

A God of Second Chances

by
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It had been eight weeks since I had been inside the Creekwood Church building when the unexpected happened. The Rosemont Church and the Creekwood Church were going to have a *joint meeting*. This had to be a unique event in the history of humankind. How often did two churches resulting from a split get back together after just eight weeks. After all, the split had not been cordial. Several weeks of bitter disagreements and long doctrinal discussions had failed to bring the congregation together. The split was inevitable. But now, after only two months of division, the two churches had worked out a joint meeting. Needless to say, I was quite excited about what would happen at that Sunday night meeting. However, my excitement would have reached explosive levels had I known all of what would happen.

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"I just don't understand it," Sally was saying to my mother, "Bill has been nothing but trouble for you since you married him. Now you find out that he's been messing around with that whore at work. How could you take him back?"

"I have my reasons," was mother's only response. Sally was my mother's first cousin, but she had always been like a sister. I knew mother was holding back in order to prevent a shouting match from occurring in front of her eight-year-old son. However, Sally, who enjoyed 'loud discussions,' would not accept the answer.

"Then tell me, Elaine. What are your reasons?" She was standing firm with her arms crossed. Her mouth was twisted in such a way that the seam along her lips appeared to be in the shape of an X.

Mother answered in the calm, kindly way that had become her trademark among friends and family. "If I tell you, you will just get mad and start yelling at me."

"Oh my God, this isn't about forgiveness and God and all that crap, is it?" Sally's voice was already becoming elevated.

"Well, yes it is! I don't expect you to understand. We've discussed it many times before, and you never understand. But if I must say it again, I will. I need to give Bill a second chance."

"Why? Why? WHY?" Sally's face was turning red. "He's caused you so much pain!"

"Because God is a God of second chances."

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It was Sunday night. I was the first member of the Rosemont Church to arrive at the Creekwood building. The Creekwood members were already in the church auditorium awaiting their estranged brethren. Apparently they had come early to make preparations for the night's event. A few makeshift bleachers had been set up in the foyer to handle what was expected to be a large crowd. After all, with an event like this, there would be many people from other churches and even the press in attendance. As I stood in the foyer, I glanced through the door of the church library. Betty Sturgeon was standing there looking at me. I stepped hurriedly into the library to greet her, but was met by a chill. Betty Sturgeon had been *dead for over two years*. How could she be here, standing right in front of me? Instead of greeting her, all I could say was, "I know who you are. Where are you?"

A smile lightened up her face as she replied. "Heaven."

I was so overwhelmed with this vision or whatever it was, I didn't know what to say. I finally managed to ask, "Are you having a good time?"

"Yes."

"Are there other people there besides people in our denomination?"

"Yes." Her face showed a hint of surprise amidst the obvious pleasure.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for some ants to eat and some water to drink. I might even find a cockroach. I'm trying to lose weight." Her facial expression was oddly matter-of-fact for such a strange response. I thought she had been joking. But then I remembered that John the Baptist had eaten locust and honey.

Just as I was about to respond, she turned and walked toward the children's book section. It was then I saw yet another strange sight. A small red convertible was sitting on what looked like railroad tracks. The tracks extended *through* the building walls. A thin, yet muscular man was sitting in the car. Betty entered the car and sat next to him. I knew they were about to leave, but only one question came to mind. "You don't feel pain, do you?"

Betty responded, "No. But he said I would look better." The 'he' referred to the

man she was sitting next to; however, I still did not understand the statement. Just as I was about to question her further, the car drove off through the wall.

I turned to exit the library and saw Richard Smith, an old school chum, standing behind me. He had obviously seen Betty just as I had. Before I could say anything, I heard someone mumbling behind Richard. I leaned to my right to look around him. It was Jimmy Drake, a member of the Creekwood Church. He had a screwdriver in his hand working on a bookcase. As I stepped closer, I could hear what he was saying. He was complaining bitterly about the people who had left Creekwood to start the Rosemont Church. The jerking motion of the hand with the screwdriver reinforced the tone of his voice.

I stepped up to Jimmy, looked him directly in the eye, and said, "I still don't fully understand why we split. I talked to the preacher and found nothing unusual in his beliefs. However, the elders obviously thought otherwise."

A loud noise diverted my attention to the foyer. A large crowd was now entering the building. Many faces I recognized as Rosemont members. Other faces I did not recognize. When I saw Fred Nicely, Rosemont's preacher, enter the building, I remembered my visit with Betty Sturgeon. I wondered if I should tell him about it. Would he even believe it, or would he think I was crazy.

Before I had a chance to consider it further, I noticed a strange man sitting in the bleachers surrounded by several other people. He had the appearance of a hobo, with a tattered coat and hat and dirty face and hands. I did not recognize him. I wondered why someone dressed as he was would want to attend this historic meeting. When I approached him, he began to speak.

"It's about time."

"Time for what? My death?" I queried. I did not know why I asked that question. The words just seemed to fall out of my mouth.

The hobo did not respond. He just stared at me, a blank look on his face. It was then I realized that no one else was aware of him. There were two women on either side of him talking to each other. Not only were they not aware of him, they apparently could not even see him. I continued to stare at the hobo's blank face. Somehow it was communicating something to me. Something was about to happen. I didn't know what. All I could do was wait and see.

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"I'll never talk to him again," I was sobbing to my mother. "I thought he was my friend, but he's not. Why did he do this to me?" Tears were running down my trembling face as I uttered these words. Dennis Blake, my supposed best friend, had hit me on the head with a rock while walking home from school.

