

**A SHATTERED HEART:**  
Finding God Amidst a Dating Break-up

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**To all the people hurt by love who still await its healing touch**

*Every  
love  
a  
tragedy,  
every  
sorrow  
a  
hope*

## A SHATTERED HEART: FINDING GOD AMIDST A DATING BREAK-UP

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### Bibliography and Suggested Reading

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

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## CHAPTER 1. THE ROMANCE SIZZLES

Would I trust God when he took away someone whom I thought he'd promised me? *A Shattered Heart* aims to minister to Christian single adults facing pre-marital break-ups. It declares the greatness and glory of God among real pain, pain that I have personally felt. The guiding principle of this book is simple: *In our brokenness, God is working out his perfect plan to bring us joy and to demonstrate his glory, as he defeats his enemy the devil.*

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"Can you come out and walk with me?" Barbara asked.

"Sure," I said, biting my lip, wondering what was on her mind. I'd already talked to her a few minutes ago. Our five weeks of missions training was winding down, and we'd soon be parting ways for a while.

Did she want to talk about us?

We strolled into the grassy courtyard. The stars glimmered above.

"Look at the moon," I said to start conversation.

"Here, let's get on the swings," she suggested.

She had just turned twenty-two but looked like a little girl, swinging with her legs stretched out, all cares cast aside. Her black hair brushed the ground as she swung forward, her head leaning back. I was twenty-nine, but I felt like a little boy, swinging with the girl I wanted to marry.

"The moon's the shape of a pink Hostess Snowball, isn't it?" I said.

Her hair kept swooshing back and forth on the ground, her feet pointed heavenward with every forward swing. I longed to reach out and caress her cheek, to let her know I cared, to blurt out my desire for her.

"Can you believe it? In a couple of months, we'll both be overseas in our separate countries," I said. We would each be serving terms as missionaries.

"I hope we like it."

"Two years is a long time to be unhappy," I said as I looked at the moon.

She turned toward me, like she wanted to share her secret thoughts. Her eyes met mine. My hands started shaking a little. I cracked a joke to lighten the mood.

"Kevin, I've been having some nightmares lately . . . would you pray with me that they stop?"

Man, did I launch my best prayer missile. I poured my soul into it.

"Thanks," she said.

I can't remember who moved first, but we hugged. It was our first embrace. Oh, did my heart race that night! I practically floated back to my apartment. I slept very little that night, thinking of Barbara, wondering about our future together.

My alarm screeched at 4:30 a.m. the next morning. My heart revived at the thought of last night. *I think she likes me . . . I've known her a few weeks, gone fishing with her twice, and taken walks with her three times. Last night was the clincher though. I think she really likes me.*

But it was a sad day. I had to wish her good-bye.

I showed up at her apartment next door, my eyes still fighting to stay open. Her suitcase weighed at least eighty pounds. I remember thinking, *this lady sure packs some heavy things*. She wore blue overalls, the ones she wore the day we met. Boy, could her smile inflate my goose bumps.

We chatted briefly until the bus gave hints that it was leaving. I hugged her 'bye, feeling her moist hair with my right hand. I inhaled the scent of her shampoo.

I can't tell you all of the emotions that filled my heart that morning as the bus crept away, Barbara's smile shining at me like the sun popping over the trees. Her wave soon faded as the bus wheeled down the road. I wanted to cry, missing her already, but that would have been melodramatic. And running after the bus didn't seem appropriate, either.

Yet I wanted to dance. We'd planted seeds of hope.

Later that same day, I, too, hopped on a bus to the airport. More than a month of missions training lay behind me, as I returned to my home state for six weeks before heading overseas.

Within a few days, Barbara called me. She was in New Mexico preparing for her trip abroad. We were both anxious about our assignments, but giddy about them, too. I was almost certain she liked me. But it didn't seem like the right time to talk about my feelings. I wanted us to get settled in our countries first.

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Several weeks later, I stood on a sidewalk in Asia, listening to the blare of motorcycle horns. Some people smiled at me while others stared, like I might be working for the CIA. I'd finally arrived to serve my two-year term. The country struck me with its Eastern differences--constant stares, pointing from small children, a plethora of bicycles filling the streets, people on the sidewalks bartering for goods, and the depth of hospitality from strangers--but I was committed to the full two years. And I was committed to making Barbara my girlfriend.

We e-mailed regularly within those first two weeks of my landing. By then, she'd already been in South Korea for several weeks. I mailed post cards to her, called her once, and sent e-mails daily. I also carried a tape recorder with me one day to randomly interview some local people who could speak English just so that I could send it to her. At the end of the tape, I pretended to be a DJ and dedicated a song to her from the band Chicago. I was going nuts over this gal.

I couldn't stand it any longer, so I e-mailed Barbara, asking her to be my girlfriend. She took several days to respond, which kept my adrenaline flowing. I played with my hair and patted my foot rapidly every time I checked my e-mail.

But eventually she wrote back with a *yes*. That was August of 2000, and I was close to heaven that day.

That began a ten-month journey of love (or romance, or whatever you might want to call it). I was dating the girl of my dreams and acting like a kid, showing strangers her picture, thinking up corny poems, and whistling as I walked down the street.

She sent me a box of candy for my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. It had every sweet nugget I could have wanted. She'd also sent me a nice letter with it.

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In December of that year, Barbara came to visit me for a week in my Asian country.

"I'm so glad to see you," I said. Her face brightened when she saw the flowers.

We held hands for the first time that night on our way back from the airport. It was a great week for the both of us, spending Christmas together with some friends. Several days passed and it was time for her to leave.

"I love you," she said, tears in her eyes.

Her words surprised me. I'd already told her of my love, but she'd not yet been able to return my words. Now, she was saying them. I ached when I said good-bye to her that night at the airport, after only seven days together. We didn't know when we'd see each other again, but we committed to make it happen.

The calls, e-mails, letters, and packages continued. These were some of the hardest months of my life, as I waited to be by her side again. The long-distance dating was getting old. I smelled everything in the packages she sent me, just to get a whiff of her perfume.

For Valentines Day of 2001, we sent each other gifts. I called her and sang Elvis' "Can't Help Falling in Love." (Yes, it was over the top, I know, but I was in love.) Although my guitar skills weren't too impressive, she cried. And I think it was because of my effort, but it could have been over my lack of skill.

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We vacationed together in China in May of 2001. By this time, we'd know each other a year. She brought a female friend to keep us accountable (and for the record we slept in separate hotel rooms). At this point in our relationship, we'd had a few arguments--over our future roles in marriage and another lesser issue--but we were working through these problems. Our trip to China gave us some face-to-face time to discuss our disagreements, and we experienced some tension, but mostly the vacation was positive.

I gave her a necklace, and she loved it. I also surprised her with a rose while we were there. She bubbled with excitement. With her permission, I'd recorded one of our conversations so that I could always have her voice around me in my country.

"I love you, Kevin Howard," she mumbled into my shoulder as I hugged her good-bye at the Beijing airport.

"I love you, too." Again, tears filled my eyes as I watched her wave from the bus that took her to the plane. I couldn't wait to see her again. We were within a year of being back in the States, and were now talking about marriage. I returned to my country to finish my assignment, happy about our prospects of matrimony.

Why did I want to marry Barbara? She was devoted to Christ. She seemed confident in who she was, independent but not anti-social. She was OK being alone or going somewhere on her own; she didn't cling to others. The word *intelligent* comes to mind when I think of her. She'd spent significant time thinking through crucial issues like gun-control, politics, gender roles, parenting and marriage. Barbara wasn't controlled by materialism either; she was content with the basics of life. Listening to

others came easy to her and serving was one of her gifts. Aside from her physical beauty, she possessed a soft heart and loved being feminine, like spraying on perfume, painting her nails, wearing her hair long, and occasionally donning a skirt. She enjoyed laughing. In fact, despite her shyness, she could roar with laughter that people could easily hear at the other side of a large restaurant. So, yes, I was happy about the thought of marrying Barbara.

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Two weeks after the trip to China, she called with trembling in her voice.

"We've got to work through some of our differences if this relationship is going to last," she said. Her statement rattled me. She sounded mad, like she'd been stewing over this for a while. We'd already talked in China about these issues bothering her. Why suddenly the frantic call? I hardly knew what to say during that conversation.

"Let me think about these things and talk to you more in a couple of days," I said.

Her call was the beginning of the end. The week that followed was filled with misery for me as I contemplated that she might be pulling away. She's the only woman who'd ever said she loved me. She was the only woman I'd ever loved. Surely she wasn't going to say good-bye forever.

"God, please, don't take her away from me," I prayed. "If you must, then I'll still obey you. But please, Lord, don't deprive me of her." I begged God for a morsel of hope, like a child asking for food.

A week later, the phone rang again. She'd e-mailed me earlier that day, saying she was going to call me Monday night. I still recall staring at the phone that night when she called. The chirp of the phone echoed off the concrete walls in my uncarpeted room. I wondered if her call would change my life. (Several years later, this seems melodramatic, but at the time it felt so ominous and life changing. If you're going through it, you'll likely understand the emotional drama.)

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### **Could you trust God if he took away something or someone that you thought he'd promised you?**

It's hard to know where to begin because this isn't just a subject, it's a place in my heart, a very tender place. Or, I should say, it was tender in the months following my break-up in 2001. By the grace of Christ, I have since recovered. This book comes out of my own experience of a break-up with a girl whom I cared for deeply. I long to be honest about the good and the bad, the pain and the joy of walking through emotional valleys.

Since *A Shattered Heart* aims at Christian single adults facing pre-marital break-ups, much of its contents won't make sense or apply to someone not following Jesus. That is, non-believers can't take comfort in the many biblical passages I give because these verses apply to believers. My hope, nonetheless, is that many hurting non-believers will read this work, and in the course of it, place their faith in Jesus.

This book entails a journey through a forest of pain in which tall trees had cast dark shadows over parts of my life. You are invited to travel along and see Christ among

the briars, bushes, and leaves. I'm writing about his glory amidst my past brokenness in hopes that others will see that they are not alone. God brings about his glory even in pain and tragedy.

Many readers will have suffered far more than I have. Whether my suffering ranks as relatively small or great compared to yours, I hope that this will be a chance for me, your Christian brother, to be vulnerable so that God's goodness shines through in each of our situations.

I pray you find yourself in these pages of neediness, connecting with my desperation and feeling the warm rays of hope. And more than anything, I pray you find Jesus walking there, too.

I penned most of chapters 1-3 shortly after my break-up but have added to them along the way. I mention when I wrote them, because I want you to know that although I've written the following chapters in past tense, they came from my heart, along with many tears. Any spiritual truths I set forth here, came to me, not as a removed third person dishing out Scripture insensitively, but as a man in sorrow, sorrow that I thought might actually stomp the life out of me. Throughout this work, I've interspersed my journal entries, which extend over a three-month period following my break-up. These entries will give you a closer look at the subjective journey through the terrain of my own brokenness. They reveal a lot about me, both good and bad. Hopefully, you will find them useful in your own shattered heart and see the grace of Christ intermingled. Sometimes in my journals, I'm writing to God, at other times to myself. And, in some entries, I seem to be writing to a mysterious third person. Perhaps that is you.

The fifth chapter will explain biblical love and discuss some important issues pertaining to dating. And chapter six will bring you up to date with how I am now, several years after my break-up.

Just in case you're wondering, Barbara is a pseudonym. I've also changed a couple of other minor details to obscure her identity, lest she be discovered and made fun of for having ever dated me in the first place.

## CHAPTER 2. THE SHATTERING BEGINS

### *The Shock*

"I feel like we should not be together anymore," Barbara said. That was June 2001. Since she was in South Korea and I was in another Asian country, each of us serving mission terms, the break-up came by way of phone.

I had just seen her a month ago on vacation in China. We'd declared our love for each other, and we had talked about where we would live in the States once we were married.

What had happened? What had we done wrong that caused our relationship to crumble? Couldn't we work this out? I felt like I was losing all control, or maybe worse, realizing I'd never had control. Suddenly, the train of my life derailed. I wanted to throw up and then sleep for a week to forget about the break-up.

As soon as I hung up the phone, I broke into tears. Head in hands, a 30-year-old man weeping before the Lord, tears innumerable. I was glad for the tears, though. They expressed what words could not.

I was devastated. We'd known each other a whole year, and she was the first woman I had ever loved.

An avalanche of pain unleashed its fury on me that day, spilling down more than I could bear. Thousands of thoughts rushed through my mind. I felt a hopelessness move over me. All I could do was cry before God. I was sure that God had brought her into my life for marriage.

I watched my dreams slip away. Within my soul a storm started brewing that only Jesus himself could calm.

I opened up the Bible that night and began this break-up with God's wisdom. I read from the Psalms. Later, I thought of Job and how he'd suffered. I knew that my loss was small compared to Job's, but I felt he was a comrade in pain.

