

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“When I was young, I cared about myself, nothing else. If something made me feel good, that made it right. You know how I acted, George. I always carried plenty of money, and my parents gave me everything I wanted. Any girl that appealed to me I seduced, and very few ever turned me down. I made good grades without studying much and I lettered in basketball and football.

“So far as I was concerned, the world owed me a good time, and I intended to collect on it. After high school, I went to UK, where I was a BMOC, Big Man On Campus. I majored in basketball, with a minor in business administration.

“I knew Marcia in high school, but for whatever strange reason she didn’t interest me that much then. One day I saw her sitting in the stands at Rupp during a game and I almost fell down with the ball. I thought she was the most gorgeous thing I’d ever laid eyes on. Back then, that’s about all I saw when I looked at girls, things. I found Marcia later, and she responded just like I hoped she would. We turned into a major item.

“Every once in a while we’d break up, because I still wanted to play the field, but we always got back together again. We both played the party scene, so we got along real well together. Neither of us saw anything wrong with having sex or drugs or booze whenever we felt like it, and the crowd we moved in felt the same as we did. Once, Marcia got careless and had to have an abortion; we thought nothing of it at the time

“After college I got a job as a sales rep with a medical supply company, and within three years I clawed my way up to district sales manager for eastern Kentucky. The fact that my daddy knew the owner of the company didn’t hurt, but I had to climb over several people. We moved to a town not far from where I grew up and bought a big two-story house.

“One day I looked around and decided that nothing I had, and nothing I did, made me happy. Marcia and I lived together at the time, and I decided I might be happier if we actually married. She didn’t like the idea at first, especially when I mentioned that my idea of marriage included a family, meaning children. She had that abortion in college to keep *from* having children. Finally, though, I convinced her that our lives needed commitment.

“For a few years we really were happy. We liked it when people called us husband and wife and when Marcia got pregnant we were both ecstatic. We liked having the first two girls in the house, kind of like having little dolls around. Little babies, though, grow into little girls and boys. By the time Amanda came along the novelty had long since worn off. Marcia decided enough was enough and had her tubes tied. I drank heavily and stayed away from home as much as possible. Both of us had affairs, and neither one of us much cared. We stayed married for the sake of the children, nothing else.

“This went on for years, until about a year ago. Things went from very bad to worse then. The bottom fell out of the economy and out of my sales figures. Daddy retired and he couldn’t save me. I lost my job and got so depressed I decided to just drink myself to death. At least, I thought, I’d die happy.

“I woke up one morning at home with no recollection at all of how I got there. I had no idea what I did the night before, or the day before that. Looking through the house, I discovered that Marcia had gone and taken the girls with her. She left me a note on the refrigerator saying I needn’t try to find her. She would send the divorce papers along shortly.

“I decided it was time I took a grip on myself. I went to the bathroom, and when I saw myself in the mirror I could hardly believe what I saw. My eyes were blood red and hollow, my cheeks were sunken and I had a

stubble of whiskers all over my face. I looked like a derelict, like one of the skid row bums I used to joke about.

“After I washed my face and shaved, I went to find something to eat. I turned on the news channel, but all they talked about was this fellow over in Italy, and I’d heard enough about him.

“Sitting in my favorite chair, I tried to decide what I could do to make things better and get my family back, but I couldn’t think of anything. I spent the day feeling sorry for myself and wondering where Marcia could be. I’ll let her tell you what happened next.”

She kisses him and sits on the arm of his chair, running her fingers through his hair. “I acted as badly as Martin, and just as selfishly. I did try to be a good mother, but mostly I succeeded in making spoiled brats out of my girls. They fought with each other constantly and ignored everything I told them. Martin was never there to discipline them, and I didn’t know how to. I spanked them at the wrong times for the wrong reasons.

“I drank, too, but I convinced myself I could control it better than Martin. At every chance I could find I’d leave my girls with a friend and go to a cheap motel with whatever man happened to turn me on. When Martin went on that last drinking binge, he behaved like an animal. He had never been violent before, even during our worst fights, but this time he hit me and threatened to kill us all. After he passed out, I packed some clothes, wrote him a note, took the girls and left. I decided to go to Ashland to visit an aunt of mine there. I thought about going back home to mother, about fifteen miles away, but he’d find me there right away.

“I didn’t know how to get to Ashland because I didn’t drive and you could hardly get gas then anyway. There hadn’t been bus service in town for years. It was at least eighty-five miles from where we were living.

