

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

A True Story of God's Restoration and Healing

by Jamie Buckingham



All men do not become involved with other women to fill a vacuum in their lives. But everyone has to eventually face the fact that no horizontal relationship can satisfy their vertical longing. This is the true story of how God rescued me from my awful sins and how the Holy Spirit began to move with power in my life.

One of my closest friends is the former pastor of a large denominational church. A few months ago he called on the phone. He was being forced to leave his church. For some time he had been involved with another woman in an extra-marital relationship. It had been discovered and his kingdom had fallen around him.

Such disclosure should not shock or dismay Christians, for ministers are no less susceptible to the surging drives of sex and passion than anyone else. If anything, they are more susceptible. They are exposed to every kind of emotional and spiritual sickness. Only those who are spiritually empty seek their help. Like medical doctors who are daily exposed to deadly germs of disease, if they are not constantly on guard, constantly inoculated, under constant control of the Holy Spirit, they fall. Satan always seems to aim his biggest guns at the man on the point in spiritual warfare. Thus it should never come as a shock that shepherds are usually the first ones to bleed when the wolf comes after the sheep.

After a great deal of weeping and praying (mostly over the shame of being caught; for true repentance does not come easily, nor rapidly), my friend finally confessed to his wife, to his children and to a few select leaders in the church. There was a genuine attempt on the part of the men to work things out, to keep it quiet and bring healing to their shepherd. But the rumor spread rapidly. In a horrible moment of disclosure, he stood in the pulpit one Sunday morning and confessed to the entire congregation. Then in shame and confusion, he fled the city. He and his family still smelled the fires of hell when he arrived at our little city of refuge in Florida.

Some of my friends, hearing he was in town, called and said, "Don't touch him. He'll drag you down with him." But that is one of the risks a man runs when he reaches out to help. It is the risk a life-guard has to face when he goes after a drowning man, that he, too, may be pulled beneath the waters. Fortunately, I wasn't out there alone. The other ministers in our church were standing with me — counseling, loving, accepting, correcting. It was a perfect example of the Body of Christ reaching out to an injured member, surrounding him with love in an attempt to support and care while the Holy Spirit brought healing.

Any man who commits adultery also lies. Like alcoholism, the two sins always exist side by side. Healing — and forgiveness — must be administered bit by bit, with love and yet with sternness.

So I struggled with my friend, knowing at times he was lying to me, yet understanding. For to make full disclosure of all the darkness in his heart would expose him to the full light of healing — a light which he was not yet prepared to receive. It was exhausting, yet we sensed always that if he could be plucked as a brand from the burning, he would emerge as a giant in the Kingdom — for black sheep always make the most understanding shepherds.

Gradually we began seeing evidence of his restoration. However, I knew we were in for intense, fierce battles as he and his wife fought their way to the surface of their deception where they could breathe the fresh air of truth spoken in love.

I sat in the beautiful conference room of that large Baptist church in South Carolina, surrounded by a group of 20 deacons, all with stern faces. They had tried over the last few months to convince me to resign. They knew something was wrong but until this dreadful night had found no evidence.

That night Jackie and I lay awake for long hours. I needed to talk. "Why me, Lord?" This intense time with my wounded friend had uncovered areas of spiritual scar tissue in my own life which, although healed, were still capable of being inflamed. "Why bring me these fallen shepherds?"

Jackie let me talk, long into the night, for she knew I was hurting. Not for myself but for my friend. Lying on my back beside her, hands clasped under my head, I stared up into the darkness of our bedroom. "Surely there is some way a man can come to wholeness without having to be exposed to the purging fire of hell."

"All fire is not from hell," Jackie said softly. "Remember our God is a consuming fire. Sometimes it is He who purges His children. Have you forgotten?"

But, is there not some other way for the Holy Spirit to take control of a person's life without forcing him through such

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LIVING THROUGH THE FIRE

by MRS. JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

I tried to hide everything. You just don't come out and tell people your husband is having an affair . . .

After 27 years of marriage — and 5 years of dating and engagement before that — I'm still in love with Jamie. In fact, more today than ever. I still enjoy just holding his hand.

But, our past has certainly been a stormy one. It's not so difficult to talk about it now . . . especially if it can help someone else. But, the only reason I can talk about it at all is because we have experienced healing and wholeness in Jesus Christ.

Fifteen years ago, it was different. I tried to hide everything. You just don't come out and tell people your husband is having an affair, especially if he's the pastor of the church. Many times I felt like I was carrying this load all alone. I felt humiliated, wounded, rejected . . . and I didn't know who I could turn to.

