

A Troubled Heart

“O Sovereign LORD, deal well with me for your name’s sake; out of the goodness of your love, deliver me. For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me.”

Psalm 109:21–22

I was nineteen years old and miserable. I’d spent most of my high school years partying and fighting, and had barely graduated. For the previous year I’d worked in a warehouse in Oakland, California. Finally, after twelve months of packing boxes, I’d earned a vacation, so a friend and I celebrated by driving to Reno for several days of drinking and run-ins with the city police. In more ways than one, it was a wasted week.

Now I was at my grandparents’ home in Turlock. It was Saturday afternoon; I had to be back at work in Oakland, ninety miles away, by Monday morning. I didn’t know how I could face another year of box-packing. I was completely depressed, with no hopes or plans for the rest of my life—or even for that night.

Suddenly, an idea popped into my head. *Judy Barrows lives around here. I wonder if she’d go out with me tonight?*

My friend Richard had once dated Judy when we all lived in the area. I hardly knew her, but I remembered she was a pretty brunette. I looked up Judy’s number and called. To my surprise, she accepted my short-notice date proposal.

A few hours later, I pulled up to Judy’s ranch-style home in my pride and joy, a ’53 green and yellow Chevy Bel Air. Judy, wearing a yellow summer dress, looked great. My hopes of quickly whisking her away in my dream mobile were soon dashed, however.

“Dennis, my brother is going to be on television in a few minutes,” Judy said. “Would you mind if we watched a little of the program?”

What could I say? I reluctantly consented.

After family introductions, I sat down in the Barrows' living room with Judy and her father, mother, brother, and sister, wondering what I was getting myself into. The program host came on and announced that we were about to see a Billy Graham crusade from Madison Square Garden in New York.

I'd heard of Billy Graham, but didn't know anything about him. And I certainly didn't know until that moment that Cliff Barrows, the program's master of ceremonies and song leader, was Judy's brother!

We watched for a few minutes. I had no interest in the message or what Billy Graham was saying about the Bible. As far as I was concerned, church was for hypocrites and old ladies. I could feel my palms start to sweat. This was not what I had in mind for the evening.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I turned to Judy and whispered, "Maybe it's time for us to go."

Her father heard me. "Dennis," he said, "I think it would be a good idea for you to watch the whole program." The look in his eye and the tone of his voice made it clear that the matter was not up for debate. If I wanted to date this man's daughter, I was going to have to sit through the entire show.

It was one of the longest hours of my life.

At last, the program ended. I barely remember where Judy and I went that night—probably to the local drive-in for something to eat. But I'll never forget what happened when we got back to her house.

We parked in Judy's driveway and started to talk. I shared about how much I disliked my warehouse job, described my awful "vacation," and admitted that my life had no meaning or direction.

Judy looked at me intently. "Dennis, you need what Billy was talking about tonight—a personal relationship with Jesus Christ."

I raised my hand. "Oh, no," I said. "I've already heard one sermon too many tonight. I don't need another one from you. I think I'd better get going."

“Okay,” she answered. “But before you go, I want to pray for you.” Judy didn’t wait for me to answer. She closed her eyes and in a sweet, gentle voice, started praying out loud, inviting Jesus to move into and take hold of my life.

I was stunned. No one had ever prayed like this just for me.

When she finished, Judy opened her eyes and looked again at me. “Now,” she said, “why don’t *you* pray and give your life to Christ?”

The strangest feeling came over me. My resistance seemed to melt away. The desire to escape was gone. For some reason, I couldn’t say no to Judy’s question. Instead, I looked down and began to speak.

“God,” I said in a low voice, “if You’re really there and You’re real...if You can do anything with this crazy life of mine...then do it.”

For me, the experience was like being in a dark room and suddenly finding the light switch. I knew this was real. I’d met the Living Christ right there in Judy Barrows’ driveway. I said good-bye to Judy, raced back to my grandparents’ place, and woke up my grandmother.

“Grandma, you won’t believe it,” I said. “I accepted Jesus tonight. I’m a Christian!”

My grandmother, who’d been sleeping soundly and wasn’t wearing her hearing aides, glasses, or false teeth, had some trouble getting my message. She thought I was drunk again.

