

The Truth Will Set You Free

by Diane Stelling

My faith is a tremendous comfort to me, yet for most of my life this was not the case. I was raised in a household where religion was not practiced; I was neither baptized nor confirmed, nor did I ever attend church or Sunday school. Yet I still believed in God. My upbringing was physically and emotionally abusive, and I remember praying every night that God would make the fighting and humiliation stop, or at least take me away from it all. That never happened, and I always wondered why God didn't answer my prayers and protect me and why God allowed the abuse to continue.

When I grew up, because my parents did not possess good parenting skills, I knew I needed some guidance in the "right" way to live, and God's Word offered me an excellent example and model to follow. I attended church and was baptized and confirmed in my mid-twenties. I thought that accepting Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior would finally bring me the peace and comfort I was seeking, but that didn't happen - things only got worse.

My faith life was not uplifting. It was an additional burden to me, and the further along I went on my faith journey, the worse I felt about myself as a Christian and a human being. I recognized myself as the sinful, flawed human that I am, but because of my abuse, I was more than willing to accept any problems in relationships as my own fault, due to my sin, and that anything I did to assert my needs to others (especially if they objected) was sinful. My abusers had imbued me with the sense that I was responsible for the abuse done to me and that, as a child, my needs and wants were not worthy to be considered. Those feelings of worthlessness persisted into adulthood.

As I attended church and Bible study groups and read my Bible, my confusion, guilt, and feelings of hypocrisy increased. I did all of the external "religious" things, hoping that would give me an internal peace. But God's demands seemed too impossible for me – to honor and obey my parents, and to forgive them and the person who sexually abused me as an adult for what they had done. I felt guilty about the abuse and about not protecting my sister from it when we were children. I felt shameful before God because of the sexual abuse, wondering what I had done to provoke it, and thinking that I could never measure up to God's standards because of it. And I felt hypocritical, because while I espoused good Christian principles, in my heart I despised my parents and I knew that God could see into my heart.

My need for absolution and forgiveness grew, but my faith seemed suffocating rather than a relief. I confessed my sins to God, but the feelings did not dissipate. In my struggles, I was viewing God and placing him in the same role as my abuser – a tough taskmaster who was going to reward or punish me based upon my ability to live up to his rules and, in a sense, earn his love. Even when I focused on the Gospel message of mercy and forgiveness, rather than

the Law, it pointed me back to my own shortcomings and inability to succeed in demonstrating Christian love. It seemed too difficult for me to try to live up to God's expectations. I could not believe that God wanted me to live my life feeling depressed and in so much emotional and spiritual pain. Where was the comfort?

In the abuse workshops I present, people offer many reasons for why they remain in abusive situations; things they believe God and Scripture are telling them. Some people believe their abuse is their cross to bear, that Jesus suffered and that they should bear up under their own suffering without complaint, just as Jesus did. Those in abusive marriages are guilt-ridden if they think of divorce; it is not an option. Others believe that because God does not protect them from their abuse that he is not answering their prayers and is not there for them. And still others believe that forgiving their abuser means reconciling with him and that if they just try harder to be a better Christian, their abuser will see Christ through the victim's actions and will miraculously change and the abuse will stop.

The life-changing revelation for me was when I finally learned, and truly felt, through God's Word, what truth and unconditional love really mean, and that God wants us to live our lives in love and truth. I could read Scripture with a new heart and mind (*"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come"* – 2 Cor. 5:17) and see truths about abuse that were not evident to me before.

The truth is that victims are innocent regarding the abuse done to them. The sin of the abuse belongs to the abuser, and all of the guilt the victim feels regarding the abuse is a false guilt, a guilt that should rest on the shoulders of the perpetrator. Victims need to ask God for forgiveness and to repent for any sinful behaviors they adopt because of the abuse, but the abuse itself is not their fault.

The truth is that God does not want us to live in abusive situations. Abuse is all about lies, and abusers are liars. All forms of abuse show a total disregard for the sanctity of the human body and spirit. God does not want us to live our lives as lies. We are to expose lies, and by doing so we honor God: *"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible."* – Ephesians 5:11-14. Abuse is perpetuated through fear, which has no place in God's plan for us: *"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment."* – 1 John 4:16,18.