Whether Job ever had a break-up lies beyond my knowledge, but he certainly knew suffering. "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21).

Job's words sparkle like stars when we consider that he had just been told his oxen, camels, sheep, servants, and grown children had been killed. Job must have been crushed under the weight of the news. His heart broke in one moment. How could such calamity fall on any one person?

Job's response was not to get drunk or swear. Instead, he tore his robe and shaved his head to express his grief. He fell to the ground and worshipped God. Job wasn't denying his loss. He was coming to terms with it in the presence of God. He turned to God and offered up his pain, the only way that pain can really be dealt with.

He went on to say, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble" (Job 2:10)? The question spoke to my aching soul. If Job in his suffering could ask this, who was I to do differently? Job realized God was in control. "For he [God] wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal" (Job 5:18). We would do well to recall Job's words in our pain. God knows what he's doing and can be trusted. His trustworthiness may appear questionable when tragedy knocks, but he is reliable. If we fill our hearts

with God's word during our everyday routine, we may be better able to apply these passages when harm visits.

The night of our break-up, I read the little quote taped to my wall, which then seemed prophetic. When Jim Elliot wrote in 1952 in his journal, it was almost like he wrote the words for my situation in 2001: "To dream, and want and pray, almost savagely; then to commit and wait and see [God] quietly pile all dreams aside and replace them with what we could not dream, the *realized Will*" (*Shadow of the Almighty*, 191).

Then, I turned on a Christian song and sang while my tears flowed. I felt my loss, but I also felt God's strong hand helping me. He seemed especially real during that time.

Who is this great God who wounds and heals his children? "The . . . LORD binds up the bruises of his people and heals the wounds he inflicted" (Isaiah 30:26). Who can fathom the ways of the Almighty?

Although waves of pain rushed over my soul, I felt God's hand caressing me. I then talked with my roommate, who mostly just listened.

Here's my first journal entry, the day after my break-up with Barbara:

June 5: I felt quite sad and unenergetic today, yet felt better than I would have guessed.

I think the hardest part is going through all these feelings, wanting to write my best friend and describe what's happened today, and knowing that I can't, because Barbara was my best friend. The very one that I shared my heart with is no longer available, and yet she's the person behind my heart's stirrings.

It's especially tough at night in my room, because I have to be quiet and alone, and because that's when I always wrote to her.

I feel this big loss in my life, this vacuum, this void, this gap. I want her to fill it, but I can't look to her anymore. I have to look to someone stronger, to the one I should have been looking to all along--God!

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### *The Quest for a Wife*

I started praying for a wife in 1989 as a young man. One year later, when I went to Bible college in Dallas, I knew God would soon bring me and my future wife together. Why wouldn't he? After all, I loved him and prayed daily for a godly wife.

The whole decade of the 90s turned out to be one romantic disappointment after another--a few dates and too many crushes. I'd always considered dating a serious thing, and I wasn't interested in dating around. I wanted to be married.

In 2000, still romantically unattached, I decided to do mission work for two years. Before going overseas, as mentioned already, I received five weeks of training. For the first time in my adult life, I was somewhat content at being single. I still wanted to get married, but at least momentarily I was OK not dating.

Shortly into my five weeks of training, with about fifty single adults, I became interested in Barbara. She stood tall, pretty, and kind-hearted, and she was serious about her Christian life. She'd also grown up overseas as a missionary kid. She was the perfect catch. Now, all I had to do was catch her.

Before long, she was equally interested in me. She let me pursue without playing hard-to-get. By the end of our five weeks of training, we'd grown fond of each other, although we'd not talked about our feelings. But there were complications. We were each heading to different countries for two years, so it couldn't be a typical dating situation, where each person would be living in the same town.

After she landed in South Korea and I arrived in my Asian country, I asked her to be my girlfriend. Within a ten-month period, we wrote each other daily through e-mail, talked on the phone every two weeks, and also met each other twice for vacation.

Our biggest disagreement was about gender roles in marriage. Because of my more traditional views of marriage, she wondered if she'd ever reach her full potential if we married. I did my best to assure her that life with me would be grand, but she feared that her life might never amount to anything more than changing diapers and making meals. I had no problem with her working outside the home, but I did want her at home for the first few years after we had children. And, she agreed that was best, too. This is why her break-up puzzled me. She desired to do the very things that frightened her about marriage. She wanted to stay home and take care of our future kids.

I made sure she knew I was more than willing to help out with these things. Yet she feared that I would dominate her, and her concern confused me. We'd known about our disagreements from day one of our relationship, and she'd never accused me of being domineering.

Although this conflict loomed over all of our other disagreements, we seemed to be working through it. Yet she was growing increasingly troubled about our relationship--more troubled than I knew.

That's when she called on June 4, 2001, to say she felt like we were on different paths. According to her, God's plans for her future were different than his plans for mine.

June 6: Things are still fresh and tender. I hurt mostly at night and in the morning. It's tough now because I find myself searching for a reason for the break-up. What went wrong? How can I prevent it next time? Would this have happened if I'd done things differently? Was it my fault?

I felt pain throughout the day. I put away a few more things--pictures, notes--that reminded me of Barbara.

It was really hard today to consider that she won't be a part of my life anymore.

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### *Making a Clean Break*

But what was I to do? The relationship was over. What next?

I started taking down my pictures of her and all the other things around the room that reminded me of her. It wasn't my goal to wipe her from my memory, for after all, I had some great memories. And that's what made it so painful. But I was nonetheless trying to settle in my heart that this relationship was over. I realized boundaries could be important when it comes to getting closure. We shouldn't try to erase people from our memories, but we do have to set some boundaries so we're not holding out false hope for the relationship to begin again.

Let me say right away that I'm terrible at setting boundaries. But after many times of pursuing girls after they'd said no, and after I'd held out hope, hoped against

hope, only to have my heart broken worse later on, I've come to believe there is a time to give up and make a clean break. I needed to move on.

Barbara and I had ended on friendly terms. And she invited me to stay in touch if I wanted to. But I knew that if I did that, I'd always be hoping for another chance. It had to be a total cut-off.

Staying in touch seems like a Christian thing to do. Yet for me, staying in touch would likely have been a recipe for disaster. Two people can go their own ways without doing it in hatred. And that can be more important than staying in touch. Maybe some people can actually stay in touch and be OK, but I couldn't in this situation.

It might be best, in many cases, if we cease praying for our former boyfriend or girlfriend. I'm sure that sounds unspiritual. I wanted to keep praying for Barbara, but continuing wasn't healthy. In my case, real faith was to trust that God would raise up people to pray for her. I didn't need to concern myself with her future; it was no longer my business. She'd given me my walking papers, so that's what I was to do--walk on.

Praying for her would have only encouraged me to keep hanging on. And I needed to let go, at every level, especially at the spiritual level.

June 7: Today it seemed like God helped me turn a corner. I woke with less pain about her. I was happy and light-hearted.

[Several hours later] I've felt restless tonight. I'm really missing her now, and my heart wants to believe there's still a chance for reconciliation.

This thing is heavy. I feel so weighted down and burdened. One year ago today, I landed at the place where I met her. Knowing this stirs pains and insecurities. I'm fearful of my future without her.

I feel rather void and empty. I was doing so well earlier, but now I feel so needy.

I hate checking my e-mail because I know she's not going to write. I'm disappointed every time I check it.

In these days of hurt and pain, there is something that strikes me. My heart longs to have her in my life. But I realize that what I'm longing for, even in the embrace and hope of a life with her, is something that neither she, nor any woman, could ever give. The hole that's in my heart--and the fears and insecurities mounted there--can only be filled by God himself.

This isn't to say that I don't miss her, nor to deny that there is some gap that she could fill, but I realize that not even she could really meet my ultimate need. Only God can do this!

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### *Keeping Dignity*

Part of my reasoning behind making a complete break was for the purpose of keeping dignity. It's true that pride can easily be confused with dignity. Not staying in touch was my attempt at respecting her decision as well as respecting myself. After all, could I not trust God with my situation?

Because of the break-up, trust had been lost and just inviting her back would not have solved the problems that led to the break-up. Nor would it have resolved the problems caused by the break-up. In order to restore our relationship, we both would have had to think and pray seriously about the details of what would have to happen in each of our lives to restore trust. I chose not to pursue.

At first, I thought I would do what love was supposed to do--*pursue her at all costs*. I thought by asking her back I'd be swallowing my pride and taking another chance. But the truth was, I was in pain and wanted relief.

However, this wasn't a broken marriage. She was only a girlfriend. That hurts to say because I loved her, but she was only a girlfriend. It wasn't like I was giving up on a marriage.

And to bring things into focus more clearly, she had broken up with me, not the other way around. I'd never been given a vote about breaking up, so what made me think that I could persuade her to come back to me? Of course, this is not to say that it's always wrong for a person to pursue the one who left, but there is good reason for caution.

If the couple has been having sex, the rejected one may find it especially hard to move on. God created sex for marriage, and it's a powerfully binding aspect of intimacy. That's one of the reasons he created it for marriage. By the grace of Christ, Barbara and I remained sexually pure in our relationship, so fortunately I didn't have that to deal with. But if we had, the break-up would have been harder to bear.

Unfortunately, today so many singles, who profess to be followers of Christ, engage in sexual activity. H. Norman Wright, a Christian counselor, says that about half of the couples he works with in premarital counseling admit to having sex of some kind with their partners (*Let's Just be Friends*, 161). The sexual aspect will make the break-up or recovery harder. If you've been involved inappropriately with your partner, you not only need to confess this sin to God, but you most likely will need to get with a pastor or another mature believer to work through the repentance part of your sin and the special grieving process you'll be going through.

I want to caution anyone who claims to be a Christian and yet who lives in open rebellion against God, like involved in premarital sex, looking at pornography, etc. This sort of lifestyle very well could show that someone hasn't yet trusted Christ. The Bible encourages us to examine ourselves to make sure we're in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). Does your life bear fruit that you hate sin and love Christ? Are you obeying his word? Please take time to examine your faith now.

## CHAPTER 3. THE HEART BREAKS

### *Grief*

As I said earlier, when Barbara broke up with me, I watched my dreams fade away. When going through a break-up, some of us might be tempted to tell ourselves that we really didn't love that person after all. If we could stop the love, then we could stop the hurt in our soul.

When tragedy strikes and we encounter grief, we should acknowledge that we have experienced a loss of love and dreams. Why pretend we're above grieving our losses? Refusal to acknowledge our grief could be nothing more than our prideful hearts saying we are too strong to feel the hurt inflicted on us.

Consider what Job said in 7:1-11:

Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man? Like a slave longing for the evening shadows, or a hired man waiting eagerly for his wages, so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me. When I lie down I think, "How long before I get up?" The night drags on, and I toss till dawn. My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and they come to an end without hope. Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again. The eye that now sees me will see me no longer; you will look for me, but I will be no more. As a cloud vanishes and is gone, so he who goes down to the grave does not return. He will never come to his house again; his place will know him no more. Therefore I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.

Job was responding to his friends, who served more as accusers than ministers. Though we need to be careful what we say in prayer, especially when we write in pain, we can nonetheless speak to God from our broken condition. Jeremiah spoke words to God that we probably feel too spiritual to say: "Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame" (Jeremiah 20:18)?

The Psalms provide examples of people crying out to God in their brokenness and sin. Just one example is found in Psalm 13:1-2, where David spoke words close to his hurting heart, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

God's holiness and our sinfulness give ample reason why we should revere God, for he is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29), but there is no reason why we can't express our sorrow to him. After all, who else will we go to with our pain?

Norman Wright speaks to the issue of grieving about a break-up:

During this time, you're hit by seasons of sadness, depression, anger, calm, fear, and eventually hope, but they don't follow one another progressively. They overlap, often chaotically. Just when you think you're over one emotion, it comes barging through your door again. You finally smile, but then the tears return. You laugh, but the cloud of depression drifts in once again. This is normal. This is necessary. This is healing. (*Let's Just be Friends*, 87)

As I moved through this period after my break-up, I realized that I had to go on with life, even if with tears. Seeing myself as too manly for tears seemed only harmful. I strove to be honest with myself and God. *"Lord, this pain hurts like I've never known pain before. O Lord, receive the pain and the tears as offerings to you."*

June 19: I've felt lonely today but it's not been as intense. I've been more active today, that's why it's been better.

Here two weeks after the break-up, at one level I'm moving on. I can cut up and joke with friends. Yet at another level, I'm still grieving. So, on the surface, I'm fine, but inside I'm not.

I feel trapped in my silent sorrow. I feel like my culture and society expect me to be over her by now. After all, she wasn't my wife. It wasn't a death or a divorce, she was only a girlfriend, not even a fiancée.

But it is a big deal to me. My heart is still grieving the loss. And although my friends would probably be more compassionate than I'm imagining, I still feel pressured (by myself) to hurry up and heal. My feelings of embarrassment for not being over her yet are nothing more than pride, but they're still there anyway.

