

All Things New!

From A Dysfunctional Family, I Found Christ's Love

By Tom Stephens, 2002

Mom and Dad are gone. Dad passed in December, 1971 in Arizona. Mom followed approximately thirty years later in Abilene, Texas. I have a brother* who is about 16 months older than I, and a sister* who is six years younger. Add me to the picture and you see my family - photographically, that is.

The story I'm about to tell is true, and though it opens up some wounds, it is part of my story.

We were a dysfunctional family, and no one gets more blame than the other, except when we three children were small. Moms and Dads are always to blame when little children are concerned and the thing I desire to instill in the hearts of my readers is this: Children *always* feel and accept *all* the blame. Let me say that again..."Children always feel and accept *all* the blame". I know because I was one of those victimized children.

I'll be sixty-two this year (2002) and only recently have I finally found healing from the terrifying nightmares of my childhood.

I was about five years old when I began to understand the terror a child can go through when parents abuse each other and the children as well. Unexpectedly Mom would strike at us, her anger filling the air like a monster. His temper out-of-control, dad would slam us with the back of the hand and on my brother, only 15 months older than I, his fist. The following nightmare followed me from early childhood through late adulthood.

A Most Terrifying Dream

My brother, sister, and I were usually "open season" to the angry moods of our parents. Mom's anger would flare up in the most innocent circumstances. She thought nothing of slapping us or using a belt—sometimes not getting over this anger for days. I feel this is a major cause for the stresses and tensions between my brother and sister and myself while growing up. I became hardened to the pains of life; and never revealed anything to others, building the wall so many speak of.

In the darkness of night demonic beings would chase me in my dreams through the house, and out the front door where the terrain would suddenly be a huge "knee deep" body of water. When I tried running through this shallow lake, I would become even more frightened. Terrified, I would scream with all the power of my lungs as I struggled against the water. My legs would not carry me fast enough and the awful beings closed in around me! The dream ended here, amidst my terrifying cries for help. Each time the dream ended like I was falling into a terrible place filled with more demons!

I would awaken, sitting up in my bed screaming so loud I would frighten myself, yet no one came to my rescue. No one ever came into my bedroom to comfort me. This dream became my personal enemy and I always felt only inches away from death. I was just a little child not more

than five or six years old. As the years passed, I learned this evil would be my continual accuser. I met him in my youngest days; I remember witnessing his horror during my teens. In the military, I woke myself up screaming, “Why doesn’t anyone love me!”—while men stirred. Not one of my army peers ever mentioned this embarrassing incident.

More Terror:

Again, when I was around five years old, Mom and dad were in a violent fight in our living room, mom swinging the buckle end of a leather belt at dad, causing bloody places on his upper body. During the terrible fight, I observed my brother’s face. It was knarled up. His hands were shaking in front of him, and he was jumping around near the corner of the room where mom and dad were in physical battle. There was blood on dad’s face and back. It looked to me like he was simply trying to protect himself from the belt buckle mom was swinging at him.

My brother was panicking, running in circles with his hands around his head, and in his hair. He ran out the door. Then seconds later, dad and mom followed, but went another direction...toward the car.

Seems mom wanted the keys to get away, but dad opened the car hood and ripped some wires from the motor. Again they fought in the yard, ceasing when a neighbor and my brother returned. Over the years, I determined I would not allow myself to be as emotional as my brother. I would not allow anything to hurt me again, ever. I needed healing, and hardly a day passed I didn’t recognize the condition of my heart and soul.

Both my older brother and my younger sister, from their youth, were in and out of trouble with the law. Though he is settled down now with a lovely wife who loves him dearly, my brother is still in denial over his ever existent grief from his past. My sister knows what living in the world will do to a person physically and emotionally.

So then, what *is* love? True Love is not a thing, but a Person. Love is Eternal.

A Family Reunion: Finally Peace Comes

It was just another family reunion but I was looking forward to it. After a three-year tour in the military, I had tried a trade school in Dallas but when that didn’t work out, I moved back to Abilene to my parents’ home. I was almost 25 and living at home again – not exactly where I wanted to be. But the reunion would give me a chance to see some cousins I hadn’t seen in a long time and just sort of think things through.