“Go back to bed, Denny,” she said. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”

I did feel better the next day—not because I was recovering from a hangover, but because I now had hope. I returned to Oakland, bought a Bible, and a few days later felt prompted to quit my job at the warehouse. I loaded my few possessions into the Bel Air and drove to Los Angeles, where I soon convinced the registrar at a Christian school then called Biola College to allow me to enroll. Biola was a new world to me, and I loved it. I soaked up the teaching there like a sponge.

I also came to appreciate the attributes of another student named Joan. I dated several girls at Biola, but when my eyes fell on Joan, I was captivated. I had never met

anyone with the same measure of grace, beauty, quiet spirit, purity, godliness, and innocence. For some reason, she also seemed to see something in me. By the end of my four years at Biola, we were engaged to be married.

I was on my way to a great life, full of love for the Lord and excited about spending the rest of my days with my new wife, serving God, and spreading the message of Christ. The hopeless, drifting, self-destructive young man I'd been before was gone. I'd made a 180-degree turn. Now that I'd committed myself to Christ, I knew that my worries were over.

At least, that's what I thought at the time. What I didn't know was that down deep, in the hidden chambers of my heart, I was still very troubled.

Vomit from the Heart

Many of us begin our new lives as Christians with the secret expectation that everything will be different and that the rest of our days will be a pleasant stroll down Easy Street. And it's only after considerable experience, reflection on Scripture, and spiritual maturity that we begin to understand that the trials and troubles of daily life don't go away after we commit ourselves to Christ. Sometimes our problems even get worse. It was Peter, after all, who wrote, "Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12–13).

There are always challenges, events that plague us from without and threaten to do significant damage. This is part of life. God sometimes uses these trials to draw us closer to Him, and likewise our relationship Jesus helps us deal with each unexpected crisis.

But there are also troubles that torment us from within. These are the kind that can cause the greatest harm. They are like time bombs waiting to go off. They are the weapons that Satan deploys most easily to destroy our lives and faith, and so many of us are blown away by the explosions.

I watched one of these bombs go off shortly after I made my commitment to the Lord. A student named Bill was the first person at Biola to disciple me. He was an ex-Marine in his mid-twenties who seemed totally dedicated to God. I admired him tremendously. We handed out Christian tracts on the corner of Hollywood and Vine and visited jail inmates together. Whenever I went by Bill's dorm room, I'd find him on his bed, reading the Bible.

To my surprise, however, Bill left Biola in the middle of that first academic year. He got involved in a cult, began a relationship with a married woman, and abandoned the faith. I couldn't believe it. I wondered, *If Bill can't make it, how am I going to do it?*

Over the years, I've seen many more of these bombs go off. Rick and Cindi, for example, were a husband-and-wife team I knew that were heavily involved in missions work. Both were dedicated to their faith, two hard-working servants of the Lord. They and their two children moved to Wyoming to take over a church there. All seemed well at first, but then I heard an unbelievable report: Cindi had fallen for the youth pastor at the church. Her marriage to Rick was shattered.

Then there is Jerry, the man who preached at my ordination service at a small church in Carver, Oregon. His son Will became my best friend at Biola, and Will and his parents practically adopted me during my school years. Jerry, his wife, Emily, and Will were a loving family, so different from my own. They were a wonderful blessing to me in those years.

While I was at Biola, Emily discovered she had leukemia. She passed away while I was at seminary. It was a sad time for me and a tremendous loss for Jerry and his family. A few years later, though, he recovered from his grief and married Charlene, an administrator at a Christian school. But almost immediately after the wedding, Jerry was shocked to discover that his new wife had been involved in a lesbian relationship. Equally devastating, he learned that Charlene had seduced girls at the Christian school, and that others in the administration knew and did nothing about it. Distressed and disillusioned, Jerry didn't just annul his marriage. He became very angry with God and for a time walked away from Him.

The stories go on and on.

I'm sure you can think of your own examples of people who completely lost their bearings. You may be one yourself. What happened to them? To you? How can men and women who put their trust in Christ make such terrible mistakes and turn away from Him and His ways? Why the seemingly sudden disconnect?

The answer can be found in Scripture. Solomon wrote, "The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live" (Ecclesiastes 9:3).

Jesus put it in even more graphic language:

"It's what comes out of a person that pollutes: obscenities, lusts, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, depravity, deceptive dealings, carousing, mean looks, slander, arrogance, foolishness—all these are vomit from the heart. *There is the source of your pollution*" (Mark 7:21–23 MSG).

A Seed for Malice

Don't miss this biblical message: The heart is evil. Nearly every sin imaginable is "vomit from the heart." The heart is the source of the pollution in our lives.