June 24: The hardest part of dealing with this break-up is not memories of hatred and fights between us, for our relationship was filled mostly with love. Rather, the hardest part is remembering all the good times we had together. It's those things that cause me to ask, "Why did it have to end?" But it is on this harsh reality--the questions with no answers--that I must admit my ignorance and leap into the arms of God.

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### *Shame*

Just minutes after our break-up, I felt ashamed of my predicament. What would I tell my friends? What would they think of me? What was wrong with me that made her breakup?

Some of the questions that came to my mind were worth thinking about. There are things about me that need to change.

Nonetheless, shame seems like a natural response to a break-up. We don't have to act as though we're fine. Like grief, we can acknowledge shame to God and to our friends.

Yet at other times, our sinfulness lies behind our shame. Not that all shame stinks with sin, but shame can sometimes be sinful. If I fall down the stairs, with friends watching, my red face will beam my embarrassment. The shame itself is not sinful, but if I begin to identify myself by it ("you dumb klutz"), then it is wrong because pride has entered in--or should I say, has come out!

Maybe God placed the capacity for shame in us so that we won't intentionally do vile and offensive things. So we need not be ashamed of our shame; we need only to lift it up to God as part of our confession that we are broken people living in a broken world.

This doesn't mean that shame will just disappear when we pray, but it does acknowledge to our sinful souls that Christ is our sustainer and the one who can deal with such issues (See Dan Allender's book, *The Wounded Heart*, 57-89).[1] (See page 52)

### *Self-Pity*

One of the dangers associated with the shame of a break-up is self-pity. Self-pity could be loosely defined as the feeling we get when we begin to identify ourselves by the calamity in our lives--*Barbara dumped me, so I must be a loser*. We put the spotlight on us instead of on Christ. We lose sight of God's divine plan, thinking that we're the lone sufferer in the world.

But Jesus was a man of sorrows, and can relate to our pain and suffering. He doesn't demand that we cease feeling loss. Surely, in Jesus' dying moment, when he turned his mother over to the care of John, the Lord felt the pain of separation, knowing that his relationship with his mother would no longer be the same (John 19:26-27). Just because he was coming back to life in three days didn't mean he felt no grief.

However, knowing that Jesus also suffered loss doesn't always keep us from seeing ourselves as victims. When God brings sin to our attention, we must confess it to him and, by his grace, change our behavior. *"God, you know how I want all my friends to focus on me now that Barbara's gone. I want their pity. Help me receive their sympathy but not demand it."*

As the youngest in my family, it was easy to take my place as the victim. Why is my brother beating up on me? He always picks on me. Why did my parents say that to me? They always do that.

And when I got older, I took that thinking into other areas: Why do I always get caught in traffic? Why do I never get the great jobs? Why does my car always break down?

Well, as I said earlier, some questions need to be answered, but it's easy to subtly move into the arena of self. Why is the world ganging up on me? Why don't things ever go the way I planned? Why did she break up with me?

Self-pity is pride wearing a sad face. And God hates pride: 1 Peter 5:5, "Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" We have to be honest with ourselves about the pain in our hearts, but we also have to be honest with God about the sin that's there too. *"God, you know that I like people to feel sorry for me. You know that I often see myself as a victim so I don't have to face my own sin. Forgive me, Lord."*

June 18: If there's ever been a time when I am open to the temptations of the evil one, it is during these times when my wounds are gapping, aching and greatly wanting something to numb the pain, something to make me feel alive again. Beware, weary soul, these are dangerous days!

August 6: I went to the post office to mail a letter. I checked my box while I was there; it was covered with cobwebs. This made me sad. I used to receive so many packages from her, and I sent her so many postcards. I'd

begun to associate the post office with her. Now, the post office mocks my pain, a cruel reminder of love gone sour.

I'm feeling sorry for myself. I feel strongly pulled in areas of temptation, and I miss knowing that there's a woman out there who loves me and likes the smell of my shirt. I miss being loved. I'm not talking about sex. What I miss is a simple love, a growing oneness.

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### *Fear and Worry*

There are many of us who have a bevy of fears troubling our souls. When Barbara broke up with me, so many fears immediately greeted me. Who would I marry? When would I marry? What if I never marry? Who would be with me through the years? Would I have to go through life without the simple pleasures of hugs and kisses and sex?

These are very real fears, and not just for me, but for many. Those who are married have other fears: What if she leaves me? What if I get fired? What if we lose the house? What if he cheats on me? What if my spouse dies suddenly? What if I get sick? What if I get fat? What if my children get injured?

God has called us to live by faith, not fear. Can we not entrust our lives to an all-wise, all-knowing, all-caring triune God? What are our options? Live a life of fear or a life of faith.

I have a long way to go in this area. God woos me unto himself, saying, "Son, be at peace, I have control of it all." God has not given us a spirit of fear but of a sound mind in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:7). Quoting that verse doesn't take away all of my fears, but if I will ask in faith, God will use this truth to work for his good pleasure. I could fret all day about my future relationships, money, health, and a host of other things. God said that he has all of it in his hands (Job 13:15, Isaiah 14:24-27, Matthew 6:25-34, Acts 17:26). God lives self-sufficient and we can do nothing for him (Deuteronomy 32:6, Job 41:11, Psalm 50:12; Acts 17:25). We are called to trust him, as Hebrews 11:6 says: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

God has also called us to fear him (Psalm 130:4, Luke 12:5). We should fear him because he has the power of life and death in his hands. He forgives those who trust Christ for salvation. God doesn't owe any of us salvation, so God must be honored and feared (Romans 11:22). Who wouldn't fear one with the ability to save or condemn?

As Elisabeth Elliot wrote, "Fear God and nothing else." If we are believers, nothing can shake the reality of being the children of God. Nothing can take us away from God. His love draws us near even in the face of persecution (Romans 8:25-29). Yet, with all of this said, we still have fears. So what do we do?

We can cry out to God, acknowledging our sin. *"God, I fear the future more than I trust you. I often fear others more than I fear you. Forgive my sin."* Not that this chases away all our fears, but it's a start.

July 9: I came home and was seriously depressed about Barbara. Having talked about her earlier today with a friend, I was so discouraged. It's been a month and 5 days since the break-up, yet I'm still down.

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### *Prayer*

God has calmed my heart on many occasions with Philippians 4:6-7: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This passage helps me lift my eyes from my situation. Not only do I find me, my brokenness, and my sin in these words, but I also find God, his holiness, and his strength.

Fear can cause us to turn away from God. By faith, we can lift those fears to him, acknowledging our sin, and our need for his mercy to continue its work in our lives. He wants us to come to him with thanksgiving, not as victims without hope. We don't have to deny our problems, but we can thank God, as Paul did, even in affliction (Philippians 1:3, 4:10). We can thank God for something while we suffer the wounds of a break-up. I have found this difficult, but not impossible.

And, as I lift my requests to God with thanksgiving, he gives me peace--that inner calm which finds its comfort in God's strength. *"O, God, I thank you for yet another opportunity to cry out to you. I'm weak Lord. I'm fearful of being alone. God, please, minister to me now in my fear and pain. Be close to me and hear my request, in Christ's name."*

God gave us (believers) all that we need in Christ Jesus for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). He equipped us through his Spirit to accomplish what he gifted us to do (1 Corinthians 12). After all, he will never forsake us. The Lord stands as our helper, and we need not wither in fear. What can people do to us (Hebrews 13:5-6)?

### *Searching, Longing, and Loneliness*

Many will say, "Yes, I agree that I should trust God, but I still feel lonely after my break-up." And this desire for companionship is nothing to be ashamed of. I felt the same way trying to imagine life without Barbara. God has placed in our hearts the desire to be with one another. The problem dwells not with our desire or loneliness, but with our distortion of what we really need and how we will fill those desires.

As I lay in bed shortly after my break-up, with my wounds still open and hurting, I remember fearing the future. I thought of what it would be like to live the rest of life alone. I became angry at Barbara, thinking that she was to blame for those fears, because if she hadn't broken up with me, then I wouldn't be experiencing those emotions. Then, it was like the Spirit spoke words of gentle rebuke: "You can't blame Barbara for your fears. You must take responsibility and confess them to me. Your real fears--death, loneliness, and abandonment--aren't things that she can take away. Only I, God, can touch you in those areas."

My life contains a hole only Jesus can reach. Often times I think I know what I need--a wife, a Coke, a meal, a movie--and I try to sooth that aching. And even though God has blessed me with things, only God can really deal with my loneliness.

Henri Nouwen, the late Catholic priest and author, had much to tell us about facing our fears and insecurities:

The awareness of loneliness might be a gift we must protect and guard, because our loneliness reveals to us an inner emptiness that can be destructive when misunderstood, but filled with promise for him who can tolerate its sweet pain.

When we are impatient, when we want to give up our loneliness and try to overcome the separation and incompleteness we feel . . . . We ignore what we already know with a deep-seated, intuitive knowledge--that no love or friendship, no intimate embrace or tender kiss, no community, commune or collective, no man or woman, will ever be able to satisfy our desire to be released from our lonely condition. This truth is so disconcerting and painful that we are more prone to play games with our fantasies than to face the truth of our existence. Thus we keep hoping that one day we will find the man who really understands our experiences, the woman who will bring peace to our restless life, the job where we can fulfill our potentials, the book which will explain everything, and the place where we can feel at home. Such false hope leads us to make exhausting demands and prepares us for bitterness and dangerous hostility when we start discovering that nobody, and nothing, can live up to our absolutistic expectations. (*The Wounded Healer*, 84-85)

Cloud and Townsend in their book, *Boundaries Before Marriage*, discuss two types of loneliness. One reflects the normal longing for relationships, and the second type indicates a problem:

This [second] type of loneliness is a chronic, longstanding sense of emptiness in life, no matter what the circumstances. The person can be around many loving, caring people, and still feel isolated. She may either feel that others don't care, or that she is unable to receive what they give. This loneliness is an indication that something is broken in one's soul, and needs to be repaired in God's healing process. (123-24)

Whatever I try to fill that gap with may numb me for a bit, but it doesn't bring lasting satisfaction. Only God's life overflowing into mine will bring true satisfaction. Note what Jesus said in John 10:10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." And even then, we're bound to find ourselves one day longing again for another filling. Only when we see Jesus face to face, will the gap finally be filled once and for all (1 John 3:2).

June 11: Tonight, I remembered that I still have Barbara's coat. It's the small things like this that make it so painful, the little reminders of a time-no-more.

June 13: Dear Lord, today I write to you about my secret life of emptiness. It's the issue of loneliness, that feeling of despair, that sense of longing and incompleteness. Yes, to be alone and to be lonely are two different things. But I sometimes feel lonely even when I'm with others.

I suppose some would prescribe ready-made cures for such an ill: find a hobby, make more friends, buy a pet, get a wife, work harder. But I have a suspicion that what I struggle with is not so different than what others face, the old and young, Christian and pagan, married and single alike. It is that odd sensation of being dissatisfied,

incomplete, somehow empty and broken, yet hungry and yearning to be filled.

Maybe in the heart of every human lies this void, spoken of by saints of old, that only you, God, can fill, something that no mere human, no activity, not even a spiritual discipline can actually satisfy. It is that place that only you yourself can dwell and appease, Lord. It is the untamed soulfulness that only you can befriend, the storm that only Jesus can soothe.

This is the part of my character that doesn't have a face; it's allusive and hard to put my finger on. It hides itself somewhere inside of me, yet occasionally makes itself known in the still and steady moments of life. It's the silent-self that fears the light of exposure.

Many, as do I, seek to fill that emptiness with things and people and events only to find in the calmer moments of life that something is still missing, still astir and restless in the soul. Could it be my soul longing for a better place, a better world, a God that I can see, and a heaven that is real beneath my feet? Yes, I suppose it is. Could it be evidence of my lack of perfection? Yes, I'm sure of it.

Admitting I'm lonely shames me because it means I'm needy, that I still lack something, even as a Christian. I'd rather pretend that I'm whole and fully self-sufficient, admitting nothing of my own weakness. What would others think? They might feel sorry for me. But that's not what I want. I want wholeness as it is found in Christ. And so, I will admit my neediness, my loneliness, my un-fulfilled-ness. For in truthful, humble surrender and confession, God, you are here to show yourself strong.

I offer up my brokenness to you, Lord. I declare that you are enough, that you are here, among me, among my friends, among my stains, bruises, shame, and beauty. It is in this rubble of a fallen world that you, the king of glory, walk. You are here among the pieces, bringing forth gold where there was only ash, bringing forth water where there was only desert. And, my soul, struggling though it may be, will taste bits of your joy now, while still longing for its true home, a home not found in this world. Amen.

