

SECTION THREE

THE CHANGE

FROM PROMISCUITY TO PURITY

Linda

After only eight months together, we left for college. Palm Beach Atlantic had a firm curfew and strict rules. I finally saw my opportunity to develop a spiritual life.

At home the friends I hung out with and my basic lifestyle made it difficult to live out my faith. I had attended school with the same group of kids for thirteen years and felt trapped by their expectations, pressured to conform to an image that they would approve. The campus milieu was different. It fostered my spiritual life by providing fewer distractions and by accepting and promoting Christian truth. I felt free to recreate my image.

My first roommate, however, was similar to the high school friends I had left behind. If I had not been firm in my decision to change, I might have continued on my old destructive path. But I saw this time of independence as a new beginning. I wanted more in my relationship with God. I started reading the Bible and making time to pray.

As a result of this new fervor, the crack in my relationship with Chris opened into a chasm. He was moving in a different direction than I. His musical choices went from bad to worse, as he began to favor violent and even

Satanist bands. I couldn't stand being in the car with him when he turned on his music.

We often ended up in heated arguments. It seemed that he was doing things just to irritate me. He chewed tobacco, for example, even though it made him sick, and he began lying to me. There were moments when I would look at him and think, "What has he become? Why am I staying with him?" Familiarity was part of the reason we stayed together because at first we had no other friends at this new school.

But also, despite the difficulty in our relationship, I did love Chris and in a way needed him. Consequently we continued to struggle with sexual sin, although I became increasingly conflicted about it. I craved purity, yet I was not strong enough on my own to overcome what felt like an addiction.

The situation reminded me of the candy binges of my childhood. On Halloween night I would eat sweets until I felt sick. The next morning, if offered more sugar I would refuse. My body craved something nutritious.

That was how my spirit felt during those beginning months of college. I was tired of being spiritually sick and wounded. My spirit desired life, and I knew that life only came from Christ. I needed to pursue him and find him. And I really wanted Chris to take this journey with me.

Our relationship remained in the same rut until Thanksgiving break. A few days prior to this short vacation, I had intense pain in my jaw, the result of a cyst that

had formed on the root of a tooth. The cyst was a rare side effect from an operation I had had in eighth grade for a broken jaw. I went home, and the day after Thanksgiving I had minor surgery to correct the problem.

Late that night I was recovering in bed when the phone rang. The person on the other end asked me what I was doing. Assuming it was Chris, I was annoyed. Earlier that day he had helped my mother bring me home. He should have known that I was doing nothing but trying to recover.

I quickly realized that the caller was not Chris but probably an ex-boyfriend. I tried to make light conversation, but when he became obnoxious I hung up and called Chris. I told him about the rude call, and when I said I suspected it was my ex-boyfriend, Chris exploded in a fit of rage. He decided to go to this guy's house and confront him. First, though, he thought he should call the offender to warn him that death was pending.

When Chris called he discovered that this was not the guy who had called me. But more than that, he found out that this former boyfriend had become a Christian. Chris ended up going to the guy's house to hear the full story of his conversion. We spent the remainder of the weekend hanging out with his group of friends, all of whom had surrendered their lives to God.

A month later, over Christmas break, Chris went with this group of new Christians to a Bible study. He came away a changed man. I recall sitting in his car and hearing

him relate the experience. We could see right away that our relationship needed a transformation. We discussed steps to bring our life together in line with God's will. I rejoiced over this new commitment to walk together with God.

During the second semester of college, we were both on the same page spiritually and relationally. Even though we did not overcome the sexual stronghold overnight, the situation began to improve. The turning point came when we totally surrendered each other and ourselves to the Lord. All of a sudden God was our primary focus rather than one another. We gathered a circle of friends who shared the same commitment to live for God.

We also devised regulations for ourselves that would help us remain pure. Some of these rules were pretty radical, but we were serious about change. Minor adjustments wouldn't do the trick when temptation threatened to overpower us.

Since I loved Chris and wanted to help him grow in holiness, the first issue we tackled was my wardrobe. Chris told me honestly what clothing caused temptation. I adapted my wardrobe accordingly. I had to give up wearing shorts, at least when I was around him.

Chris stopped listening to violent and occult music, and we stopped going to movies, since so many were filled with sexual images or references. We were poor college students, so it helped that movies were simply too expensive.

At some point along the way our relationship became chaste. The fruit of that chastity was a dear friendship and camaraderie that had been lost when we were having sex. We learned to love each other without selfish intentions.

The victory was that we remained 100 percent pure for the two years we continued to date before we married. On our long-awaited wedding night, I pictured God looking down on us, no longer ashamed of our actions. This time, sacramentally committed, we were enjoying his gift as he intended.

FROM OPPRESSION TO FREEDOM

Chris

Palm Beach Atlantic College grew from the Baptist tradition, a congenial choice for us since Linda and I were not Catholic yet. We were glad to be going to a school that had a religious foundation, even if our lives didn't reflect a thriving spirituality. In fact, I hesitated to call myself a Christian because of the moral choices I had been making. I wasn't interested in being a hypocrite, so I couldn't confidently speak of my faith to others. Linda and I both knew that the problem was a paralyzed spiritual life brought about by sexual promiscuity.

Deep in our hearts the longing to follow Christ remained. We wanted our words and deeds to proclaim this, though that rarely happened during these unsettled times. If we were going to mature as a couple, somehow our faith had to rejuvenate and dominate our lives again.

We had chosen a Christian college knowing that there would be no co-ed dormitories. We even had a curfew and got demerits if we broke it. We adjusted to this new way of life, but we still found ways to sin.