You may be thinking, *What is this guy talking about? I may not be perfect, but my heart isn't evil. And my sweet little baby daughter certainly doesn't have all that "pollution" in her heart!*

Let's consider this for a moment. Why do we, as parents, work so hard to teach our kids to have good manners, to tell the truth, to treat others with kindness? When parents fail to address these issues, how do their children act? Isn't it true that without proper teaching and guidance, kids will descend into all manner of selfish and destructive behaviors? I'm sure you've seen it happen. It's just part of their nature—or stated more accurately, the condition of their hearts.

I'm not saying that we are born with a fully developed inclination toward evil, or that little children intend to harm and destroy with every thought and act (though I've occasionally met a mischievous boy or girl who made me wonder!). But I am stating that the *seed* for malice is there from the beginning. It's called sin, and it's what the apostle Paul was talking about when he wrote, "For before the law was given, sin was in the world" (Romans 5:13).

As children and then as adults, we carry around that sinful seed inside our hearts. The training of our parents—and for many of us, faith in Christ—helps us keep it buried. But then, so often, something happens that causes the seed to grow.

It can be anything: the death of a loved one, a life-threatening disease, a spouse's affair, an abortion, the loss of a job, emotional or sexual abuse, lies that destroy our reputation, bankruptcy.

The outcome is pain, a wound that penetrates to the core of our soul—to our hearts. And if we're not careful, the hurt becomes a trigger. The wound is like water on our buried sin. As the water flows, the sin grows and flourishes with each passing day.

All of us enter salvation with wounded hearts, some to a greater degree than others. Contrary to what we tend to believe, the Christian life does not automatically remove the hurt. Christ is not a Great Eraser who instantly wipes away the pain of your past. As a result, what often happens is that once we give our lives to Jesus and discover that we still have pain, we choose to self-medicate. We do whatever it takes to get by. And we wonder why God doesn't seem to care.

Dr. David Allen, a Christian psychologist and author, has described the process this way:

The cycle is predictable. It goes like this: Internal pain (a void, sense of inadequacy, love hunger, or loss) manifests itself as shame, anxiety, guilt, depression, anger, or boredom. The vulnerable person tries to alleviate this pain or get comfort through some type of anesthetic—drugs, alcohol, relationships, work, rage, sex, food, or gambling. The anesthetic relieves the situation temporarily but later generates even more serious

consequences—intense guilt, remorse, and dissatisfaction with self...God-given meaning, dignity, identity, and value for oneself are lost.¹

Sound familiar? You probably know someone in your family, neighborhood, workplace, or church that's trapped in this cycle. You might be there yourself. Look again at the result: "God-given meaning, dignity, identity, and value for oneself are lost." It's a pattern that leads to crisis and tragedy. It's a spiral into despair. It's the definition of a wounded and troubled heart.

It's also the road I was on for most of my life—only I didn't know it.

Human Doings

You could say that my childhood was less than ideal. Pornographic materials of various types were readily available in our home. My father had a serious drinking problem and a violent temper. He worked at menial jobs in the Oakland area and had no interests or hobbies other than working, drinking, and gambling. My mother was a hyperactive woman who worked at drug stores and led an active social life. I felt neglected and never bonded with her.

Conflict was commonplace in our family. My parents fought often and separated many times while I grew up. My older brother, Ron, and I couldn't stand each other and also fought. Once I threw him through the kitchen window. Another time, when I had my hands and feet tied as part of a game we were playing, he pushed me off the front porch and bloodied my face. The only person at home I didn't battle with was my brother Terry, ten years younger. We mostly left each other alone.

On top of all this, I was sexually abused multiple times by someone I trusted. For a child not even twelve years old, it was an overwhelming and frightening experience. I felt betrayed. I didn't know where to turn. It also awakened sexual feelings I wasn't ready for.

As you might expect, by the time I graduated from high school, I had hardened my heart and was stubborn, unfeeling, unloving, rebellious, negative, unhappy, and unfulfilled. I wouldn't have said so at the time, but I had a wounded and troubled heart.

Yet by the time I graduated from Biola and married Joan, I believed everything had changed. I was motivated to ride the fast track to bringing glory to God. The years passed like a runaway train. We moved to Portland, where I completed my seminary training at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary and served as part-time pastor of a community church. We spent nearly four years as missionaries in Brazil. Joan and I had two children. Then we felt the Lord leading us to start a new church in Corvallis, Oregon.

