment to seek God and build a sincere relationship with Him. The fruit that so rapidly grew were given by the power and grace of God, inspired by a sincere heart; and were definitely not things I can take credit for.

 Anyhow, over those weeks the DA tried to offer me several plea agreements. “Plead guilty to attempted manslaughter,” and I'd only serve 12 to 15 years was the first one. I told them right where they could shove that deal. Then it was “Plead guilty to assault with deadly weapon/with intent to do serious bodily injury,” a 15 year sentence of which I'd serve 8 and be paroled; but again I refused. The last deal was a 10 year sentence, possibility of parole after 2 to 3 years; but again I rejected. You see, I had committed my life to God, and I was determined to go to trial and let God decide where the chips might fall. I had been dictating my life for far too long, and look where I was; what I was facing. The outcome didn't bother me in the least, the only aspect I cared about was at least knowing what my sentence was so I could accept it and move forward. To me, I found comfort in letting go and letting God steer the ship.

 Just under two months after arrest, my initial court date arrived, and though I didn't know what to expect; I was confident that God's will would be done. I wasn't praying for a release, I wasn't praying to be delivered; I prayed simply for the decision to be directed of God, and the courage to accept whatever decision it was. These were things I believe contributed greatly to the outcome.

 When I arrived in the courtroom the Judge was outraged; it would seem that the public defender's office had failed to send any attorney on my behalf. It was then the beginning of July, and the judge, being of a mind to ensure my next court date was one with an attorney present; reset that initial hearing until December 27th. Immediately I was crushed, not looking forward to a six month wait; just to find out the next step in the process to determine my fate. So I asked the judge for permission to speak.

 When granted, I simply explained that what I'd done had not been premeditated or intended; that I knew I reacted poorly, but out of fear for the life and safety of myself, the women, and a child. It wasn't my goal to harm anyone, even though it was the tragic result. Furthermore, I'd been told by some inmates that given my unique situation, never having had a felony; that if I pled guilty I may be allowed a lesser sentence. I asked if this were true, and if there was any possibility of such a thing in my case. To my surprise the judge looked daggers at the DA and said they better throw me one hell of a deal because he was almost of a mind to completely dismiss my case based on self defense! I was absolutely numb with shock; as this was not at all anything I could have imagined in a million years. The DA looked completely taken aback also as he fumbled with papers and stammered to try and respond. Finally, he said if I plead guilty to MISDEMEANOR battery third, I would be released on time served with a $250 fine. Despite my shock I immediately shouted GUILTY! I PLEAD GUILTY!

 Praise God Almighty! From a lost and hopeless sinner facing possible life in prison for attempted murder, and just two months later; released a newborn in Christ on a petty misdemeanor and nominal fine. I can guarantee you this outcome came by way of God, not man; and it is my belief that it only came about because of a heart that was sincere, devoted, selfless, and was further evidenced by fruit. Had I not turned to God so completely and with such unique fervor I can almost ensure that this court date would have had a much different outcome. What's more, the genuine nature of my conversion was so noticeable and fruit-bearing, I was asked by the chaplain to be the keynote speaker at that year's annual jail and prison ministry fundraiser. Barely even joined the kingdom, and asked to shine light in front of folks who directly dictate the amount of funding and resources dedicated to the entire state's jail and prison ministry. Glory be to God alone!

**-Part Three: Growing Pains-**

 I was shortly released, but it only moved me from one trial into another. This one being to now adjust to newfound faith and learn how to grow and fellowship in the body with other believers; and it had some early obstacles. The travel companions that I had arrived with, obviously did not stay for two months; but to make things worse, they had left with all my clothing and my wallet. So I had nothing, and not even an ID to get work. I had no friends, I knew nobody there, had no money, no job, no home, and no family that still claimed any kinship to me I could ask for help. As a matter of fact; upon release the only clothing I had was the two month old, unwashed, completely blood-caked outfit I was arrested in.

 Imagine the sight: a 20 year old guy with an unruly beard, hair past my shoulders, wearing a thoroughly blood covered t-shirt and jogging pants. It's likely that I looked close to what Charles Manson looked like in his darkest hours. So I'm dancing down the sidewalk in unbridled worship and appreciation of who God is and what He has done-I'm belting out "Your love O Lord," in song, spirit of worship and of praise, and I'm almost completely lost in His presence. Meanwhile; folks a block down round the corner, take one look at me and almost literally run back the way they came. They probably thought they were seeing a mass murderer, given the blood on my clothing and generally rough appearance. They may have thought I was the devil himself...all the while I'm carried away in a spirit of praise and adoration, just in love with Jesus! Irony at its greatest. After a few blocks I saw this place called "Oasis," which is an outreach center to aid those with no place to go, no food to eat, and generally there to serve those in crisis. So of course I went in, and of course the entire room went dead silent as everyone stared openly at this blood covered stranger. I was about to attempt to explain when a man came from another room and told me he was expecting me. Apparently he was also told to help me in any way he could.