“I did something very foolish. The Lord watched over us or we all could have ended up dead. I walked with the girls out to the four-lane south of town and started hitchhiking. I never did anything like that before in my life and I had no idea how dangerous it was.

“As I say, the Lord was with us. We hadn’t stood by the road over five minutes until a car pulled up beside us and stopped. The man driving the car rolled down the window and asked if we needed help. I said I needed to get to Ashland. He told me he was going that way and would be glad to give us a ride. Since he had a kind face, I felt like we could trust him. He got out and threw our bags in the trunk and we all got in the car. A few minutes later a car full of rough looking men came roaring past us, almost running us off the road. I shudder to think what would have happened if they had gotten to us first. The Lord knew, of course.

“As we rode along, our driver began telling me about his best friend, Jesus. Nobody had ever talked to me about the Lord like that. I had always thought of it all as a lot of superstition, but he made his faith very real and alive. As I watched him talk, I saw something in him I didn’t have, and I wanted it. I know now that it was the joy of the Lord.

“Before we got to Ashland I poured out my heart to him, telling him how empty and meaningless my life was. He asked me if I wanted to meet his friend, Jesus, and I said I did want to, with all my heart. He led me through the sinner’s prayer and I accepted the Lord into my life. I never really knew real peace and joy until that moment.

“When he dropped us off in front of my aunt’s house, I was a new creature in Christ. My aunt was an old woman who had spent her life hating the husband who abused her and left her fifty years before. I hadn’t looked forward to seeing her. I was so on fire for the Lord, though, that before the next day was over I led both her and my three girls to the Lord. That evening, I got the strongest urge to call Martin, so I did. Not long after that, phone service started going out all over. A few months later and I never would have reached him.

“Anyway, I called him, on the video phone, and when he answered I was so filled with love for him that I choked up inside. I could hardly talk. I was glad to see he was sober. The night before, I had prayed that the Lord would remove the desire for alcohol from him. He was so sweet it made me cry; when I told him what had happened to us, he didn’t sneer at all, like he would have once. He said he missed us more than he had ever thought possible and asked if we would come home. Before we hung up, I prayed with him to receive the Lord, and Jesus saved him!

“Now, Martin, dearest, it’s your turn to talk again.”

He draws her down toward him and kisses her, then resumes the story. “We’ve told you all of that to tell you the real story, what happened to us *after* we were saved. I managed to find some gas for the car, which wasn’t easy, and made the trip up to Ashland. When we got home, we had the sweetest time we had ever known in our lives, all five of us.

“Things around us kept getting worse and worse, as you know, George, but for Marcia and me the next several months were a second honeymoon. I had no work, so we lived off our savings until I could figure out what to do. We joined a church group which had been forced to leave its building. Since we had a big house, we invited the church to hold services there.

“One of our members, Brother Phillip here, was blessed with the gift of prophecy. The Lord showed him we were headed into a time of great disasters and troubles, worse than anything the earth had ever known before. He told us the Lord had prepared a sanctuary for us in the wilderness, a haven for those fleeing persecution. Some of us had trouble accepting this, wondering why the Lord would single us out when so many hundreds of Christians around us were suffering and dying for their faith. We finally agreed, though, that if it were the Lord’s will we shouldn’t question it. By way of a fleece we asked that God would send us a guide to this place, wherever it might be, when the time came to leave.

“The night before the earthquake we gathered for a service and started to worship. Someone knocked on the door. Marcia went to see who it was and found the man who led her to the Lord standing there at the door. He smiled and said, ‘Hi Marcia, I think you all are looking for a guide. May I come in?’ ”

Marcia breaks in again here. “I was so excited I threw my arms around him and kissed him. He wasn’t the least embarrassed or offended, but Martin was a little upset when he came in and saw me kissing s strange man.”

“Well, I wasn’t jealous for long, but it did give me a scare. We took him to meet the others, and he told us all to go and collect whatever we could carry. He said to meet him at an old park on the south side of town, in two hours. After he prayed with us he left. The others went home to prepare.

“He met us later, just where he said he’d be. Thirty-two of us, of all ages, left town that evening. We had walked well into the hills the next morning when everything got dark. At first we thought a storm was coming, but our guide told us all to hurry to an open space in the woods and lie down. The earth moved like water under us when the earthquake came; it shook so violently I thought sure every bone in my body would shatter. Trees crashed down all around us, and the earth tore itself apart. When it finally stopped and the light returned, we discovered that we were all fine, though the children were badly frightened. Around us it looked like a disaster area, and we had trouble finding a path through all of the fallen trees.