The truth is that Jesus intimately understands the pain victims endure through their abuse. Victims do not choose abuse, but Jesus chose to subject himself to abuse and because of that we can trust in him; we can trust that he knows and empathizes with all the pain and humiliation that victims experience.

The truth is that God does not promise us protection from physical harm. There will be pain and suffering in our lives and our bodies will deteriorate. But God does promise us protection

for our eternal soul – no one can harm that. The Lord does not cause abuse; evil things happen to the best of people, and even if the abuse doesn't stop, it doesn't mean that God isn't watching over victims and giving them the strength to endure. God also gives us free will and courage and we are to exercise those in order to extricate ourselves from situations that are harmful to us.

The truth is that God does not want us to emulate Jesus' suffering and death, but the manner in which he lived his life. Abuse is never anyone's "cross to bear," and we shouldn't feel it necessary to follow Jesus' example to suffer and die in silence. Silence is not a virtue when the person enforcing it is using it for evil purposes. And no matter how much a victim tries to model Christian behavior, to be "good enough," or to continually "turn the other cheek," an abuser will continue to abuse unless there is some type of outside intervention and motivation for him to stop.

The truth is that a marriage is based on a covenant of mutual trust. The person who brings violence into a marriage is the one who breaks the marriage covenant, not the person who seeks divorce to end an abusive relationship. If one partner cannot trust that the other partner will not harm her, either physically or emotionally, then the marriage covenant has been broken.

The truth is that to honor one's parents, one must live a life honoring God. Honoring and obeying one's parents are not the same thing. If parents do not honor God by their actions, then children need to separate themselves from their parents' ways and follow God. For victims of abusive parents, this may mean disobeying parents by revealing the abuse. In the absence of good earthly role models, we can always turn to God as the ultimate parental role model: *"Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me."* – Psalm 27:10.

The truth is that forgiveness is a process, one in which the victim first needs to mourn the losses caused by the abuse, whether it is a childhood, a marriage, or relationships with relatives or friends. This complex process of "letting go" occurs in God's time, and we need to allow victims the time and space to work through this process with God's healing presence in their lives. Forgiveness does not automatically imply restoration and reconciliation. There are three elements in the healing process: forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation. Victims are responsible for their journey towards forgiveness, perpetrators are responsible for their journey towards repentance, and both parties can work towards reconciliation if and when forgiveness and repentance are achieved.

Not only did these truths offer me freedom from the guilt and shame of my abuse, but God's unconditional love showed me how much he values me for who I am and allows me the freedom to become everything he wants me to be. God is love, and God loves me unconditionally, just as I am, warts and all. I know that I am *"precious and honored in (his) sight."* – Isaiah 43:4. I cannot possibly live up to the Lord's expectations, but God is not expecting me to be Christ. God knows my flaws. No amount of good works on my part will compensate for my sins or earn God's love. The Lord extends grace and mercy to me because of the atoning sacrifice of his own dear son, not because of anything that I have done.

I choose to do good works, not as a prerequisite to earn God's love, but as a consequence of the unending love and grace and mercy that God extends to me. I need only to make myself available to him so that he can use me, in whatever manner he decides, to show Christ's love to others. The Gospel message is meant to give me the freedom to live my life to the fullest and to not constantly worry that I am failing to measure up to certain spiritual standards. It frees me from a life of lies, of sin, and enables me to live a life of truth. My faith brings me great inner peace, contentment, and comfort and I want others to know and feel the joy, contentment and freedom that the Gospel message affords me.

It is no coincidence that at least eighty times in the Gospels Jesus prefaced his statements by saying "I tell you the truth...." Jesus only spoke the truth and he described himself as the embodiment of truth to his disciples: "*I am the way and the truth and the life.*" – John 14:6. He could have said, "*I am the way and the life,*" which are the most important concepts Christians believe, but he included another significant fact - that he is also the truth. Jesus is the truth, and as he said in his own words, "*the truth will set you free.*"