 When I asked how he knew I was coming; if someone at the jail told him, he looked baffled. " Jail?? " he asked. " No not at all, I've no clue about that. God has been preparing me for days and insisting I'm to help the one he sends. He is now confirming to me that YOU are the one He has been telling me about." Keep in mind that I'm still new to the kingdom at this stage, and didn't even yet realize that the things I had learned, the things I knew, the scriptural insight I'd developed-were all God talking to me. I guess I took it as simply having come by these things based on bible study and prayer alone. So I didn't really believe what the man was saying, and a part of me even thought, " Well this guy is certainly off his rocker, but I do need help so I'd best just go with it." In short order the man had secured shelter, promise of clothing, a potential job for me and a home church; and I began my early days of kingdom living.

 The following Sunday I attended the first church service I had since about the age of 7. All I recalled from the childhood experience was a dusty methodist church and a pastor that could bore rocks to death. Truly, watching mold grow was a preferable enterprise. (Mind you, this is not to say that the pastor from my childhood wasn't a good man, or dedicated leader; it was simply all I recalled from a limited child's perspective.) I had no idea at all what it was to be in a truly vibrant, Spirit filled and living Body; but that is exactly what this church was. To add to the special and powerful experience, there was a special service this week; a famous violinist, known for the powerful anointing in her music was there. She had played for Popes, Prime Ministers, the Queen of England, former presidents, the Dalhi Lhama...among others, and we will revisit her role in just a moment. Anyhow, I cannot even tell you what the Pastor's sermon was on, because I wasn't there at all. To me, it was like the clouds had rolled back and all I saw was heaven; many, many angels; the cross, and a smiling Father. I heard His voice as though a loudspeaker were attached to my ear, saying: "Son I have always been here, and I will never...EVER leave you. " I could even feel His warm, loving embrace as He simply held me.

 At some point, I came back down to earth enough to hear an altar call for those who truly wished to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Though I'd already taken this step in heart, I was moved-and literally ran down the aisle, skidding to halt on my knees already in complete surrender. I prayed as directed, and meant it with a steel resolve that even death could not break; was prayed over, then we were sent back to our seats. I had barely sat down and wiped away the tears of joy from the beautiful and incomparable experience when another altar call was offered. This one was for those who were committed to living the life of discipleship, surrendering all in a willingness to serve and be a light to the lost; to help others find joy and peace in Christ.

 Without a moment's hesitation; I again returned to the altar, closed my eyes and just let God minister. Eyes closed, hands raised, tears flowing freely; I felt a hand grab my arm gently and lead me. I didn't know then, but nobody saw anyone grab my arm; nor did they know why I was led directly to center stage. However, once there the violinist played an entire set directly over me. I know now that God was imparting a tremendous anointing and calling upon me, and the violinist did as she had never done before; but out of obedience to the movement of the Spirit played specifically over me. With each note, each moment; the Spirit of God hummed into me-more, and more.

 I have no clue how long in earthly terms I stood there receiving of God, and my eyes remained shut tight. Regardless what others saw, I was communing directly and intimately with Father in the throneroom. At some point a man,(an actual man, in the flesh this time,) came onstage and put a hand on my shoulder saying, " Son, you have never met your father, and it has long troubled you. But don't lose heart, for you will meet him someday." He could not have possibly known of the absence of my father, I'd told nobody in the entire state of Arkansas. But when he said I'd meet my father some day, I opened my eyes, looked over, and smiling; said simply, " I just did."

 When that first service for me finally ended, I found myself surrounded by believers with a sincere and desperate plea in their eyes. They told me that the light shining from me was all but blinding and they just knew if I were to pray for them; God would hear me. The sheep were looking to ME of all people to intercede for them with God! Here I was, barely 2 months into my walk; just released from jail, with little clue what was going on. Yet, here I was being asked to pray for them as though I had some great station or miraculous power.

 (Again, please note: I did not ask for these things, I did not deserve these things, and I was scared to death at what was happening. Not one single movement was of any trait, ability or power of mine; but of God. Believe me; I was quite at a loss as to why God chose me.)

 I was greatly disturbed, concerned that their faith in my faith and ability was far misguided; that if I prayed and no deliverance came, it could be a detriment to their faith. However, their desperate pleas, and the fragile hope in each pair of eyes caused me to try anyhow. I could not simply leave them empty and disheartened, so I prayed. Until the next Sunday I kept praying those prayers; I begged of God to work wonders, because it crushed my heart to think they might be deterred if my lack of faith prevented the receipt of fulfilled prayer.