Though ours was hardly a normal family, we had gone to church off and on as I was growing up but like many young people, I fell away and wasn’t living for God. But I knew I needed to be and God was preparing my soul for what I call my “upper room” experience (See Acts 2).

I had to work that Friday so mom and dad went alone to the reunion, and I was to drive up the following day. I remember the two and a half hour trip as a preparation of my soul, fed by gospel music coming through the radio.

Not long after arriving, an ex-husband of one of my aunts showed up unannounced. A second aunt immediately took opportunity to minister to this estranged family member.

Listening through an adjoining doorway were at least six or seven youths, including myself. Aunt Jean had always loved all the children and ministered to us by God's precious Spirit the years we were growing up. That afternoon, as she was ministering to this estranged family member, God's Spirit began moving in my heart. Though I fought these emotions stirring me, my eyes began to tear up. When I finally looked around, every one of my young cousins was affected as much as I. We sat a minute on the beds wondering what must be next. Then as God's Spirit began intervening, we all seemed to know what to do.

There was an upper floor in Grandma's home which had been vacant many years, so we decided to go up stairs and find the Lord anew. Each of us was weeping by the time we got upstairs. I was afraid because I was not used to the terrible guilt I felt, and the tremendous urge to let it all come out. Then, following the example of my more experienced cousins, I began to open my heart to the Lord. He ministered to us in a very sweet way that warm, August day in 1966. I was delivered from the power of hell that evening and I remember throwing a pack of cigarettes across the room. God delivered me from cigarettes and He also completed a physical work of healing, and a spiritual walk with Him began.

I had arrived at Grandma's house about dinner time that Saturday and by 10 p.m. was a changed person. Jesus Christ had this date recorded from the foundations of the world, for nothing happens by accident. He foreordained these hours of my life and determined I was to belong to Him. He has convinced me of His love, and of all His earthly benefits, love is the only thing that will remain and abide with us throughout eternity.

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth, confession is made unto salvation.” (Romans 10:9, 10).

My day of Salvation: Peace Finally Comes

After I found Jesus anew, I entered college where I met my wife Linda. Believing everything was finally over and I had found peace, I relaxed and attempted to accept the healing I knew I needed for my soul. But it wasn't to be that easy, as those same familiar beasts were still lurking around the corner wanting my victory...even my life!

Linda would gently waken me when my terrifying screams would startle her. Concerned, many times as I would attempt to fall off to sleep once more, I could feel the prayers of my wife going up to heaven. Healing delayed as more years passed by. Though not often, once in a while the nightmare would still invade my sleep.

In 1995 our church experienced a wonderful time of revival. Night after night, we gathered at the church, lifting our praises to God and basking in His glory. Sometime during those months, the nightmares finally fled and the freedom I had so diligently sought was finally mine.

Love Is Not Fear:

God showed me recently the biggest problem in my life was fear. Fear and love are enemies. I didn't realize the love of God can destroy that kind of fear in a person's life until I was ready to accept healing from the Master. The following exhortation may be very radical to you, though what I'm saying is true by the prophetic and lovely Word of God.

“If you do not believe we are living in the day of the supernatural gifts from God whereas His people continue in ministries of healing and deliverance, prophetic ministries, Word of Knowledge, speaking in other tongues, and other ministries as delivered to the New Covenant saints on the day of Pentecost, then you may have never received a true and full revelation of Who Jesus Christ really is.”

Assuming you identify with the above doctrine, I have one question to ask you. Hopefully you will meditate just a little while before giving the answer: “Do you read and study the Words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to learn at His feet the things closest to His heart; or do you read the Bible only to learn facts and contend for the faith?”

The Great Commandment Of The Law

It seems very important to God that the new nature He has given His people flows through us in the form of “Agape” love. God looks for those who will allow that kind of love to be manifest in their lives.

The importance of this truth is confirmed by Jesus' words in Matthew 22. In this passage, the Pharisees heard Jesus shut down the Sadducees, so no one really wanted to ask Him any questions.