I remember even as word began to leak out — other people started seeing things on their own — and they would come and try to tell me. But, I refused to acknowledge Jamie's sin to anyone. I knew in my heart it was so, but I wasn't about to allow others to throw stones at him.

For the most part, he was good to me, a good father and a good provider. It was just that he was being unfaithful to me, his wife, and to our commitment with each other and God.

I have always said that it is easy to forgive someone when you love them. That is the only reason I could keep on forgiving and forgiving.

As Jamie says it, "Forgiveness is not something you do. It is something you are." It is a state of being. It is not words that come out of my mouth saying, "I forgive you." It is a way a person lives. It is not putting off retaliation to a better time. It is wiping the slate clean. It's like the difference between a self-cleaning and a continuous-cleaning oven. Forgiveness is continual cleaning. To me the central theme of Jesus Christ is forgiveness. It is the purpose of the cross . . . Christ hanging upon it to forgive us of all our sins.

I guess I was always questioning Jamie's salvation. I didn't understand how he could be involved with someone other than his wife and still have a relationship with God. Then, in 1968, Jamie and I both had an experience with the Holy Spirit. That did not settle our problems. It didn't make us both sinless. But we were different. Now there was a new power working inside us — a desire to be holy as God is holy. Gradually that moved us toward truth. Truth with each other. Truth with God.

Jamie began sharing his fears. His desires — both those moral and immoral. I was free to tell him where and how I hurt — not just lash back at him in anger. We were both different. Jesus had become Lord of our lives.

The problems did not disappear overnight, but remained as "echos". Occasionally the former relationships reappear in our lives, but now we face them together.

Healing doesn't happen over night. But it always starts with truthfulness — as painful as that may be. It takes a long time, but it gets better all the time. There are many happy experiences that build on top of the unhappy experiences of the past. I make it a policy to focus on the good things over the past 15 years instead of the bad memories 20 years ago.

But, in all of this, we never considered separation or divorce. It was just never an option. Now in looking back, I'm thankful that no one came along and counseled me to get a divorce. If I were being abused physically, separation or divorce might have been necessary for my protection. But, except for that, I see the whole message of the cross calling us to stay in the marriage relationship — and dying to self there. How else is there going to be new life spring up in your mate, unless you are willing to "die". I came to the place in my walk with the Lord that I could honestly say to Jamie: "I love you and I'm going to stay with you and be your wife as I promised I would from the beginning." I know I could have left. I had every legal and moral right to do so. But, I chose to stay. I believed with all my heart that as long as I stayed obedient to God, that He would take care of Jamie. (The lilly perfumes the hand that crushes it.)

I'm convinced that is one of the reasons God has blessed us. We made it through the fire, with God's help. We have beautiful children, a happy family, a beautiful home and an income that exceeds our needs. It is God's blessing on our lives.

Jamie has a driving desire — a desire I believe God has given him — to see things restored. To see even those wrong relationships brought to holiness and purity. And I am standing with him.

Together, I am convinced, we'll not stumble anymore.

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agony? I moaned out loud, feeling the tears gathering in my eyes.

"All people are not the same," Jackie said, her voice still soothingly soft. "Some grow up good. Think of Corrie ten Boom. She accepted the Lord at the age of five and never turned from Him — not a day of her life."

"But even she had to go through the horror of a Nazi concentration camp," I countered.

"True," Jackie answered. "But her struggles were external — with forces from the outside. Not with internal forces like you — and your friends — have had to face. You have to fight your battles on a different level. Yet the final conclusion is always the same — God brings you to that place in life where you have no choice but to turn loose."

Affliction, chastisement, hardship, suffering — all are God's means to bring us to the place of obedience, to bring us to the place of the Spirit-controlled life. It is in these places, where the awful sins of life threaten to consume us, that we learn God can be trusted.

"There was a time," Jackie said gently, reaching over and touching my shoulder in the darkness, "when you thought your world had come to an end. Remember?"

This time the tears overflowed. I remembered. I would never forget. I recalled my own fiery pits, when the flames were so hot I thought surely I would be consumed. I wished that on no man. Yet that day was the finest day in my life. For it was that day I turned loose. I relinquished control. I look back to that day when in total and utter desperation I said to God, "Take me. I am worthless." It was the day when the Holy Spirit began to move in greatest power in my life.

The events, the sensations, the feelings of my own pain are forever etched on my mind. How foolish I had been. Fresh out of seminary. Flushed with the knowledge I was a success in the ministerial profession. Pastor of one of the largest churches in the state. Yet it had all fallen around me. As I thought back, I knew what had taken place was inevitable, for something always moves into a vacuum.