Loneliness can feel unbearable, and if we add in the discomfort of a break-up, then we've got some serious misery on our hands. The pain of a break-up and the ensuing loneliness can be so overwhelming that people who were otherwise stable sometimes turn to drugs or alcohol. This, of course, only makes matters worse. Yet some people will dull their pain at any cost. If you're abusing drugs or alcohol, food or TV, pornography or sex, etc., please seek help from a Christian pastor. You don't have to suffer alone.

A special word of caution also needs to be spoken here about rebound or "revenge dating." The most natural response after a break-up is to go looking for someone else to

sooth the pain of rejection. Finding someone else quickly also seems like it will punish our ex-girlfriend. There's a time and place to move on with romance, but just after our break-up is not likely the right occasion. We may find someone else to partially fill the gap, but it'll probably not be a lasting relationship. If we're not careful, we'll end up causing ourselves more pain, and that isn't what we need. It's not worth the pain just to spite our ex, nor will it heal our hearts.

One counselor quotes his patient on this issue:

I feel as though I'm on a merry-go-round, bumper car, and roller coaster all at the same time. I have to be on the go constantly or I think I'll go bananas. I'm always doing something and jumping into one relationship after another--and unfortunately, one bed after another. I don't like myself for doing this, and it makes me feel even worse about the relationship I lost. I've decided to find some more constructive things to do with my time and to stay home on Thursday and Friday night each week to prove that I'm able to do it. (Wright, *Let's Just be Friends*, 149)

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### *The Gift and The Giver*

God wants us to enjoy his creation as a gift--in fact, we are a part of his creation--but we frequently confuse the gift with the giver. Romans chapter one speaks to our leanings toward idolatry: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men . . . . For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him . . . . They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen" (vv. 18-25). We must always guard our hearts against idolatry.

Barbara and I cared deeply for each other. We both acknowledged times of finding ourselves daydreaming about what the other was doing. She once told me of a time that she sat praying with several other people, and caught herself daydreaming about me. On more than one occasion, I was deep in thought about her, rather than doing what I was supposed to be doing (learning a new language, meeting new people, etc). Whether you call it puppy love or childishness, we cared for each other. There were times when I thought that I wouldn't be able to live if she ever broke up with me. And then she broke up with me, and I had to test whether I actually could live without her. I'm not going to speculate that God took Barbara away from me because I liked her so much. I think God smiles at love and devotion; he isn't bent on beating up his children when they find themselves loving someone else. He's jealous for our love, but he isn't neurotic.

Yet for something so horrible, idolatry creeps up subtly. Jeremiah said, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it" (17:9)? God has a passion for his glory, deserves all the attention, and will not share that with anyone else (Isaiah 6:3, 40:5, 9-11, 42:8, 45:18-23, 48:11, Romans 3:4, 1 Corinthians 1:29, Philippians 2:10-11). He has saved us for his own sake, and stands alone as the only true God (Isaiah 43:25, 44:6, 8).

God warned the Jews back in Exodus 20 about worshipping other gods. The Ten Commandments are an attempt to help people find their satisfaction in God. Man's tendency to look to himself has always been a problem in the human heart. But God longs for glory.

God is not prideful for wanting all the glory. When we want glory, it's repulsive to God because we don't deserve glory. God deserves all praise because he is perfect and has created this world to love him.

When we look at a girlfriend or spouse and declare that we need that person to make us happy, we have lost sight of the glory of God. And let's be honest, it happens more than we'd like to admit. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be happy. The problem arises when we try to fill that longing with something other than God.

I cared deeply for Barbara, but I don't think my idolatry really showed itself until after we broke up. Before we broke up, I was just loving my girlfriend. Granted, my love wasn't perfect . . . it was likely mixed with idolatry, too, but I was at least putting the needs of another above that of my own (or at least, that's what I was trying to do). It was after the break-up that I felt desperate for her, that I'd die if she didn't come back. It was at moments like that, when I wondered if I'd crossed from love to idolatry.

As John Piper says, while building on one of C. S. Lewis' ideas, the problem is that we often never get around to being filled with God because we're so busy filling ourselves with trite things that don't last (*Desiring God*, 9, 16-17). Piper frequently says, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him" (*Future Grace*, 7, 385-86; *Desiring God*, 238). What could bring more glory to God than going to him, to be filled up by him, with him? I hungered to fill up on Barbara rather than on God. I wanted to call her, or e-mail her, and find out what she was doing, to see if she missed me, if she realized yet she'd made a mistake.

It's too easy to run to the TV or the Internet or even to friends while neglecting our hope in Christ. "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak" (Isaiah 40:28-29). Oh, that God give us eyes to see that only the true living water--Christ--can quench our thirsty souls (John 4:10-15).

### *Betrayal and Bitterness*

Our minds easily tell us that God owes us better than the way life is treating us. Within hours, if not minutes, of Barbara breaking up with me, I began thinking my situation unfair--*this shouldn't be happening to me, especially considering that I've gone through a break-up before.*

Barbara and I were remaining pure in our relationship, we were seeking to get married, we both wanted to serve the Lord in some sort of vocational ministry, and I'd prayed for many years that God would send me a wife. I thought God was answering my prayers by giving me what I'd asked for--a spouse. So when it fell apart, I felt not only betrayed by Barbara, but by God. After all, he was the one who had allowed us to ever meet in the first place. All I could think after the break-up was, "God, this just isn't fair . . . she's mine!"

I was asserting that God owed me something better. "God, what sort of screwed up world are you running anyway? Hand me the wheel, and King Kevin will show you a thing or two about controlling the universe." I had accused him of being unfair and I confessed my pride.

We can ask God honest questions, but we shouldn't forget that he doesn't owe us an answer. We must also keep in mind that God is holy and perfect (Matthew 6:9). He

cares for us, and desires to answer our prayers (Matthew 7:7-11), but he is not an underling to our commands.

Admittedly, though, it's easy to feel betrayed by God. After all, he reigns with all power. So why did he allow this to happen?

The devil wants us to believe that God isn't good but we need to resist that lie with faith. We must cry out to God--"*Lord, I'm angry and perplexed about this situation, but I confess my ignorance. I can't see the whole picture. I confess my sin of being angry with you. I confess that my anger is due to my own pride. I'm angry because I've misunderstood something about you and my situation. Maybe I've even chosen to ignore something you've said, and rebellion has led to my pain in this situation. But, I turn from my sin and put my hope in you, according to the mercies poured on me through your Son Christ Jesus. Please help me deal rightly with my anger and ignorance.*"

August 19: Today's been interesting. This morning and afternoon I experienced such a great deal of anger. Some of it is directed at, maybe provoked by, those around me. But I've also been aware of anger over being abandoned by Barbara. I was rejected. She did all the rejecting and I did all the receiving. This seems so unfair. I'm devastated at the thought of not being able to spend the rest of my life with her. And, I'm also mad at her for leaving me. I'm so sad and angry at being rejected. I'm angry at myself for having been rejected. I think I'm even angry at God, too, for allowing it. I'm feeling so shattered inside. All that seems to lurk in me is a large amount of rage. Rage at her, at myself, at the world, and at what my heart perceives as an unfair system, a system God created.

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### *Forgiveness*

I'm probably not the best one to talk about forgiveness. I'm not very good at it . . . but then again, maybe that's why I should talk about it. Many of you may not be good at it, either. And if that's the case, you're in good company (or should I say bad company?). It truly takes the grace of Christ to love others well.

I started growing fangs and producing venom when Barbara broke up with me. I ached at losing her, but also wanted to tell her off with a full assortment of expletives. I was ready to cast good religion aside to have my say. No words were off limit, either. I wanted to vent. In the following months, I dealt with rage at some pretty deep and shallow levels. I'm ashamed to say that on one occasion, I was riding my motorcycle in my country, and a guy barely nicked my bike with his. I immediately yelled out a harsh word in English. He couldn't understand it, but it wasn't kind. I don't know how related this one instance was with my break-up, but I had a few of these surprising outbursts after the break-up. The more I dealt with my hatred toward her, the less such things happened.

It's easy to remain angry at the one who ended the relationship. It's not necessarily sinful to be angry with him or her. Maybe we were truly wronged. We may need to confront the person about how he or she sinned against us. But we sin when we stay angry. Ephesians 4:31 makes this clear: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." We can acknowledge such

anger before God, ask for his justice, and then call upon his mercy that we might forgive that person. After all, Jesus, while being accused, ". . . did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). If the sinless Son of God forgave the injustice enacted upon him, how can we stay angry? If we nurture our anger, it will turn to bitterness, which will rot our souls (Hebrews 12:15).

Sometimes we need to say to God, "*Lord, I feel wronged in this situation. I feel misunderstood and abandoned by someone I truly loved. The pain is immense. And so is the anger and my desire for justice. God, I trust that you will right all wrongs. I also realize that I am sinful, too, and I place myself before your mercies. I forgive my perpetrator, not because she deserves it, but because you have forgiven me when I didn't deserve it. By your grace, I forgive her and choose not to use her offense against her.*"

We step out in faith and forgive, especially when we don't feel like it. If the anger resurfaces, then we go back to God acknowledging that we are having trouble letting go. We must continue with our commitment to forgive. This isn't self determination, it'll take Christ working out his love in us.

Forgiving another may often have an actual moment of climatic transition, similar to conversion when a person goes from death to life, but it is naïve to believe forgiving another for any one failure or for a lifetime of harm is ever entirely finished. The fact seems to be that as any harm is more fully faced, then it requires the deepening of forgiveness to overcome. To forgive another is always an ongoing, deepening, quickening process, rather than a once-and-for-all event. (Allender, *Bold Love*, 158)

Perhaps by the goodness of Christ, some acts of forgiveness can be once-and-for-all events, but I like Allender's idea that some offenses can take significant time to work through.

### *Confession*

God never tires of hearing our honest confessions. Psalm 51:17 says: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." He warms to a heart crying out to him. Actually, Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

We need to confess our pride and other sins to God. Sometimes we only need to confess our sins to God in private, while at other times, we need to go to another Christian friend and confess to him (James 5:16). This does a lot to keep our hearts vulnerable before God. When we confess to others, we are ultimately confessing to God. It helps our pride to tell trustworthy Christians the sins we're struggling with. Confession helps make us vulnerable, needy, and humble. "*God, I hate Barbara. But how can I hate her for doing to me once what I've done to you a thousand times? She may have acted immaturely or sinful in some of her reactions, but I confess my pride and bitterness.*"

I've confessed my secret sins to other men many times, and it usually humbled them, too. I've experienced healing in a few areas as I've brought sins into the light of Christian confession and fellowship. After they've prayed for me, I've sensed God's

presence like never before. Confessing my hatred of Barbara to friends was especially helpful as I was healing from our break-up.

June 21: I shouldn't feel that I have to deny her sins in the break-up. But I can't hold on to that idea, either. I must forgive. Also, I must consider that God could be using this break-up as a corrective in my life.

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### *Sin and Redemption*

We must look into God's word for an accurate picture of our human predicament. We really are sinners. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins." (Ecclesiastes 7:20). These are heavy words. Who can hear them? "*Lord, we ask that you take into account that we are made of dust. We have frail frames and are weak.*"

But the good news for those of us in Christ is that we are declared righteous through the work that Jesus did on the cross (Romans 4). Christ put his Spirit in us and gave us a new nature (Romans 8:9, Galatians 5:16-26, Colossians 3:9-10). Yes, we are able to sin, but God the Father is working through us in Christ (Philippians 1:6, Jude 24-25).

Listen to what Paul said in Titus 3:4-7,

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Now that's profound. God provided true life through his Son Christ. Yet, pain can cloud the brightness of God's glory. There were times after my break-up that I couldn't rejoice, that I didn't have hope or joy. I was unsure the misery would end anytime soon. Sorrow in life just can't be avoided. Yet, we should remember that pain and disappointment are a part of God's plan to bring us into the righteous life now and heaven later. This may not be what we want to hear; it certainly wasn't what I wanted to hear in the aftermath of my break-up, but it is true.

God remains with us in our sufferings. He knows pain, death, and sorrow: Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

As Hebrews goes on to tell us, Christ endured far more suffering than we'll ever know. He never sinned; instead, he fought sin to the grave and did so with joy (12:1-3). As believers, we can draw strength from Jesus' example. We're not God, but we do have his Spirit dwelling within us, providing joy unspeakable.

My question to the reader at this point, is, do you know Christ? While I've addressed you, the reader, as though you're a Christian, you might not really be one. The

promises of God's presence and hope during hard times only apply to those who have trusted Christ's death and resurrection as sufficient payment for their sin and as sufficient to turn away God's wrath against their sin. If you're not a believer, the Bible says you're God's enemy and will one day face his wrath in hell (Ephesians 2:1-3). If you want trust him, confess your sin to him, ask him to forgive you, and make you a new person.