 I came to find the following week, that every person prayed for had experienced an almost immediate and miraculous movement of God in response! This was much to my surprise. I was humbled beyond measure, and yet guarded; because this now gave cause for others to similarly petition me to petition God. I was constantly reminded by the situation to completely be surrendered to God; even a single moment's lapse could prevent these souls in need from receiving of God, andI didn't want to be the cause of that.

 The next few months were a season of unrivaled growth, incomparable blessing, divine favor, and perpetually answered prayer. Testimony after testimony was birthed by God as He ministered to me and through me. I always gave God the glory and He always gave me more opportunity. Folks, again I must adamantly assert this: not a single redeemable or miraculous outcome was from any power or quality of mine. Nothing I did was the catalyst to the outcome. The only part I played was having a sincere, willing heart, and a sober recognition of the significance and gravity of what was occurring.

 Every morning I'd awake about 5 AM, I'd pray; then I'd read my daily bread, I'd read my daily Oswald Chambers, I'd read my daily proverb, my daily psalm, and I'd study at least one chapter in both the old and new testament. Then I'd pray some more, I'd listen to worship music and pour my own praise out to God; all the while meditating on everything I read. I didn't merely read the bible, or simply memorize verses, but constantly hungered for depth of understanding and constantly applied the principles to my life. After that, I'd grab my bible, put my headphones on and remain in a spirit of praise and worship everywhere I went. It's not so much about what we do but the intention and passion with which we do those things.

 Sadly, the weight of everything became heavy. I was still new in Christ, still struggling to understand what was going on, what God's purpose was for me, and how to simply be where I was at spiritually. Nonetheless, I was becoming quite overwhelmed as the expectations of me to “work miracles,” on God's behalf kept piling up. I loved to do these things that God would be glorified; I loved helping others; I loved experiencing the miraculous movement of God time and again. However, it is a heavy burden for even a seasoned believer much less a spiritual newborn; and since it required such constant dedication to spiritual preparation, I simply began to flag.

 Part of my error was blindly letting zeal and the requests of others spur me to get ahead of God; ahead of my spiritual maturity, taking on more than a new believer should shoulder. Part of my error was being so obsessed with the kingdom and spiritual growth that my flesh became completely overwhelmed, worn out and exhausted. I didn't give myself room for any error, fearing that would impact and obstruct God's movement in response to the duties other believers seemed to expect of me. I needed to allow myself the freedom to be human now and then, but I didn't because I feared the consequences to others.

 In the end, I eventually and inevitably fell away; returning home to the easy life of less responsibility. I could party when I wanted, do what I wanted, and nobody counted on me for anything. You see, when in Arkansas I felt that I could not allow myself any room for error, I could not afford to fail; because so many relied on me, trusted me, and needed me. Any failure of mine could cause them to lose hope, faith, and instigate potential blame towards God. Back home nobody relied on me, nobody expected anything of me; truly, for all intents and purposes-back home it was like I didn't even exist. This was a far less heavy burden, and I again ran from God; only this time I actually knew who I was running from, and why I was running. For years I struggled to come to terms with myself, my past, my destiny and calling, and so much more. I did the "roller coaster," version of Christian living; on top of the mountain for a period, then falling away into the darkness of lower valleys. I attended several potential home churches, was restored and continued my walk; only to fall away again. When I was "In," I was "All in," just like the early days in Arkansas...but when I was out, I'd slowly fade away; until finally I'd hit a point where I couldn't recall the last time I'd been in church, read my bible, or even prayed. At one point I was even on payroll at one of the largest churches in my hometown; actually being paid for service to the kingdom, yet still I fell away.

 Tragically it wasn't just me that contributed to my backsliding, and while I must be accountable for my role; it is critical that I not ignore the cancer that has been allowed and perpetuated within the Body of Christ. So many times as I struggled, I desperately fought to stay the course; but I would be so ashamed at any shortcoming, any sin, any error, that I would turn to self condemnation without even realizing it. I would see all the other believers living these perfect lives, free from sin-free from struggle; and it made me feel as if my faith were an illusion. How could God have really accepted me and forgiven me? How can He truly love me and bless me? How...when my life doesn't match the reflection of perfect victory everyone elses life shows?

 This led me to question everything that I'd experienced in the kingdom, and made it near impossible to have faith in my standing in Christ. In my self imposed condemnation, I'd eventually be so overcome with guilt and shame that I felt too unworthy-too filthy to be in church; after all I would only be exposing these perfect believers to the cancer that was my life. So I'd turn away, pouring out tears of sorrow and shame; unable to even look to God in my horrible behavior and state. Then when I fell away I'd pray to the point that tears were almost blood; that God would send even one-anyone, just to show they care. To show that I wasn't as worthless as I felt, not as abandoned as it seemed. Nobody ever came. Not a single one; not even once. Not a phone call, not an email, nothing; complete abandonment....just like my earthly dad had done before I was even born.