Those days at what became Northwest Hills Church were exciting and challenging. I wanted to be involved in everything. We had three morning services and an evening service. In addition to preparing several messages each week, I attended numerous weekly meetings. I also served as a board member and then chairman of the board of a missionary organization, became involved with other Christian organizations, and accepted out-of-town speaking engagements.

After fourteen years of full-time (and then some) ministry at Northwest Hills, we left for another ministry opportunity in Illinois, only to return to Corvallis several months later after discovering the position in Illinois wasn't what we anticipated. A group of close friends felt prompted to begin a new church. Despite the concerns of some people I'd served with for years, I agreed to help with this new effort.

Following a few years of working to establish this new church in Corvallis, Joan and I, along with our daughter, Jennifer, again left Corvallis for a year of missions work in Brazil (our eldest child, Tim, stayed behind to attend college). After Brazil came a short-term assignment with Medical Ambassadors International, seven years as pastor of Modesto (California) Covenant Church, a stint as pastor of Cascade Community Church in Sisters, Oregon, and a merger with Sisters Baptist Church. In Sisters, I was especially excited and proud when our son, Tim, was invited to join us as assistant pastor. I felt even more so a couple of years later when Tim agreed to become lead pastor, while I continued

to serve as an associate pastor and also launched a new, international effort, World Leadership Ministries.

I should have been able to look back on my forty-plus years of ministry with satisfaction. I'd experienced amazing opportunities to serve God and had been blessed in countless ways. And yet...I wasn't happy. Though I'd refused to admit it to myself, through all those years I'd lived with a nagging sense of internal conflict. I often felt frustrated, guilty, and disillusioned. It was more than the usual bumps that go with trying to lead a family and congregation. I was so driven to perform for God that I missed out on the joy of life. Something at the core of my soul wasn't right.

But I didn't want to face that. My solution was to serve and then serve some more. I was a man in perpetual motion.

Dr. Allen has put into words the state of my life at that time:

Hurt people sometimes feel restless without knowing why; they find it hard to just be. They always have to be on the go—accomplishing something to help them feel good about themselves and escape the empty feelings quiet brings. They tend to be human doings rather than human beings.²

Year after year, the output of my life far exceeded the intake. I neglected my health, my family, and most importantly, my walk with God. Though my intentions were good, and though everything appeared under control from the outside, on the inside my heart became more troubled by the day. I could identify with the struggle the apostle Paul experienced and vividly describes in Romans 7:15: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." I felt like a walking civil war.

Gradually the inner conflict, which at the time I was unable to identify as a severely wounded and troubled heart, intensified and grew to unbearable proportions. To ease the pain and tension, I made a series of sinful choices over the years, which included sexual failure, with more than one affair. What I did was sin. I now realize that because I

had never let Jesus heal my troubled heart, the hidden chambers of my heart were unchanged. I was the perfect candidate for the time bomb inside me to explode.

Those terrible sins didn't make things better, of course. They made them far worse. I was racked by raging guilt and more internal conflict. I didn't want anyone to find out what I'd done. The incongruity between what I was preaching and teaching and what was going on in my personal life was tearing me apart. Yet I pressed on. Pride, fear, and the belief that I could solve my own problems all played a part in perpetuating my self-deception. My heart was more deeply troubled than ever, and I did nothing about it.

Are You So Dull?

But God has His ways. He loves us too much to allow us to continue to go down destructive paths indefinitely. I remember well the day several years ago when my world finally collapsed and God got my full attention.

It was a Monday morning. I was home alone when I noticed my son pull up in his jeep. When I opened the door and saw the look on Tim's face, I knew this was more than a social call.

We sat in my living room, Tim on an easy chair and me on the couch. He quickly got to the point. He confronted me with an accusation he had heard about my sexual misconduct.

After a time of emotional discussion, Tim continued. His expression was serious and intense. "Dad, don't lie to me," he said. "If you do, you'll severely damage our relationship. But if this did happen and you tell the truth, you'll see grace like you've never seen before."

It was an excruciating moment. I was being confronted with my sins. I stayed calm on the outside, but my insides were churning.

"I've got to go upstairs," I said. I walked away.

Alone in my office, I was battered by a whirlwind of thoughts. The accusation *was* true. But if I admitted it, everything would change. So many people would be hurt. My reputation and maybe my marriage would be destroyed. Could I handle that?