### *The Real Battle*

Satan would love to distract us with our own problems so that we lose sight of the real battle. It's OK for us to hurt over a break-up, and it's OK for us to cry out in pain to the Lord, but it's not OK for us to get so attached to our pain that we lose sight of God. Satan wants to convince us that God is cruel. We can become so consumed with our own hurts that we forget to guard against the enemy of our souls.

We aren't the only ones hurting; other people stand in need of our ministry (Romans 12:10-15). In Philippians 2:1-3 the Apostle Paul said,

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

"Yes," you may say, "but I'm hurting too badly right now to reach out." Well, all of us need ministering to sometimes. Or more accurately put, we are always in need of God's mercy through the care of other believers. But sometimes we need extra care, and there is a time for us to heal in Christ. Yet, we must be careful, for the evil one roams like a roaring lion seeking to devour us (1 Peter 5:8). He wants to destroy us and those around us. We must keep in mind that this world is not about our own comfort. Yes, we must pursue our pleasure in God, but that doesn't always equal comfort (See Piper, *Desiring God*, 213-238; *Let the Nations be Glad*, 71-112). God calls us unto suffering and death for his sake (Luke 9:23, Philippians 3:10). Paul stated it clearly in 2 Timothy 3:12, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted . . ." (Just to put our suffering in context, approximately 150,000 Christians die for their faith every year around the world. A break-up may be painful, but it shrinks in comparison to dying for our faith.)

"Since the children have flesh and blood," Hebrews 2:14-15 says, "he [Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil--and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." Did we get that? God achieves glory, through Christ, by beating back his enemy. "He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8). Let's allow our break-up to refocus our attention on God's larger plan. God's light is extinguishing the darkness, and he's getting glory through Christ as he defeats the devil through us, the broken and weak vessels that we are. Consider 1 Corinthians 1:25-31:

For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were

influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

God gets all the glory as he uses us, weak vessels, to defeat his enemy. Only an all-powerful God could use a defective weapon (us) to defeat his enemy (Satan). But ultimately God relies on himself, not us. "For my own name's sake I [God] delay my wrath; for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you [Israel], so as not to cut you off. See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another" (Isaiah 48:9-11). God depends on himself and will bring us to perfection in the process (Ephesians 5:25-27). He has called us into this spiritual battle (Ephesians 6), yet the battle is his to win (Judges 7:20, 15:15, 1 Samuel 17:37, 45-47, Zechariah 4:6). The loss of a relationship with someone we love can bend our backs with its weight, but God hasn't left us in our pain.

We should not lose heart, though pain rages in our soul, though sins still trouble us, God is winning the war against Satan. God gains glory for himself in Christ through us, his needy children. The ultimate battle includes more than just romance, but heaven and hell, life and death, salvation and damnation. God cares about our romantic life, our heartaches and successes, but we must not forget his bigger plan--that he be honored in all things.

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). The battle may rage partly in our emotions, but those things only point us to a greater reality, a battle that rages for the hearts of men and women. God can use us to comfort others, even when loved ones break our hearts.

Our pain reminds us that we are not yet fully redeemed, and that the battle flares on. We are called to participate in spreading God's glory, rather than the expansion of our own kingdom. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). In the midst of sorrow from a break-up, we can't forget about the people who haven't yet tasted the morsels of life with Jesus.

In our pain, we are free to hurt before God and his people. But we need to be mindful that we are here for God's glory. Even through our suffering, he will make a great name for himself, while at the same time, ministering to us.

We must keep the big picture in mind especially during the pain of our break-up. God is spreading his light to all the world as he indicates in Isaiah 49:6 regarding his chosen people so long ago: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." God uses us in the process of reaching the nations. Paul declared, "However, I consider my life worth

nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24). Even with the pain from a broken relationship, we should pray as Jesus did to the Father, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

God will one day meet our every need with himself. After all, God turns deserts into pools of water, and transforms shame into joy (Psalm 107:35, Isaiah 61:7). So, if our tears from our present break-up don't stop any time soon, we can still move on, tears and all, toward God's perfect healing.

## CHAPTER 4. THE HEALING CONTINUES

When I originally penned this chapter, I started by saying, "At the time of this writing, not all of my hurt is healed, yet I can say by faith that healing is available in Christ for all of our hurts." Years later, I testify that God has borne witness to what I wrote then, even though at the time, my faith resembled a drunk man stumbling home after too many drinks. We must not be too prideful to bring to God things that seem small. Yes, God cares about us when we get dumped. He is interested in us when we hurt emotionally. He loves us so much that he will give himself to us because he knows that's ultimately what we need. He will get glory even in our pain, and he will work it for our good (Romans 8:28).

### *Joy in the Journey*

Christ offers us peace in life despite pain's presence. I probably wouldn't believe this if Jesus hadn't said it himself to his weary disciples. In John 16:32-33, Jesus said, "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

The pain we face over a break-up is important to God, but the pain serves as a reminder that this world drips with sorrow, but a greater joy awaits us. Jesus forewarned us of the hurt, and he wants us to spread the good news about him, especially in our pain. He wants us to live for him, even when people persecute us for our faith.

Satan sows havoc in the world through persecution and other types of suffering, but be of good cheer. Christ has overcome the world (1 John 4:4). His love pushes fear from our lives (1 John 4:18). The fear of being alone can be crippling and God knows it, but he wants us, married or single, to find security in his love.

We can experience joy when we obey God. Jesus said, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:10-11). It's hard to contemplate joy when a break-up has just slung us overboard and we're barely treading water. But Jesus promises joy as we swim in the rough waters of life.

Despite the hurt, those who walk with Christ can live joyfully (Galatians 5:22). James said that we can have joy during our trials (1:2). Psalm 5:11-12 puts it this way, "But let all who take refuge in you [God] be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. For surely, O LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield."

Honestly, I'm not the most joyful Christian that ever lived. I can, so I'm told, be plain irritable sometimes, especially when I'm hurting. After my break-up, I walked into a small shop in my assigned country and asked for something in the local language. The shop owner looked puzzled, obviously not understanding what I wanted. I'd lived there nearly two years, and my language was OK (or so I thought). It especially angered me when people didn't understand what I was saying. Out of pride, I yelled at the storeowner, in his mother tongue, "What's the matter, don't you understand this language?" It wasn't one of my better moments. I was doing all the culturally insensitive

things I'd been trained not to do. Again, I had to talk to God, "*Lord, I confess that joy is not something I can muster up from within. It must come from your Spirit. I'm often tempted to believe the lies Satan tells me--that I'll never be good for anything, that joy isn't possible--but, by your Son's work, I live in the fullness of Christ and accept your identity of me rather than listening to Satan's lies about me.*"

June 22: God, let me proceed in confidence today, not falling back on old and torn memories, but on your plan for a better day.

July 13: I feel like I need to share something great that has been going on lately, 40 days after our break-up. I asked for joy three days ago, and the Father gave it. I feel like in these last three or four days, I've turned a corner in my recovery from my break-up. I feel like I'm dwelling on it less and less; I'm living in the here and now with hope for the future, and much of the pain is gone.

It's not all gone, but it's not as deep, intense, or long in duration. I don't want to fool myself by saying, "There now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Because it was bad. Nor do I want to tell myself that I'm over her. But I do want to give God the glory. Glory and praise to him!

I feel that in the last month, I've had plenty of time to grieve, mull over, and replay many events. Now, I give myself very little time to rehash events or torn dreams. I don't want to be too hasty and say that I must never think about the break-up. But at some point I have to set boundaries and stop entertaining these old and harmful thoughts.

July 17: Now, I'm missing her and struggling with my self-image.

July 27: Today, I thanked God for breaking us up. I'm not glad that we broke up, but wanted to thank him even though I can't yet see the good in it.

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### *Validation from God*

I'm learning to identify myself through God's eyes. Shortly after my break-up, a friend told me that I should keep in mind that God validates me, not Barbara. This was refreshing. Barbara meant a lot to me, but I was idolizing her when I sought true validation and fulfillment from her instead of God.

Our hearts ache, but we can't let our weeping hearts tell us who we are. We must not let our circumstances identify us. We need to let the triune God himself tell us who we are, otherwise we'll either think too much, or too little, of ourselves. We must guard against seeing only ourselves and missing the majesty of God.

When we're feeling battered by the world and crippled by the lies from the evil one, we can go to the Bible, like Ephesians 1, and read what it says about who we are in Christ. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in

the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight . . . ." What wonderful truth.

I remember several years ago, before I met Barbara, reeling from emotional pain over a woman who wasn't interested in me, when I was unable to think of anything else. Satan was telling me my life would be worthless without her. Then God called my attention to Psalm 46:1-3: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging." My soul found peace in God that night, and I went right to sleep.

Psalm 34:4 says, "I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." Verse 8 declares, "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him." If we ever doubt God's goodness, we can "taste it for ourselves." God is good, even when we hurt. He deserves praise. Verse 18 goes on to say, "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

If we're his children, the Lord is not angry at us for our brokenness. He cares for us and calls us to trust him through our sorrow. We can belt out a prayer to God. We can weep if we must. Nonetheless, he remains our stronghold and fortress.

Christ so cares about the glory of God the Father that he died to honor him. And, in his dying, Jesus has done what the elect needed most--brought us to God. "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit . . ." (1 Peter 3:18).

For all who call upon him in faith, God brought himself glory by dealing with our sin, through Christ, and then by bringing us to himself. God could do nothing greater for us than to share his life with us. And if we have trusted Christ, then he has given himself to us. Ultimately what we need is not a spouse or a boyfriend, but God. We were dead without him and headed for hell. Out of his mercy he gave us life in Christ (Ephesians 2).

August 11: Today, I've felt so discouraged. I woke up angry at the world. When I wasn't feeling anger, I was apathetic.

I spent a lot of time, numbing the pain, in front of the TV . . . Oh, the ache still lurks in my heart. Every time I tell myself I'm healed, I have a setback and bleed internally, emotionally.

After church, I had a morbid prayer time in which I asked God to lift my burden of loneliness. I tell you, this singleness is next to maddening at times. I have all these desires that I can't legitimately fulfill right now. And that causes as much anger in my heart as it causes passion. I lie to myself and say that marriage will make things right, straighten out my crooks and smooth out my edges. In the realistic picture, that's probably not true, at least not entirely. Surely, though, it would help me in some ways.

I begged God not to leave me in my singleness, to let me know the joy, the oneness, the failures even, of love

and marriage. I want to know and to be known. Doesn't every human cry out and hunger for this very thing? Isn't this why we were made? To know you, God, and others? Oh Lord, withhold it no longer from your servant.

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### *Cherishing God's Goodness*

We must learn to appreciate God in his goodness regardless of our situations. This doesn't call for stoic denial of reality. If we hurt, we hurt. But it means we need to keep in mind who God is at all times.

"Surely [Jesus] took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted" (Isaiah 53:4). As a Father, God knows the depth of our sins and has dealt with them in Christ. He is also aware of our pain, having borne it, too. We have a God who cares for us, and who made his mercies available to us.

As was quoted earlier, King David cried out in Psalm 13 and spoke very pointed words to God. David felt alone and was full of sorrow. Yet at the end of this dreary Psalm, in verses 5-6 he declared, "But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me." We don't know how much time, if any, transpired between the woe of verses 1-4 and the praise of verses 5-6. We don't know if his circumstances changed or if David changed. But we do know that his gloom was turned to praise. This is not to say that we have to fake our way through our problems, always smiling and never showing our pain. And David's words don't mean that every situation in life has a happy ending. But this passage does show that God works in us to bring forth praise for his name, even in sorrow. Yes, especially in sorrow, God is still worthy of praise. That's how good he is.

Although Job had many great things to say in the book that bears his name, at the end of it, he sits speechless before God's awesome power. In 42:2-6, Job spoke again, but this time with all of his sufferings placed in the light of God's good plan:

I know that you [God] can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. [You asked,] "Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?" Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. [You said,] "Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me." My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.

God humbled Job. This suffering man saw God's glory and worshipped him. Often we say more than we should when we hurt. When we see our pain in the light of God's providence, we will join Job in praising God. We, too, will repent for our selfishness.

June 29: Lord, I'm prone to ask you to give me each day with no suffering. But the path you've called me to follow is one of suffering. Let the pain that I encounter today be because I have lived faithfully for you.

I ask for your protection but will relinquish myself to suffer if it can better serve your glory. Honor your name through me, either by comfort or sorrow, laughter or weeping, delight or distress. March across the land and

make a great name for yourself. Trample down your enemy and push back the darkness. Do that with me in your hands.

Only you could beat back your foe with a cracked vessel. Only you could make your impure bride, the church, spotless. Only you could use a grave to bring forth glory. Light me ablaze, even if by suffering, and cause your enemy to tremble.

July 23: There is something that we should ask ourselves through every trial: Is this calamity a mercy of God? Is it possible that while severe, painful, tragic, and maybe unspeakable, that this could be God working his mysterious love in our hearts? We easily look at a new house, a new-born baby, a positive physical exam, or a new girlfriend, and chalk them up to God's good graces. But what about life's sorrows? Is God's grace not at work there too? Are his blessings not also intermingled?