 Yet, we wonder why backsliders almost never return. We push them away and write them off; surrendering both ground and souls to satan. We profess to be the Body of Christ, but Christ directed His body to those in need, those who were lost, those who stray; while we as a body, seemed to ignore these facts. HOWEVER!!! Thank the LORD ALMIGHTY, for in recent years He has revealed the truth to this hurting heart.

 Those "perfect," lives I thought I saw were no more than whitewashed vessels, hiding the struggles and sins in their walks. They were no more perfect than I was, but they hid their sin and shame beneath layer after layer of blissful ignorance; as they cast condemning stares and shrugged cold shoulders at we who plainly wore our stains. While they pharisaically pounded their chests in self glory for their righteous seeming deeds; I was the sinner at the bottom of the temple stairs, scared to death of even touching a single step due to my unworthiness.

**-Part Four: No More Condemnation-**

 A few years back, the Lord moved upon my heart; placing a burden for a ministry specifically intended to reach out and seek those who fall away-to break free of the cycle of condemnation, both from self and others. In Luke 15, Jesus uses parables to set forth a pattern to seek and restore those who stray. If we profess that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus, then how is that we condemn ourselves for failure and shortcoming? How is it we condemn others for not being perfect, for sin-for struggle? If we feel we have to whitewash, it only proves that we know we are falling short; furthermore, the fact we must hide the struggle shows we have already judged and condemned ourselves as guilty. If we feel too ashamed, too unworthy, too guilty to seek God..to pray..to fellowship; it proves only that we have equally judged and condemned ourselves as guilty.

 Both are equally condemnation; both are equally the wrong perspective in regards to our sins. The true cancer and detriment to the Body of Christ is not sin, it is not imperfection, and it is not struggle. It is the idea and pervasive sense that anything we do impacts our standing and worth in God's eyes. It is our heart that matters. What sin?? Truly,what sin?? Is the blood of Jesus any less capable of covering our sin now than when we first came to Christ? Folks: we have no sin, even in sin; once it is surrendered. The blood forever removed both the stain and penalty of sin; so WHO are we to make the claim that Jesus' blood simply isn't enough? Thats exactly what we do anytime we condemn self or others for their sins.

 Don't we know that God knew we would be struggling, when we'd be struggling, and with what issues we'd be struggling- even when He accepted us?? Far too long have we created and perpetuated an environment where the shell is judged by the acts, and the soul condemned because of what the flesh by it's nature is bound to do. We have painted this false perception that true faithfulness means a flawless life of victorious living, completely without sin or struggle. Like the Pharisees of Jesus' time; we have become entranced with politics, tradition, processes, and appearance; but have neglected the critical matters of love and forgiveness. Like the Pharisees we continue to white wash..and from behind the illusion of righteousness, murder other believers in our hearts as we condemn them. We cast lofty and judgemental glances at those who fail to meet the status quo; those who fail to look as sparkly clean as our whitewashed exteriors. We offer smiles that are no more than skin deep, barely concealing the contempt hidden just below the surface. Well I have been anointed, I have been called, I have been blessed, and I have been gifted, empowered, and authorized. The Spirit is grieved to the point of action, and in this season I am grateful to God for restoring me to grace, and returning me to the kingdom with an obedient heart and a passion that knows no fear or hesitation. The time for restoration is upon us, and as the firstfruits it has been given me the task of sewing the seeds of Return To Grace: Restoration Ministry. Let there be no confusion, though I come with a message of hope, mercy, love, forgiveness and grace for those in need; I also come bearing prophecy, manifestation of the gifts with no boundary, and a heavy rebuke for the hardened hearts that continue to destroy the Body and abandon God's children to the enemy-as though it is a casual affair. Do not be deceived; this is a matter so dear to Father's heart-He is unwilling to allow the enemy to continue to steal, kill and destroy His children.

 May Father show us all the truth, and redirect us into a new season of unity, wholeness and openness; May He show us how to be free to be weak...how to be willing to make mistakes...that we may always know it is never what we do...but what Jesus' blood does that matters. May we always keep a proper perspective and attitude in our approach towards both God....and to others. For it is and always will be in Jesus holy name we pray..AMEN!!!

(This concludes the testimonial portion, The next four chapters comprise the critical information for Return to Grace Ministry. The first is a general outline/overview giving a general, but flexible structure. The following are specific lessons that will empower, equip, and educate the body to effectively.)