On the other hand, could I continue with this charade of pretending to be someone I wasn't? Maybe this was God's way of grabbing me by the collar and putting an end to all these years of misery. After several minutes of intense struggle, God made it clear to me that now was the time to focus my full energies on finding some answers.

I dropped my head. *Yeah*, I thought. *It's time*.

I slowly walked downstairs and, with tears in my eyes, said, "It's true."

It was the beginning of the most tumultuous period of my life. The condition of my sinful heart was exposed and I knew as never before that I had a choice to make. I could continue to deny and rationalize my sin or face it head on and by God's grace find an answer to the disconnect I had been experiencing. I was overwhelmed by shame and guilt. I didn't think I could deal with the consequences of what I'd done. I began to rationalize that it might be better for Joan and the rest of our family and friends if I just disappeared. I fantasized about how I would make my escape and start a new life, maybe in Australia or New Zealand.

Yet in the end, I couldn't walk away from the people I loved and who loved me, or from what I knew was God's plan for restoring me. When I shared my struggle and confessed my sin to Joan, she made the choice to stand by me and work through this. We entered into the most intense and painful time we had experienced in our forty-plus years of marriage. But I was determined to do whatever it took to deal with the issues of my troubled heart that I had neglected far too long.

My quest for answers and the exposing of my sinful heart to the light started when Joan and I entered into a ten-day, intensive counseling session in Colorado. In some ways it was a very frustrating time. I wanted to talk about the specific mistakes I had made so I could figure out why I made them and how I could avoid them in the future. But the counselor kept insisting that just dealing with behaviors was like shuffling the chairs on the Titanic while it was going down. The issue wasn't my behaviors; it was the condition of my heart.

"Dennis," he said, "if your heart doesn't change, nothing will change." There it was again—it really was all about the heart. I couldn't get away from it!

After those ten days in Colorado, Joan and I said little to each other on the long drive back to Oregon. We were both disappointed. I felt we'd accomplished little during our time in counseling.

At home, though, I thought more deeply about the counselor's words and his focus on the heart. As I read my Bible, I started noticing how often the heart was mentioned. It was everywhere! I wondered if the counselor was on to something after all. I decided I needed to do my own study on matters of the heart in Scripture.

I still remember the summer evening I sat in my upstairs office, gazing out the window at our beautiful landscaped backyard, ponderosa pine trees framing our little pond and the waterfall that flows into it. The pastoral scene was such a contrast to my jagged thoughts and the mess I'd made of my life.

I opened my Bible and was soon reading Mark's Gospel. In chapter seven, Jesus tells a parable, but the disciples don't understand and ask Him about it.

"Are you so dull?" [Jesus] asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body...What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'...All these evils come from inside"
(Mark 7:18–23).

Are you so dull? I stopped breathing for a moment. The words of Jesus seemed to echo off the walls of my office. He was trying to tell me something.

For most of my life, I realized, I'd thought the specific sinful choices I'd made were the cause of my trouble. If I could just learn to stop the sin, I figured, I'd be fine.

But maybe my approach was all wrong. Maybe the reason I was destroying my life with bad choices was that something was fundamentally wrong with my heart—and it had been there from the beginning. If I honestly wanted to get rid of the anguish that had been tormenting me for so many years, that's where I had to go. With the Lord's help, I had to confront the enemy inside me. I needed to embark on a journey to the center of my troubled heart.

Gordon MacDonald, in his helpful book *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, strongly emphasizes the need of dealing with the heart when he writes:

A broken world will never be rebuilt until we learn this principle of the unbound heart. It must be unwrapped and exposed to the light. The light will show some unattractive evil, but then something wonderful will happen. The love of God will be free to flood into the dark recesses, and rebuilding will begin.”

Is this your story too? Do you live with a continual burden of frustration and confusion? Do you suffer from emotional pain that won’t go away? Are you ruining your life and the lives of those around you with a stream of destructive acts?

It doesn’t have to be this way. God doesn’t want us to live this way. I’ve learned that He has so much more planned for me and for you. We can *know* His love and peace in a manner that is deep and satisfying—and never goes away.

It all starts with the heart.

[Following text set in a box]

A Thought to Remember

Vulnerable people try to alleviate their pain through some type of self-medication.

A Verse to Review

“O Sovereign LORD, deal well with me for your name’s sake; out of the goodness of your love, deliver me. For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me.” Psalm 109:21–22

A Question for Reflection

How has your heart been wounded?