It's a different sort of cup and a different sort of drink, this cup of sorrows, this drink of tears. But they also contain the severe mercies of God. So drink up. It's in this kind of communion that we come to know Christ in his suffering.

I must interject this quote: "[God] is faithful not only to give us what he knows we desire at the deepest core of our heart, but to do so in a way that is tailor-fit for the breaking of our evil, arrogant, and simple ways" (Allender, *Bold Love*, 309).

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### *Here and Now*

Praising God doesn't mean that we have to ignore our pain or play down its affects. Rather it means we can acknowledge our pain while at the same time confessing who we are in Christ--*saints who still sin, people who are sinned against, new creatures headed for heaven, joint heirs with Christ, weak vessels, children of God.*

I'm often tempted to see my pain as a parenthesis in God's plan. Or, I view my present experience, even if it's good, as a parenthetical clause. I may have a good computer now, but I keep dreaming about buying a faster one. Or I may get a job that I like, but wish it paid more or gave me more power. God is teaching me how to exist in the here and now. Yes, my heart was made to crave eternity in the uninhibited presence of God, but too often I don't crave God in heaven as much as I crave a better situation here on earth.

I don't have to wait until all of my sorrows go away before I can be content. Suffering will never disappear this side of heaven. Hurt and joy will have to walk beside each other in this life.

As one of my friends has said,

We are called to hold the pain and struggle of life alongside our hope. The pain and struggle will never go away; we can't deny it, but we need to learn to hold them side by side yielding our hurts up. I know I have lived a lot of my life hoping and waiting for the pain to stop so I can enjoy life. What a fantasy that was.

### Contentment

There are many biblical passages that teach us about being content (Philippians 4:11, 2 Timothy 6:6-8, Hebrews 13:5). Since Christ dwells in us, we should be content financially and be satisfied in God's work in our lives. Nor should we wish away our present situation.

Just as married people need to learn contentment regarding their mate, so single adults need to learn contentment regarding their unmarried status. Although we don't have to be perfect before God brings the right person into our lives, the saying rings true that if we're not happy as a single person, then we probably won't be happy as a married person.

That other person will not (actually cannot) make us happy. He or she doesn't have the ability. The other person is, after all, only human, just as we are. We can't make anybody happy, either. If we can't ultimately fill up that void in our own lives, how can we do it for someone else? Only God can fill the void in our lives.

Another prayer, *"God, acknowledging your sufficiency isn't cheap talk. I have to live this too, and it's not a smooth process for me, as I write recently after my break-up with Barbara. Even though I use Scripture to encourage myself, I still feel much pain from the break-up. There's a lot of mystery in my future. But the truth is, that mystery will not go away when I get married. I still won't know what the future holds. I will still be required to walk by faith. So know that I don't quote these spiritual things tritely. I speak them in my own weakness, holding on to your faithfulness."*

But is it wrong to want something more, something better in this life?

We can legitimately long for something better; after all, we do live in a fallen world, so there must be something better. But we must guard against thinking that we can only be joyful when we're married. We're being discontent when we think that someone or something will be the final ingredient, the ultimate answer, to our deepest longings--*"This is all I need, and then I'll be happy."* Such thinking is idolatrous. Idolatry may involve longing for anything from a new computer program, a book, or a CD, to a girlfriend or husband.

Discontentment says, "I can only be happy if I have . . . [fill in the blank]." Living discontentedly means being dissatisfied with what we have, thinking that we'd be happier if we could change our situation, rather than looking to God as our sustainer. The thought--"God owes me something"--often accompanies dissatisfaction.

A proper longing for, say, a better circumstance, can be consistent with contentment, because there *is* something better out there. Yet we must realize that anything obtained in this world will not bring the fulfillment that heaven will.

God doesn't require that we stop longing for things or relationships, just that we long for them appropriately. There is nothing wrong with looking forward to a future event, like a date. We encounter problems when don't look far enough to what really satisfies--heaven (See Allender, *Bold Love*, 288).

Again, I prayed, *"Lord, what do I want more than anything else? It will do me no good to pretend here. You know my heart and you know the answer is a wife. Too often I've viewed a wife as the final component for happiness, and I know that such is wrong. Yet this is where I am, guilty, caught in the act of loving something or someone more than I love you. I confess this to you. Please forgive my idolatry. By your grace, I repent."*

June 20: I have awakened today with a resolution to meet my ever longing and memory of Barbara with a cry for God to satisfy my soul with himself. Every pang will be an opportunity to look to God and declare by faith that only he satisfies. In him, I can be content. Every time my heart longs for love, or lusts for something else, I must ask God to fill me with himself. God has more for me than what I can see at this moment.

July 25: I keep wondering, what is Barbara doing now? Does she ever think about me? Does she ever miss me? Does she ever wonder if she made a mistake?

She comes and goes in passing thoughts throughout the day. It's at night when she most lingers. Maybe it's because all the thoughts accumulate throughout the day so that I have this big deposit at night. Maybe it's also partly due to the quietness that ensues at night. And of course, the magnified sense of being alone. All is hushed, the lights go out, the loneliness increases. Sometimes I wonder what horrible thing in me drove her away. Could she see something in me that I just refused to see? Am I just badgering myself by thinking like this?

Did she have some deep dark secret that sent her away? Was she unstable?

Before I go to bed most nights, she's already been on my mind for a while. Songs throughout the day, smells, people's expression, movies--they all trigger my thoughts of her. Although I am learning to get along without her, she is always just a thought or two away. Though I try to muster a non-concern for her, I still care so much for her. I want to un-do all the last 2 months and have my girlfriend back again. To have a girlfriend at a distance is still better than not having one at all. At least I knew that there was one lady out there besides my Mom who truly cared about me, how I felt, where I went, and what I ate.

There is something so amazing, let me say divine, about a woman's love. Her stares into your eyes, her touch, her words, her aroma, the beauty of her movements, her body. God has just heaped blessing upon blessing by giving us this man-woman love. It's better than life itself.

And with these blessings, he has also intermingled sorrow. For the sin in my heart keeps me from loving perfectly, and at times provokes me to run from a perfect love.

Sometimes I'm baffled that our love ruptured on the rocks of disagreement. That's what posses to nag me most. It's the thought that just a couple of months ago, I had a girlfriend who loved me, felt loved by me, sent me packages, emailed and called me. She was grateful for me, and I took many occasions to tell her of my gratitude for

her. Yet today, it is no more. What once was love, is now a wound. Where I felt secure and whole, I now feel abandoned and foolish. How can love go so wild, to such extremes? How can it give life, then turn around and take life?

This is what I can't fathom. Does she like someone else now?

Sometimes I can't sleep. These occasions provide too many opportunities for my wondering mind to dwell on a old love, to live in the past, and wish to relive those moments with her again.

Oh, if I spoke my soul now, I'd just have to say that I want to spend the rest of my life with her. So much for recovery.

August 14: Today I was struck with a thought: What if I stopped thinking so much about loneliness and self-fulfillment and started thinking about fulfilling the needs of others?

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### *Community*

As has been said already, we must not forget others in our pain. We are called to minister to people around us (1 Peter 4:11). God is glorifying himself as we use the gifts he's given us to serve others. Consider what 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 says about our troubles, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

God knows how to use the hurt in our lives to minister to others, just as others have ministered to us through their pain. A good friend comes to mind. He broke up with his fiancée a few years back, an extremely painful ordeal. But instead of growing bitter, he learned compassion. He listened, like a trained counselor, during my own break-up and prayed with extra sympathy. The Lord blessed me through him.

I prayed once more, *"Lord, you want to bless others through my pain, too. There are people you want me to touch. I may not see all of it now, but you will use my troubles to speak peace into the lives of others. Knowing this doesn't take away all of my pain, but it does reassure me that you are using me in the lives of others."*

Truly the Lord uses his redeemed community to shine his glory throughout the world (Isaiah 49:6). The church is his bride and he's perfecting her. We can't survive the Christian walk if we aren't regularly in communion with other believers of like faith. We need to hear each other's victories and struggles. We need to confess our sins to one another and pray for each other.

Also, we need to confess our devotion to God in the presence of others. We weep when they weep and rejoice when they rejoice (Romans 12:15). This is community and part of our ministry among the saints--to live together and struggle toward God side by side.

God heals our souls when we, as the confessing community--the church, gather to declare God's worth, sing his praise, hear his word, and partake of the Lord's table.

There is something God-like when we make ourselves vulnerable among a group of believers who view God's glory as all supreme. God ministers to us by teaching others not to give up on us in our sin and by teaching us not to give up on them in their sin. We keep loving, keep disciplining, keep repenting, keep restoring, keep correcting, keep forgiving, and keep hoping for our promised redemption. God's Spirit working among us in the community of faith, the church, teaches us about loving our creator and loving others. There is something beautiful about learning to love again, especially when there are risks. And the church plays a big role in helping us love again.

### *Faith to Love Again*

Somewhere along the way, those of us who have had break-ups must love again. It may be a while before we feel ready to start looking for another potential mate. But during the whole process, God gives us chances to love again. We have friends and family who are always in need of love. And eventually, we will likely be given the opportunity to love someone of the opposite sex in a way that may cause us the same kind of pain that we just recovered from. Loving others makes us vulnerable.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves* has some famous words on taking risks:

Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket--safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

We all have fears of rejection, and we're going to face some type of rejection as long as we live. Yet it should not keep us from loving, because God gets glory by using us to love others in the face of pain.

Dan Allender says it like this,

Whenever someone strives to love with the love of God, they enter into an endeavor that has more possibility of failure than any other enterprise in life. Simply said, God's standards of love are always higher than ours; therefore, all efforts to love biblically will inevitably lead to a sense of our incompleteness and self-centeredness. (*Bold Love*, 138)

I often respond out of my fears, trying to protect myself from hurt and shame. I cried out to God again, "*I want the perfect girlfriend, one who won't ever leave me, one who'll be the perfect wife, one who will make me happy. I know that is impossible, but I still sometimes pursue this fantasy.*"

Don't we all live in such ways to protect ourselves? "I'll never be hurt again. I will never love again; you just can't trust people."

If we don't actually say things like this, we live like it. There's nothing wrong with trying to avoid pain, but we're never going to experience a painless world until heaven. Yet some of us withhold our love from others out of fear that we will be hurt again.

I've met men and women so afraid of commitment that they wanted their dating partner to be perfect (or wouldn't go on a date because they required perfection). There's nothing wrong with wanting to marry a compatible person, but we sin when we live in a way that only takes into account our interests and not the interests of others.

Many single people have a tendency to keep their options open for someone better. Yet they don't realize they're acting out of fear instead of faith, trying to control the future rather than trusting God with it.

Several years ago, I met a young lady who had trouble loving again because years earlier she'd been in a dating relationship that fell apart after three years. It had been at least two years since her break-up, but she was still using her past hurt as an excuse to keep from getting involved with anyone else. Although she admittedly wanted to be married, she wasn't willing to take a chance on loving someone else. Somewhere along the way, she must give up her struggle to protect herself, or else be fearful and lonely forever.

We, too, will have to take a chance at loving again. There's no rush to enter into another romantic relationship after a major break-up. But we still need to love and be vulnerable. That's faith at work--that's God getting glory. If God can give us love for our enemies, then surely we can forgive those who wronged us and be open to the next person whom God might bring our way.

We need not punish new people in our lives and deprive them of love just because we've been hurt. God may be sending them into our life as a blessing.

June 17: It's hard to come to terms with a love so strong going so wrong. I feel helpless, like I'm out of control. And I don't like feeling this way. Yet, I'm never really in control, in spite of what I think, even when things go my way. Again, my heart wants to see the future, because of fear rather than faith.

If my relationship with Barbara could go wrong, then there's no guarantee that such pain won't happen again. This frightens me. I want an assurance of the future, especially an assurance that a break-up won't happen again.

What shall I do about this uncertainty, this lack of control?

What I'm always called to do--*believe*. Live by faith and not by sight. Love again, take chances, believe that I will know affection once more, and trust that there is an ultimate place in my future where pain will end--heaven (Isaiah 35:10).

I should see my pain and broken relationship in light of God's call to worship him. I must offer the broken pieces to him.

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### *Time and Healing*

I'm sure we've heard that *time heals all wounds*. Although this statement holds some truth, it's better to say that *God heals and uses time to do it*. We've all met people who have harbored bitterness for decades. Time without divinity doesn't heal our wounds. Only God can heal our hurts. Time won't do it if we refuse to forgive. But when we're trying to forgive, through God's grace, time sure helps.

If we profess Christ, we must forgive. It's not optional. There's hell to pay if we don't (Matthew 5:44-48; 6:15; 18:21-35). We lift our wounds to God and ask him to heal them. We need to talk to God, and most likely another believer too, about our hurts.