“It took us a week of hard travel to reach this place. We climbed up some really steep places, sometimes with sheer drops below, but none of us even broke a bone. The morning we came to the top of the hill above the valley we thought we had found paradise. It was just as green as it is now, only more so because it was summer. This was once a self-supporting Christian school, but it finally closed and the only people left were an old caretaker and his wife. Somehow they kept the valley beautiful for years and they always surrounded it with prayers.

“They greeted us when we came, and I have never met any two people with so much of the love and power of the Lord about them. A month after we came, they both died, on the same day at exactly the same time. They finished their work.”

“What about your guide?” asks George. “Is he still with you?”

“I don’t doubt it,” says Martin, smiling. “He disappeared shortly after we arrived, and no one could find him anywhere. Marcia is convinced he is her guardian angel, and I believe her.”

I look over at Marcia’s guardian and he shakes his head and smiles. I understand then.

“Since we came here, “ Martin continues, “Many others have joined us. Over a hundred of us live here now, mostly people with small children like us. Some people stay for a while and go back out into the world to do what the Lord called them to do. Others come here for healing of body, mind, and spirit. Whoever the Lord sends us, we don't turn away.

“I know you and our dear brother Green are only passing through, so for you this is a place of refreshing. Many have come here for that reason. I can say, without hesitation, that no servant of the Enemy has set foot in this valley since we came here, because the Lord keeps a hedge around us.”

He stretches again and hugs Marcia a little tighter. “I’ve rambled on long enough. Marcia says I talk more than I should. Let’s hear your story.”

George shares his testimony with them, glad to tell it to people he has known since his childhood. They laugh and cry with him, especially at some shared memory or experience. When he finishes, big Green Halcomb shyly shares his own story, his voice often cracking with emotion as he describes what the demon drove him to do. The faces of those who listen reflect the horror of the deeds he has done, deeds which the Lord no longer charges against him but whose guilt he still bears.

Martin and Marcia both rise from their seat and go to embrace him when he finishes. Martin tells him, “The Lord sent you here, my brother. This trip was for you, as well as for George. I know you don’t like being around a lot of people, but stay with us a while. You are full of raw, open wounds inside and the healing will take a while. There’s a beautiful wooded glen at the upper end of the valley. Stay there, if you will, and come to share with us whenever you want to. When the Lord completes his work of healing in you, you can go back out into the world wherever He leads you. Will you stay?”

Green nods dumbly, his huge face wet with tears. George comes over to him as well, and the two men embrace like long-lost brothers.

“Now, then, brothers,” Martin says after they have all returned to their seats, “let’s go out and see the rest of the valley. You really haven’t been properly introduced to everybody. Brother Phillip, will you go with us?”

Phillip has watched everything gravely, just as intently as he had earlier listened to the testimonies being shared. He shakes his head and smiles in his mild way. “I need to go apart for a while and pray. I am late in my appointed time with the Lord.”

With that he gets up, embraces each one in turn, and leaves the house. The other residents in the house, who waited unobtrusively in the kitchen during the sharing time, crowd into the living room now to get better acquainted with the newcomers. The room vibrates with a rush of people and a hush of angels.

George stays for two days. On the morning of the third day he seeks out Green to say good-bye. Green already looks happier; he has cut his hair, trimmed his beard and donned a new set of clothes which the

women of the place put together for him. He truly does look like a new man now. Not ashamed of showing emotion, he cries openly as he hugs George for the last time. Both of them know they will not see each other anymore in the flesh they wear.

Back at the house, George gets Martin and Marcia together. “I have to leave now. The Lord is sending me back where I started. I know what waits for me there is death, but that doesn’t bother me as it would have once. I’ve envied those who’ve gone on to be with the Lord, and I’m looking forward to finally going, too. There is so much I want to see and know, so many people I want to greet again, but most of all I want to be with Jesus.”

Martin and Marcia embrace him together. As humans do, they cry, but more of a sense of peace and joy comes with their tears than sadness. They do not speak of what awaits him, or of when they might meet again. They simply love him, with the love of Jesus, and that strengthens him. When all is said and the partings finished, he leaves them and heads back out of the valley, alone once more but for the Lord and me.