

Sexual Abuse Survivors Victorious:
P's Story

(Printed in the book, *The Complete Handbook For Recovery Ministry in the Church* by Bill Morris.)

My story is similar to an incident recorded in the book *The Pilgrim's Progress*. John Bunyan symbolically portrays through Christian, the main character, the religious struggles and experiences of a person on his way to the Celestial City. When Christian comes to the Wicket Gate and goes through it, it is a picture of salvation. As he continues this journey, he is carrying a burden on his back. This burden stays with him until he reaches the cross, where it is loosed from his shoulders.

I had accepted Christ as my personal Savior when I was in the fifth grade, but I, too, had been carrying a heavy sack of burdens on my shoulders for twenty-two years. My burden bag was filled with the sudden death of my father when I was ten years old. This left me with feelings of abandonment and of disappointment with God that He did not answer my prayers and heal my dad. I was hurt that I never was able to go to the hospital to see him. Dad never told me good-bye or said anything, and in just ten days he was gone.

About a year and half later, my room remarried, and my stepfather sexually abused me. This abuse continued through my junior-high-school years. Added to my burden bag were the stripping away of my dignity, trust, and self-esteem; the robbing of my sexuality so that I would struggle with relationships and intimacy; the crushing of my spirit so severely that I could no longer feel and no longer wanted to live; the creating of a deep sense of insecurity and an overwhelming feeling of helplessness, hopelessness, and guilt.

My mother also added to my burden bag. She did not come from a loving family; and therefore, she transferred her dysfunctions to her children. I longed for a mom who would express love to me—one who would hold me in her arms, one who would kiss me and say, "I love you." My soul yearned for that type of mother-daughter relationship, yet it would never be. My mom started going out to bars, which eventually led to her sleeping with men and not coming home until the next morning. She lived with a married man for approximately three years and then married him after he divorced his first wife. That tore me up inside. I was ashamed of my mother and was embarrassed to have friends come over to my house. Since I was the oldest of five children, I'd worry that something would happen to her when she would stay out all night and that I'd be left all alone, not knowing what to do. My second stepfather beat my mother. I can remember being awakened late at night by the yelling, fighting, and screaming, "Call the cops; he's killing me!" I was so scared. All I could do was lie in my bed and cry. Added to my burden bag was a load of weights. I'll just mention a few: losing my childhood, never to regain it; taking on the role of the responsible child; falling into the performance trap; and having a tremendous fear of rejection.

Hiding my true self and wearing a mask became an everyday ritual. On the outside, everything seemed to be great. People thought I was "up" all the time and on top of the world, but inside, my spirit was crying out for help. The fires of hate, bitterness, revenge, and anger were blazing in the core of my soul. Not only was this anger directed against the people who had hurt me, but it was also directed toward God. I was angry with God because if He had not taken' my father, none of these other things would have happened. I felt as if God really didn't love me. Here I was--a graduate of a Christian high school, a graduate of a Christian college, and a teacher in a Christian school--and had it not been for the reality of hell, I would not have wanted to be a Christian. I wanted to get even; and I vowed that no matter how long it took, I was going to get even.

Needless to say, my Christian life was a mess. Because of growing up in such a dysfunctional home, I easily fell prey to churches, schools, relationships, etc., that were controlling, authoritarian, legalistic, perfectionist. I learned to be a human doing rather than a human being. My worth to people, the church, and God was based upon my performance--keeping a list of do's and don'ts. Guilt was my motivator rather than love. I tried getting my life right with God. I'd give up this and do that. I'd try to keep the law. I'd read my Bible, memorize Scripture (KJV of course), go out witnessing, etc. The harder I tried, the emptier I felt. I was on a spiritual roller coaster--up and down, up and down--but most of the time down. The abundant life was the proverbial carrot on a stick always just out of my reach. Life was not living; it was existing, tolerating, and enduring.

Bunyan's Christian had his burden loosed from his shoulders when he reached the cross, which was a picture of his receiving the assurance of his salvation. My cross experience was an inner healing that took place in April of 1987. After Dr. Tony Dale spoke in our Sunday morning service, his wife, Felicity, got up and said, "The Lord has revealed to me that there is someone here that was sexually abused when she was

ten or eleven, and the Lord wants to heal you of that." I made an appointment to talk with Felicity. As she prayed for me, I could visualize myself back during the times of hurt. And for the first time in my life, I could see that Christ was there all the time. He didn't abandon me or reject me. He was there loving me and holding me as a little child, and I fell in love with my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. At that moment He took my burden bag from my shoulders, opened it up, reached inside, and touched all the hurts and pains of the past with His healing nail-pierced hands.

I thought that my inner healing experience emptied my burden bag and that my past was instantly healed. Later the realization hit me that healing is a process, and my inner healing was the beginning of my recovery journey. It is like coming out of a coma, and then there is all the therapy.

God graciously opened the door for me to attend a therapy group for incest survivors and later a support group, Sexual Abuse Survivors Victorious (SASV), at the Mount Paran Church of God. My group provided a shelter for me, -a wounded child of God, to be nurtured in love. They gave me space and time to heal. They provided a safe place where it's okay to be me, it's okay to be human, it's okay to fail. This has given me the courage and strength to remove my mask slowly inch by inch. SASV has demonstrated freedom in Christ, which is setting me free from the bondage of legalism. Their living in the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law is bringing me life instead of death. God is using Mount Paran to paint on the canvas of my mind the true picture of Himself, a loving, caring, compassionate Father, so that I would have something to compare and replace the false portrait of God that life has painted.

God used SASV to ignite within my breast a spark of encouragement and the hope of change. I'm learning to step out of denial and into reality, out of the lies and into the truth, which is setting me free. The dignity, trust, and self-esteem that were stripped away are gradually being rebuilt. Having a place to let my "secrets" out is causing them to lose their power and hold over me. The emphasis is one of acceptance, love, and honesty. Through sharing our pain, by being transparent, by exposing our wounds, through our stripes, healing is taking place. God has used Mount Paran to build a door through my thick walls, so that He and others could reach in and touch my life, and I'm eternally grateful.