God is spreading his glory throughout our lives like jelly on a slice of bread, and part of that glory he displays in the lives of believers who have been healed of wrongs, great and small. God is preparing us for a life with him, in a world in which our pains will be sent away forever. And he uses time as part of the process.

June 23: Today I wanted to search for a special someone, although no one in particular . . . . I don't feel I'm healed enough to look yet, although my heart is already searching. More healing is needed.

June 27: These days, I'm doing better, feeling more adjusted to the idea of our break-up. Although, there are continually new aspects that have to be dealt with along the way, like when I recently met someone who knew Barbara's family. These things surfaced more pain that I need to lift up to the Father. I'm adjusting, but this full healing process can't be rushed. It will take a while.

August 4: Today marks the second month anniversary of our break-up. I've tried not to ponder things too much. Really, it's been a good day. I've been mindful of the break-up, but not obsessed about it.

I feel that most of my heart has healed. But every once in a while I get the fleeting hope that there might still be a chance for reconciliation.

August 28: Today I asked the Lord to reconcile me and her. I wept over the loss. I then felt exceedingly light-filled and joy-filled. Then sad again. What a roller-coaster.

Some folks find themselves stuck in a certain stage, unable to get past the pain. What should we do if we're unable to move on and heal? Wright gives ten helpful suggestions that I've summarized:

1. Try to identify what it is that doesn't make sense to you about your break-up.
2. Identify the emotions you feel during each day.
3. Identify the steps or actions you are taking to help you move ahead and overcome this break-up.
4. Be sure you are sharing your loss and grief with others who can listen to you and support you during this time.

5. Find a person who has experienced a similar loss.
6. Identify the positive characteristics and strengths of your life that have helped you before.
7. Spend time reading the Psalms.
8. When you pray, share your confusion, your feelings, and your hopes with God.
9. Think about where you want to be in your life two years from now.
10. Remember that understanding your grief intellectually is not sufficient (*Let's Just be Friends*, 121-22).

While these principles can help, you shouldn't hesitate to talk with a mature believer--who loves God's word--to help you through this grieving process. I talked with several close friends, and a couple of Christian counselors to help me work through my break-up. There's no shame in asking for help. In fact, it takes more courage for us to ask for help than to deny our need for it.

### *Our Ultimate Hope*

The windows of our future destination easily fog when someone we love has left us. But Scripture tells us that if we trust Christ, we have a future hope (1 John 3:2). One day we will see God and he will wipe away our pain forever (Revelation 21:4). It's important to think about heaven now, because God wants our mind on heaven (Colossians 3:2). He knows that we will lose our identity if we lose sight of our real home in heaven with him.

Satan wants us to live only for this life. He desires to make our pain appear endless. He can cripple us with his lies if we don't believe God's word. If we're followers of Jesus, we have a home in heaven based on the work of Christ. Therefore, we can forgive and love in a world full of hate and pain.

If we're hurting now because someone has rejected us with painful words, or abandoned us without saying a word, we might find solace in reflecting on the greater reality. If we are followers of Christ, there is a world that awaits us in which God's glory will be seen, acknowledged, and worshipped by all believers. We won't hurt others, nor will they hurt us. (See Randy Alcorn's, *Heaven*.)

"But I'm not in heaven yet," some reader may say. "I'm on earth and I want to be with the one who broke up with me. I don't want heaven, I want my girlfriend to come back." Our heavenly Father longs for us to cry out to him. If our hearts agonize, then he wants us to call out to him. He hears and cares. But we may not get what we're wanting. He will, nonetheless, reach out to us. And somewhere along the way, we'll need to cast our eyes heavenward and live on a (redeemed) world much better than this the present one. At some point in the healing process, this does offer hope for believers.

This present world is not the end. It's not our final destination, and if we don't keep that in mind, we'll believe the lies of the devil, who tells us that life never gets any better than this world. Satan says that break-ups and weeping are all we'll ever know. But we can't listen to his deception.

As Allender says, "If I do not anticipate the regularity and tragedy of sin, I unavoidably come to believe this world is my home" (*Bold Love*, 140). When we know heaven and the beauty of God awaits us, we can live a holy and reckless life (See Piper,

*Future Grace*, 341-350). Our worst fear of death will be met with the hope of meeting the Son of God himself.

We can savor some of God's presence now, but it's just a foretaste of what lies ahead. God will one day unleash his majesty in such a way that all evil will forever be locked in hell, and all goodness will permeate us so that we ourselves will not be able to sin. A break-up may ravage our heart, but God will not leave us broken hearted. He can heal us while we're on earth and bring a mate into our lives. But if we never know marriage this side of heaven, he has promised us the ultimate encounter with love once we see him.

Imagine that. One day, we'll be so overjoyed with God that we will not sin. All glory to God for his triumph over evil!

If we're aware of what awaits us in heaven, we'll have clarity about who we are now. We're God's children. Just think how this sets us free to live holy, reckless lives. If heaven is our destination, then we're not afraid to go to the un-reached people of the world and share God's love with them. If heaven is our destination, we are unleashed to love the homeless man as God loves him. This includes loving those who have not loved us as they should have. It gives us incentive to forgive, to live in the present with hope for the future--our wedding with God himself, the ultimate lover. Mere earthly love will always disappoint, but God's love will one day heal our battered souls.

We must suffer while we're in this world. And we can do so knowing heaven awaits. Listen to what the Apostle Paul said regarding suffering and the hope of heaven: Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (*2 Corinthians 4:16-18*)

Paul endured severe suffering, yet when compared to the riches of heaven, he still called this world's afflictions minor. He wasn't denying pain's reality; rather he was putting it in proper focus with the splendor of heaven. Does a break-up rip into the soul? Oh yes. But believers have hope--hope that God will make things right in this world, and a promise that he'll right all wrongs in the life to come. Paul said elsewhere that he considered ". . . that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (*Romans 8:18*).

What is the glory and wonder of heaven? I suppose there are many right answers to this question, but the heart of this answer must be God himself.

Why will heaven last for all eternity? Because it will take forever for God to unveil his glory and majesty. We will never grow bored in heaven, for God himself will be pouring his beauty into us.

What do these reminders of God's larger plan have to do with the indignity of a break-up, the sorrow of parting with a loved one, the stench of sour earthly love? With each blow life gives us, Satan wants to wedge a knife of bitterness into our side, hoping the agony will cause us to see God as the enemy. We must not cast aside the larger vision of God's plan when pain dials our number. We can keep walking in faith, crawling perhaps, if we stay mindful of God's greater plan. Admittedly, this sounds superficial.

But it's the truth. We must cling to the truth if we are to survive. We must cast our eyes upon beauty, upon something far more stable than ourselves.

Think of some beauty here in the U.S.: The Grand Canyon, The Rocky Mountains, Niagara Falls, the changing leaves in Massachusetts, the winding Tennessee River, the coast line from Los Angeles to Seattle. Consider a beautiful woman or a flower. The eyes never get enough.

How much greater will God's beauty be in heaven when we can enjoy his splendor in an unhindered way? It will take all of eternity to experience God in his fullness and for him to pour out his unending love on us.

Revelation 4 paints a spectacular picture. The four living creatures are exalting Christ: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (v. 8). The twenty-four elders declare, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (v. 11). These truths may not bring immediate relief to our wounded soul, but we must remind ourselves of the life that awaits us. If the writers of Scripture mentioned heaven to encourage believers who daily faced pain deeper than romantic disappointment--like beatings and public shame--then we do well to meditate upon the promises of heaven too.

The praise continues in Revelation 5: "You [Jesus] are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (vv. 9-10).

And the host of heaven says, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever" (vv. 12-13)!

July 11: When every song you shared becomes a curse, when certain dates on the calendar open your wounds afresh, when every movie becomes a sad reminder, when the announcement of a newly engaged couple provokes tears instead of a smile, when every restaurant you dined in becomes a memorial to heartbreak, realize that you have a great opportunity to humble yourself and look heavenward.

You have a wound so deep, so internal that only God can heal it. You can become bitter and feel sorry for yourself, or you can admit your hurt and ask God to heal you. You have not only the pain of the wound, but you have the opportunity of healing.

August 21: It is the height of arrogance to think that the worst thing Barbara could have done for herself is to have given up the opportunity to spend the rest of her life with me. I must not view myself as her ultimate good, second only to heaven. In fact, maybe she should be commended for her wisdom.

September 3: At three months after our break-up, I'm still running across lost pictures and forgotten notes piled in

my room. A mixture of emotions always follows these discoveries, dislodging a host of memories--the increased heart-rate over holding hands, the smile of receiving her letters, the raised voice in an argument, the tears of that final call.

An eye fixed on heaven will give us a clear picture of our present problems. The pain is real, but so is God. Our heavenly Father is not gleeful about our suffering, but he is bringing about his own kingdom in our sinful hearts, even through our pain. God cares deeply for us and knows that the best gift he can give us is himself. So, let's look heavenward saints, our hope remains in God. He is faithful. Yes, he is faithful, especially to the brokenhearted.

## CHAPTER 5. THE ARENA OF LOVE AND DATING

Before I bring you up-to-date with how I'm doing quite a few years after my break-up with Barbara, let me say a few things about love and dating. The following will be a general survey only but hopefully still helpful.

### *Love*

Love is a feeling. Or should I say, some people describe love this way. Love certainly involves feelings, but it involves more. If we define love only as a feeling, then we may never "love" or feel "loved" quite the way we think we should.

Love need not exclude those feelings of utter silliness and sappiness, but it certainly can't be only those things. Feelings are bound to come and go, so marriage must be built on something else.

A biblical understanding will help us think about love and marriage. Genesis 24:67 gives the account of Isaac taking Rebekah as his wife, probably just after they met. The text tells us that Isaac loved her. Genesis 29:18 also says that Jacob loved Rachel, although he had just met her. This text shows that love is a commitment and that it is possible to love someone without knowing him or her very well (e.g., in the cases of arranged marriages).

Let's look at a few New Testament passages on love. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength . . . and love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). The Bible also says, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:9-10).

The New Testament says plenty about love: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

The Apostle Paul also said, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4).

What is love, then? While there are different types of love discussed in the Bible, essentially love is a commitment to another's well-being over that of our own selves. This describes not just marital love, but Christian love in general. Feelings alone didn't send Christ to the cross; rather it was his righteous character and genuine concern for God's glory; it was his hatred of our sin and his commitment to our well-being that put him there. We want to model this kind of love, not only in marriage, but in all of our Christian lives.

### *Guarding our Hearts*

Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." Guarding our hearts remains important especially in relationships with the opposite sex (see Heather Paulsen's *Emotional Purity: An Affair of the Heart* and Elisabeth Elliott's *Passion and Purity*).

One of the ways we can guard our heart is to make sure we don't become too exclusive too fast with our date. If possible, we're probably going to be better off spending time with that person in the context of people we already know. It's not always possible, but can be arranged on occasion.

Another way we can guard our heart is to move slowly with the physical aspects. American culture considers kissing, hugging, and hand-holding innocent treats that couples *should* give each other. But there's good reason to move slowly in these areas. The more couples delve into these things early on, the greater chance of emotional confusion. I know of a couple who didn't kiss until their wedding. That probably sounds ridiculous to many, but think of how special their wedding kiss was. And now, they can kiss all they want. Admittedly, there's no biblical rule that says we can't kiss our date. The Bible, however, never says we should either (except maybe those verses on holy kisses!). Our culture takes these physical intimacies too lightly, and while we don't need to become legalistic, we do need to re-examine what role these things should play in our dating life.

Another way we can protect our heart is to guard what emotions and experiences we tell our date. Our culture loves doing "emotional strip teases," as one author called it. Many are tempted to share every detail from their past, both positive and negative. Just as some physical things shouldn't be shared out of wedlock, so it might be with some emotional things, either good or bad. Should our dates know that we struggle with masturbation or that we were sexually active as a teenager? There's more room for caution than what many single adults feel they should share with each other before marriage. While the Bible doesn't tell us exactly how to respond in this situation, it does tell us to speak only that which gives grace to the hearer (Ephesians 4:29). So keep that in mind the next time you're on a date and wanting to recount every little event of your life.

### *Modern Approaches to Dating*

Hank was a seminary student and the guest speaker at a California youth retreat. While there, he noticed Hannah, an adult youth leader attending the retreat. She was attractive, single, and, as best he could tell, godly. All of these factors convinced him that he should pursue her. So he asked her to the beach.

She said yes, but not because she was interested in him. She just wanted to go to the beach. While on that "date" at the beach, he did the unthinkable. He asked her to marry him.

We should keep in mind, he'd only known her a few days, and even at that, he did not know her well. Nor did he even live in the same state.

She was shocked. But wanting to take his proposal seriously, she prayed about it for a month, and then said yes. The wedding took place two months later.