"Now, now," soothed my mother, "I'm sure there is an explanation. Dennis probably didn't mean to hurt you."

"Yes he did. He threw a lot of rocks at me. I tried to get him to stop, but he wouldn't listen. He had this devilish look on his face. I could almost see horns growing out of his head."

"Well, if he's sorry for what he did, you should forgive him," mother said in her calm, kindly manner.

"I can't do that. Not after what he did to me!" I screamed.

"Please try to be calm, Steve. You'll get over it. Nine-year-olds always do. It seems bad now, but you'll be friends again with Dennis."

I just stared at her incredulously. Apparently she did not totally understand the maliciousness of Dennis' attack. How could she possibly expect me to forgive him.

Mother spoke without waiting for a response. "Dennis' mother is bringing him to our house. He will be apologizing to you. Please consider forgiving him."

"No! No! Please don't let him come here. I don't want to see Dennis, and I don't want to forgive him. Pleeeeease!" I was pleading with every ounce of my breath.

"Now come on, Steve. If I can forgive your father for his transgressions, surely you can forgive Dennis." Her voice was still calm, but more persistent.

"Why? WHY? Just give me one good reason." But I knew what her answer would be while I was speaking.

"Because God is a God of second chances."

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It happened in the blink of an eye. One moment I was staring at the hobo in the bleachers and the next I was on a sled at the apex of a mountain. The side of the mountain before me sloped off at a forty-five degree angle for several hundred feet.

Richard Smith was on the sled next to me. I had no idea what was going on, but I was beginning to suspect I was dead and that this was some sort of final test.

I turned to look at Richard and spoke as calmly as I could, "We shouldn't be afraid. If we are dead, we can't be injur ..." The sled tilted forward, and we began our race downward, ever gaining speed. I could feel the air distorting the skin on my face. My testicles began to ache as they sought protection inside my body, just as they always did when riding a large roller coaster as a kid. Somehow, throughout this ordeal, I was able to remain calm and confident that all would be okay. Richard did the same.

And indeed, all was okay. Just before hitting a craggy precipice, I found myself in a large unfinished warehouse. Richard was no longer with me. There were many metal beams running to and fro along the ceiling. The building had no walls, only support beams. Outside, the sun was just above the western horizon and was blood red. Electrical lights hanging from the metal ceiling beams illuminated the interior of the warehouse. Workmen were all about trying to complete the construction of the building. I could hear them communicating via walkie-talkies. As I wandered about the building, I came across a carpenter nailing some boards together. He looked vaguely familiar. As I circled to view his face, I realized it was Jeezs, a retired carpenter from the company at which I worked. He was telling some of the other workmen that he needed some additional tools to complete his work. They went off to get them. As I stood motionless, staring at Jeezs, he raised up and looked me right in the eye for what seemed like a minute. Finally, he said, "It is time."

Jeezs walked a few yards away and hopped on an electric golf cart. He turned the key and drove off toward one side of the warehouse. I began running after him, trying to stop him so I could ask where I was and what was going on. As I reached the edge of the floor where eventually a wall would be, I realized I could not catch him. The golf cart was already far away and beginning to cross a small bridge that spanned a creek. Suddenly, a section of the bridge broke, and the golf cart tumbled downward. Just as the last sliver of sun blinked out on the horizon, I heard the cart plunge into the water. Several of the workmen that were outside also heard the splash, but none seemed concerned. Neither did anyone go to help.

I did not know what to do. I tried to remain calm, but I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. I turned and walked back inside the building. I noticed that near the center of the warehouse there were a number of men huddled together. They were all laughing jovially. As I approached, the crowd began to spread out as though the main event was over, and it was time to mingle. Through the thinning crowd, I saw the man who had been the center of attention. It was *Jeezs!* When I got within earshot, I heard him saying, "I have received all that I asked for."

Somehow, I knew that Jeezs was dead. Just like I knew I was dead.

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"How could she do this to me? She promised to be faithful, but now I find out she's been messing around with some bozo down the street. Well, I'll tell you one thing. She won't get a dime from me!" I was bending my mother's ear just like I had so many times in the past when something was troubling me.

"My dear Steve. Please don't get in a lather. You need to calm down and discuss this rationally." Mother's voice was calm and kind.

"How can I rationally discuss something so irrational?"

"Now come on. You know that Sabrina still loves you. You need to let her know you still love her."

"I can't. I just can't! She really hurt me." I could feel anger replacing my pain.

"Yes you can. I forgave your father when he hurt me the same way. Can't you do the same for Sabrina? After all, she has asked for your forgiveness."

"I know. But I just can't do it. Why should I forgive her?"

Mother looked at me gently, with that loving face that she always had when she was about to answer the question that she had answered so many times before. She did not have to speak it.

I said, "I know. Because God is a God of second chances."

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Suddenly, I was back in the Creekwood Church foyer. Nothing had changed. People were still entering the building to participate in the historic event. The hobo was still on the bleachers. Somehow, it all made sense now. I knew what was expected of me.

"It's time to go," said the hobo.

"I am ready to go, but if you like, I am also willing to stay behind and spread the word of what I have seen."

"There are many choices. It is your decision."

I chose to stay behind. In fact, I presented my message to the joint meeting of the Creekwood and Rosemont churches. Some believed. Some thought I was crazy. Some didn't know what to think. I have since presented my message to many people, each time with the same reactions. But now I know my mother was right. God *is* a God of second chances.

THE END