Finally, a lawyer who thought he knew something spoke up. He must have thought, “Well, the others were Sadducees, and I'm a Pharisee, so maybe I can tempt Jesus to make a mistake.” Of course, it didn't work, but let's follow this conversation for a moment and see what Jesus had to say about agape love.

But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together.³⁵ Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying Master, which is the great commandment in the law?³⁶ Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.³⁷ This is the first and great commandment.³⁸ And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.³⁹ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:34-40).

Note Jesus likens the second commandment - “to love our neighbors as ourselves” - to the first and great commandment, which is to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds. We are to love others with a love that is like our love for God. In fact, Jesus said we only truly love God as we walk in love toward our brethren, for the second commandment is like unto the first one. We can't love God more than people, because it is the same kind of love!

These verses used to be a mystery to me because of Jesus' statement in verse 40: “On these two

commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” That didn't make sense to me. When the lawyer tempted Jesus with the question, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus responded by quoting what He called "the first and great commandment." It sounded like He was isolating a commandment out of the original Ten Commandments, such as "Thou shalt not steal." The problem was, when I went to the Word, I couldn't find the one Jesus was referring to. Then Jesus quoted the second great commandment - we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. But I couldn't find the second great commandment in the Ten Commandments either!

As I prayed and meditated on the Word, I'd go through the Ten Commandments one by one in my mind. *First*, there must be no other gods before Him. *Second*, we are not to worship anything created. *Third*, we must not take God's name in vain. *Fourth*, we are to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

After these four commandments, the next six change in nature, addressing sins against our fellow man. The fifth is the first commandment with promise - to honor our fathers and mothers. The sixth states we shall not murder; the seventh, we shall not commit adultery. Finally, there are the last three commandments: We shall not steal, lie, or covet what belongs to another. The more I meditated on these Ten Commandments, the more I realized the two great commandments Jesus referred to in Matthew 22 were hidden there all along! The initial grouping of four Commandments cover the first great commandment – to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, our minds, our souls, and our strength. This is true even of the fourth commandment – to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. The last six commandments are all summed up in the second great commandment: to love our neighbor as ourselves, including doing no harm to him.

Everything hinges on these two great commandments that deal with our love for God and our love for each other. Nowhere is this truth emphasized more than in the book of First John.

Agape Love And The New Nature

Every time I read the five little chapters in 1st John, I see more clearly how the apostle John considered the new nature and agape love to be synonymous terms. We are born of God and saved with love, which is the core nature of our Father. God doesn't HAVE love; He is love. That's why Paul said in First Corinthians 13 love never fails, even though prophecies will cease and tongues will be done away with (v. 8). Why is this? Because prophecy and tongues are two revelation gifts. We only need these gifts here *in this life* while we are being taught how to walk in the Spirit instead of in the flesh. Prophecy and tongues are not going to Heaven with us because we won't need them there.

On the other hand, love is eternal and never fails. Love crosses the barrier between this life and the next because it is the core nature of what we received when we were born again. God considers agape love as the most lethal weapon we possess - and if we will allow the Holy Spirit to cultivate that love nature in us, our days of failure will become a thing of the past!

So as we look in the book of First John, we see the apostle John freely interchanges the concepts of loving God and loving our brother. This fits with Jesus' words to the lawyer in Matthew 22:39 when He said, "The second commandment is like unto the first." In other words, if we love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, we will also love our neighbor as

ourselves, for that is what makes the second like the first. That means if we are NOT loving our neighbor, we are also not fulfilling the first great commandment to love God.

Let's look at one passage in First John and see if we fit the description of those who truly love God: *“Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him and in you: because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth”* (1 John 2:8).

John is explaining here we don't have spiritually dead spirits any longer. We have a new nature, and the true light now shines within us. Then he says abiding in this new nature is synonymous with walking in love.

“He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes” (1 John 2:9-11).

Even if we are not spiritually dead, we still act like spiritually dead people when we don't walk in love, for we cannot see where we are going. This leads to the apostle John's conclusion: Once we are born again, we are to walk in love with others. It is as simple as that.

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* Both, brother and sister have passed away at this writing.