We didn't have the gift of the sacraments, especially the sacrament of reconciliation, but we repented in our hearts as best we could. What little spiritual life we had was unequal to the challenge; giving in to temptation seemed to be part of our makeup.

Those first few months in college I was falling apart. I was absorbed in extremely aggressive music. I had also been cutting myself with a knife, partially because I found it fascinating and partially out of the loneliness and internal unhappiness I felt. I was also reading about magic and occult situations and events.

Linda and I continued to struggle in our relationship. She was growing in her faith and wanted to be chaste, while I was falling further and further from my Christian roots.

The change in my spirit started with a class project. I was taking a basic required course on oral communications. I figured it would be effortless for me, an easy A. I had been involved in theater and music for most of my school years and was accustomed to speaking before crowds.

One of the assignments was to give a persuasive speech to the class for an allotted amount of time. I decided to speak about how to be a good Christian. I could

recall better times in my spiritual journey and remembered being faithful to healthy Christian practices. I knew that regular prayer, Bible study and evangelization were important in a relationship with Christ, so I made these the key points of my speech. I felt like a hypocrite, though, given my own spiritual condition.

I began the speech but, unusually for me, felt a bit fearful and uncomfortable. Suddenly I felt light-headed and panicky, and everything seemed weird. I couldn't breathe properly.

The class could see I was falling apart before them. They cleared some chairs and helped me lie down on them as I struggled to pull myself together. I heard someone starting to pray. I don't remember all he prayed, but there came a point when he said, "Satan, the Lord Jesus Christ rebukes you!"

It was something like that and I promise, at that very moment, I felt a heaviness leave my chest. It felt as if a weight was lifted from my body. Not that I was possessed, like the girl in *The Exorcist*, but I was certainly oppressed and depressed. This prayer came as relief to my aching soul.

That event shook me up. I was keenly aware that my life had to change. Before I went around instructing others on how to know the Lord, I needed to do a bit of housecleaning.

On our first Thanksgiving break from college, Linda and I headed back home. There, unbeknownst to me, God was about to begin the transformation in my spiritual life.

One night I was under the impression that an ex-boyfriend had prank-called Linda. I was determined to address the situation in a way that would let this kid know he was barking up the wrong tree. When I discovered that he hadn't made the call, he went on to share with me how his life had changed since he found Jesus. Face to face with my nemesis, I could see that he was not lying.

My head was spinning. I felt even more guilt when I realized that I should have been the one witnessing to this kid, and not the other way around. I had been brought up in the church, and he had not. My mother taught me Bible verses, and I went to vacation Bible school, participated in church plays, attended revivals. I was more than aware that Jesus instructed us to forgive our neighbors and love our enemies, but I had somehow become my worst enemy and greatest obstacle.

For the next few days I kept running into other students I knew from high school who were now following Christ. A few weeks later, during Christmas vacation, I was hanging around with some of these guys discussing music. One of them said that he had an electric guitar he no longer used. I could have it, but I'd need to pick it up back at his dorm at a university in northern Florida.

I had an extreme interest in heavy rock music and needed an electric guitar to play some of my own, so I didn't hesitate to agree to go get the guitar. I knew that he and his friends would invite me to attend the Bible study that had touched their lives so dramatically. I figured it

would be great to go and be touched by God, but I feared that I had strayed too far from his reach. I was a mockery to the faith. I was used goods. I was without much hope at all.

Sure enough, the guys invited me to the Bible study at a house down the road. Reluctantly, my nerves on edge, I went with them. Entering the home, I was struck by the love the mother of the house extended to me and to those already there.

I met the guest speaker, and he asked me about my faith in Christ. When had I given my life to Jesus? I ignored the temptation to mask my true feelings, and in all honesty I asked, "Which time?"

When did I give my life to Christ? The number of times I had vowed myself to his service were innumerable. Over and over again I had ascended to great spiritual heights, only to plummet to spiritual catastrophe. My "walk with God" had been more like a ride on a roller coaster, and at that point I was almost off the tracks.

The students gathered round and began to pray for me. There, in that living room, I met God in a way I had never experienced before. It was familiar yet new. It built upon earlier "conversion" moments, but it was defining for me, having felt so far from him for so long. I was changed.

It's hard to express, but I suspected that this was a special opportunity to start over. I snatched it, knowing that there was no guarantee it would be offered again. God

had touched my life, and by his grace I didn't want to fail him. He had reached out and embraced me, and I was never going to be the same.

I went back to school a new man. The transformation started in my heart. It wasn't forced, and it wasn't the result of guilt. Instead I found myself falling more and more in love with Christ. I truly wanted to change, not just by renouncing blatant sexual sin but also by striving for discipline in prayer, knowledge of the Bible and more Christian fellowship in my daily life. I wanted to surround myself with people who were passionate about the Lord. These changes played a huge role not only in what I did but also in how I thought.

Linda was elated. She no longer had to be the spiritual leader; rather, together we could make a difference and fight to live what we so deeply believed.

As Linda and I transitioned from sexual obsession into Christ's gracious freedom, the sorrow for our failures was definitely extreme. I found, however, that for the first time in a long time I had the hope that Christ's love for me wasn't contingent upon my ability to be perfect in my dating relationship. Because of his love and his help as I met the challenge to rethink old thought patterns, each day held opportunities and victories.

Slowly we made our way out of the sexual trap. God's triumph manifested itself in our dating relationship as we maintained sexual purity for over two years prior to our wedding.