My friend Hank has been married many years now, and he and his wife Hannah have two daughters and a son. Some would say they were crazy to marry without really knowing each other. Others would say that it was of God.

I know couples that have dated for several years before getting married. But I've also met a few people, like Hank and Hannah, who married without knowing each other very well. So which is the best approach, short- or long-term dating?

I'm defining dating as the event or time when two people of the opposite sex are romantically interested in each other and spending time together for the purpose of discovering their compatibility for marriage. I'm defining long-term dating as dating that lasts over a year, and short-term dating as dating that lasts no longer than nine to twelve months. And by dating, I don't mean dating around. I'm talking about romantic interactions moving toward marriage, even if those interactions are in a group setting. With good reason, there are some Christians who object to our modern day approach to dating, the pairing-off method. There are many unhealthy aspects to pairing-off dating. But since pairing-off dating remains the way that most Americans find their mates, let's look at some aspects of short- and long-term dating.

#### Advantages to Long-Term Dating

The long-term approach has the main advantage of giving dating partners a chance to get to know each other and test compatibility. It gives them a chance to see if their dating partners are the kind of people that they want to spend the rest of their lives with.

#### Disadvantages to Long-Term Dating

Although the couple has more time to work through their feelings, this extra time may only confuse their emotions. More time doesn't guarantee that the best decision will be made.

Another major disadvantage to the longer dating process is that it could provide more tempting sexual situations for the couple. This doesn't mean that short-term daters never have this problem, but when two people who care for each other spend a lot of time together, there's bound to be some time when they are tempted to get more physically and emotionally involved.

#### Advantages to Short-Term Dating

There are at least two advantages to the short-term approach. First, it quickly calls the couple to commitment. There's no time for games and fickleness. Second, it allows the couple to quickly be united sexually and emotionally in marriage. Although not every couple thinks about sex as often as others do, sex is a significant issue for many couples.

#### Disadvantages to Short-Term Dating

However, a couple's decision to marry could be based on hormonal impulse rather than because the two really want to spend the rest of their lives with each other. Although this could be true of the long-term view, the short-term approach more easily lends itself to haste.

Not that there is anything wrong with marrying to satisfy sexual urges (1 Corinthians 7:2, 9), but if one is only wanting to sleep with this other person, he should take into account that most of their married lives will be spent outside of the bed.

### *The Bible and Dating*

The Bible doesn't tell us anything about dating per se. The Bible mentions the concept of betrothal, but that's not like our system of dating or our idea of engagement. If dating took place in biblical times, it wasn't recorded.

The marriages that Scripture tells us about were arranged by someone other than those getting married (Genesis 24, 29-30, Exodus 2:21, Judges 14:1-10). In the cases where the male made a request to marry a certain woman, it was still someone else, like his parents or a parent's servant who arranged the marriage. If there were cases in Scripture where a man picked a wife without input from his or her own family, then we don't have details about it. Moses' Cushite wife and Hosea's adulterous wife could have been such cases, but we don't have enough information to know (Numbers 12:1, Hosea 1:2-3). We know only that they took wives. And Hosea followed the direct command of God by marrying a prostitute (Hosea 1:2), but this sort of choice isn't something that most godly pastors would recommend.

Since the biblical record has such a radically different cultural situation, how does it help us think about dating today in our Western world? The Bible seems to speak to us via at least two principles--love and community.

#### The Believing Community

Since I've discussed love already, let's move to the biblical concept of community. In the Bible, the community of believers (family and friends) passively or actively gave their approval of marriages. The most famous case would probably be in Genesis 24 when Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. Not just any bride would do; she needed to be from Abraham's own people, from his native land. As far as we know, Abraham never asked Isaac what he wanted. He just sent his servant and gave him permission to use his own discretion in picking a worthy wife. God, of course, led in the whole process, but it's still different from what we're used to.

As we move on, we come across Jacob. He picked Rachel, but he did so only with the approval of her father Laban (Genesis 29-30). He actually had to accept an extra wife whom he didn't want.

In Exodus 2, Jethro gave his daughter Zipporah to be Moses' wife (v. 22). And in Samson's case (Judges 14), he saw a pretty woman and asked his parents if he could marry her. Samson's parents tried to persuade him to marry someone from his own people, but he rejected their advice. Still, his parents gave their approval, although she wasn't their first choice for a daughter-in-law.

In the case of Ruth and Boaz, we also see the influence of community. They were both acting on the counsel of others (Ruth 3:1-5, 4:11).

Community approval seems to be one of the most applicable principles that we can draw from Scripture regarding romantic relationships. The believing community's blessing on a couple can still play an important role today in finding a good mate.

The church will hopefully be more objective than the couple. Christians need to avoid the maverick mentality--a couple acting with no regard to anyone else's counsel. Even Hank, who proposed on the first date, had approval from his and her family before marriage.

Of course, the believing community's approval or disapproval has problems, too. Just because a group claims to be Christian doesn't make them Christian or wise. There

are those who claim to be Christian and give their approval to same-sex marriages, which certainly doesn't make homosexual relationships legitimate.

Yet, at the risk of being too general, I want to stress a point here. One's family, church, and Christian friends play an important role in the decision-making process of dating and marriage. This doesn't mean that they should cast a vote. But their opinions matter.

If the parents highly object to a marriage, even if the parents aren't Christians, then their opinions should be seriously considered. If Christian friends and the church body as a whole don't approve of someone, then it may be foolish to go against their better judgment. True, sometimes these groups are carnal and unwise, and such must be factored in, but one must be careful not to write off what so many people are saying regarding such an important issue. Obviously, the couple will make the final decision. They shouldn't be bullied into, or out of, marriage. But too often believers overlook the importance of the family of faith in helping them choose a mate.

### *A Few Things to Keep in Mind*

Although we've yet to uncover pre-packed answers to all the queries couples ask, there are some things to consider.

- Do you and your family and friends agree that your dating partner is socially mature enough for marriage, growing in his or her walk with the Lord, and a person of integrity?
- Based on what Scripture says, will your potential mate as he or she is now, make a godly spouse?
- Would such a union be right before the Lord and his people?
- Is your potential mate a hard worker, grateful, and supportive?
- Are you committed to staying married until death? Do you really want to live with this person for 50 years?
- If the woman gets pregnant on the wedding night, are you two ready to be parents?

With all of these questions answered in the affirmative, marriage still involves risk. Marriage requires faith.

Neither the short nor the long-term approach sparkles with perfection. But the good thing is, we don't have to make those decisions by ourselves. Biblical counseling can be of great value for the questions couples have. Yes, we will have to make the final decision to marry this person or not. But we can glean wisdom from God's word and his people.

The duration of the dating period depends upon each couple's situation. There is no hard and fast rule that I can find. But whichever path a couple takes, they should be walking by faith, acting as best they can in the spirit of love toward each other, and listening closely to a Christ-centered Bible-believing church.

There are so many issues that don't have clear answers. These situations call us out of ourselves and into the hands of God. In short, they call us to relinquish our own sinful desire to control matters and to trust God with them. Our own unknowing in the matter of when and whom to marry are opportunities to kneel humbly before the cross of a holy God and confess our need for his mercy and wisdom.

## CHAPTER 6. THE FRETTING CEASES

I've experienced many ups-and-downs in my recovery, as my journal entries show. There have been a few times when I felt I was over Barbara, and then I'd have a set back, feeling overwhelming pain again.

It's now been several years since we broke up in 2001, and I haven't heard from her since 2002. But let me give an overview of the period following my break-up, because it could help others.

Not long after the break-up, I went through a two-month battle with insomnia. It might have been related to her. At the four-month point, I went to South Korea on vacation. Barbara was living there at the time, but I never made contact with her while I was there. I did, however, take some of our pictures and leave them at a place she thought was special. It was both painful and healing for me.

At another particular point, around six months after our break-up, I wept for her as though we'd just broken up the day before. But that wasn't a common experience for me. As I was honest with the Lord and my friends about my struggles, the shots of pain lessened in duration and depth.

I reached a milestone somewhere around the seven-month point. It was easier not to think about her. Until then, I was outwardly getting on with my daily life but morose inside. As the months went by, the pain lingered at various levels, but the depression lifted. I still had moments of gloom, but the depression was less frequent. I didn't forget about her entirely (which was never my goal anyhow), but I was finally able to let the pain, the nagging questions, and good memories sink into my past. It was a great place to finally reach, by God's grace of course.

I did write Barbara a few times to get more closure at the nine-month mark of our break-up. At first our correspondence was good. It was helping me process what had happened. It also gave me a chance to confront her with the hurtful way I felt she'd handled things. To keep me in check, I had a friend read over my e-mails before I sent them. Barbara wrote back and explained some things to me. But her explanations were never enough.

The one thing that I really wanted was for her to apologize for the way she'd hurt me, although I'm not sure I clearly articulated it at the time. So, I kept writing her, wanting more and more of an explanation. I should have limited myself to one e-mail, tactfully explaining my frustration and pain (or perhaps never sent one at all). Our continued correspondence put greater tension between us, hurting me (and possibly her) more. Unfortunately, I wrote again and told her what a terrible person she was. My e-mail spewed deadly venom. (Eventually, I apologized via e-mail for my vicious attack and that was another recovery time.)

At the eleven-month point, I went on the balcony of my house in Asia and burned all of the pictures, notes, and other reminders that I'd tucked away in a box the night we broke up. There were more than 100 pictures. Burning them was a freeing time, as I listened to Roxette sing "Must Have Been Love" and watched our memories further pollute the hazy air of my assigned country.

Nineteen or so months after our break-up, I ran into Barbara at a conference in the U.S. We both knew the other was going to be there, so that helped prepare us. But it still resurfaced some pain for me, as though we'd just broken up. Several weeks later, I wrote

to inquire if she was open to getting back together. The answer was, as you might have guessed, no. (I suppose I should have taken my own advice about making a clean break.)

Now, several years later, I can testify that the Lord has brought about much healing. I'm not predicting that everyone will move along at my pace. Maybe some will heal quicker, maybe others will take much longer. I'm simply testifying to God's goodness in healing me; I'm also acknowledging that it was a long road to walk.

As far as the pain I went through, I don't know that I want to talk in terms of silver linings around clouds, but I do possess joy again. Healing was hard to envision early after the break-up. But healing has come and I'm glad now that I didn't marry her. It appears that while I was trying to find God, he found me. Without his initial grace I never would have been groping around after him in the first place.

But what about my present situation? Have I found someone else, or do I remain single?

About a year and a half after breaking up with Barbara, I met a Christian lady named Denice through an Internet dating service. We dated for about ten months, and then married in 2003.

Denice is my love. *Beauty* is too weak a word to describe her. Her flowing hair highlights her femininity. Her smile brightens my weary soul when I drag in from a long day at work. Her diligence puts the Proverbs 31 lady to shame. Denice works as hard as anyone I've ever known, and she expends much of her energy serving others. She speaks gently, but always tells the truth. I love her devotion for the Lord Jesus Christ and her integrity.

She's not only smart, especially when it comes to trivia and major events in history, but she's wise. I may not always act like I care for her opinion or advice on a given matter, but I treasure it. She sees issues with more balance than I usually do.

Her heart beats passionately for missions, which attracts me like an ant to ice cream. Materialism hasn't been able to reach its claws around her throat. She's thrifty and enjoys giving generously to our church and to people in need.

Like a loyal wife, she appreciates me for who I am. She knows I have more rotten spots than a banana forgotten in the back of the refrigerator, but she loves me anyway. She says I'm her hero, that I help her deal with life's bruises. I draw strength from her and she draws strength from me. And I hope that makes God smile. We know he's behind our relationship and we try not to lose him in our schedules. But sometimes we do, yet he keeps on loving us. And that makes me smile.

I could never have imagined that just over two years after Barbara broke up with me, I'd be marrying someone who's a better fit. (By the way, *better fit* doesn't mean *perfect fit*. We also disagree sometimes, but we're committed to work through them).

Not every story in life has a happy ending, but mine certainly did. The fact that I'm married now doesn't eradicate the pain of the break-up I experienced with Barbara. Although the pain no longer surfaces when I think of our break-up, it was a long, painful trial. The Lord gave me a great wife, and I wouldn't trade her for anyone. God does work in odd ways, doesn't he?

If your pain has yet to subside, I encourage you to keep following Jesus. I know that's tough, but you'll never be sorry for obeying his Scripture. "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (Ps 42:5).

**ENDNOTE** (See chapter 3, page 17, under heading "Shame"):

[1] While I quote Dan Allender several times throughout *A Shattered Heart*, I have some qualms about how closely tied he may be to some people in the more moderate to liberal side of the "Emergent Church Movement." I don't know all of where Allender stands theologically on some Emergent Church Movement issues, but I'm keeping these quotes in my book not necessarily because I would agree with all of his theology, but because of his insight into certain issues. I would also add the same sort of caution and declaration about my quotation of Henri Nouwen and his Catholic theology.

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