All men (indeed, most men) do not turn to other women. Some fill the vacuum

with their work. They build great cathedrals, they are nominated to important positions, they are recognized by the media or they lose themselves in legitimate ministry to the poor, the underprivileged, to those in foreign lands. They may join a community or submit themselves to some disciple-maker. Yet even these, eventually, have to examine themselves and face the fact they are created empty. No horizontal relationship will ever satisfy that vertical longing. And no experience — not a salvation experience, nor even the baptism of the Holy Spirit — will satisfy that hunger. It can come only when one is filled with — and controlled by — the Holy Spirit. And that is not an experience — it is a daily process.

Etched forever in my memory are the events that took place the night of exposure — October 1965. I sat in the beautiful conference room of that large Baptist church in South Carolina, surrounded by a group of 20 deacons, all with stern faces. They had tried over the last few months to convince me to resign. They knew something was wrong but until this dreadful night had found no evidence. As the months of suspicion continued, I hung on. To leave would mean admission of guilt. Worse, it would mean leaving behind a relationship in which I reveled with the same degree of intensity an alcoholic does with his bottle.

Twice before I had stood before the church at the monthly business meeting and gone through a "Vote of Confidence." Twice I had bluffed my way through. But this time there was concrete evidence. One of the deacons had discovered a note. I had been laid bare. My insides were churning. Desperately I tried to hold the facade of false confidence.

They asked me to leave the meeting and wait outside as they discussed the matter. Instead of at least a pretense at a sedate exit, I bolted. Fled. I stumbled into the darkened sanctuary and knelt at the front, weeping in fear and confusion. Back in the conference room the men were deciding my fate. In the next room was a small office. I called Jackie. "Come get me. I can't take it anymore." I hung up and in a state of near choke, shame and faced with the awfulness of it all, I wandered down a flight of stairs lit dimly by only the quiet redness of an exit light.

She found me, the shepherd of the flock, crouched in a fetal position in a basement hallway, huddled against the landing of the stairs. "It would be better for you, for the children, for this church if I were dead," I sobbed.

She comforted. She soothed. She never asked for details. There was no need. She led me by the hand through the dark hallways of the house of God to our car parked under the lighted window of the conference room. I did not realize it at

the time, but those men were God's servants — sent by the Holy Spirit to perform the unpleasant task of shaking a man of God until only the unshakable remained.

As with Moses, who was discovered after having killed the Egyptian and driven into the desert, so I was discovered. I knew it would happen, eventually. There is no way that sin will not eventually come to the surface, especially when it involves a man of God. If Moses could not escape the exposure of his sin, if David could not escape his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and had to stand exposed before history, why should I expect special favors? Thus exposure comes, not for the sake of punishment, but for the sake of salvation. Fortunate is the man who is exposed early in life. Pity the man who is smart enough to hide his sin until the judgment.

That night I walked into the front yard of our beautiful parsonage. Standing

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under the autumn sky, I looked up into the heavens and screamed: "Take me! Take me now! Quickly!" In a desperate move, I grabbed my shirt and ripped it open at the chest, tearing the buttons and hem as I exposed my bare chest to the heavens, waiting for the inevitable flash of lightning which I knew would come and split me asunder, carrying me into the hell where I belonged.

But there was no flash of lightning, for the purging fire had already begun to burn. And besides, God does not punish sin the way we punish it. As ranchers often burn off a pasture to kill the weeds so the new grass can sprout, so the consuming fire of God burns away the dross without consuming the sinner.

There was more to follow, of course. For one thing, we had to leave. There was the desperate reaching out for friends, only to find they had all deserted. I was like a leper. Unclean. I wrote letters — more than 90 of them — to pastors and denominational friends. Only one man dared respond and that was with a curt, "I received your letter and shall be praying for you."

Perhaps God was working here too; comfort or encouragement at that agonizing time could have moved me even deeper into a continuing self-deceiving

sense of feeling justified.

And anyway, what else could anyone say?

We returned to my home state of Florida, to a small but rapidly growing church — the only opportunity that was open. But as Vance Havner once remarked, it doesn't do any good to change labels on an empty bottle. Nothing inside me had changed. I was still the magnificent manipulator, the master of control, the defender of my position. I was still pushing people around. I was far more politician than a man of God. The Holy Spirit was not controlling my life.

Soon echoes from the past began drifting down to Florida — rumors of adultery, of manipulation, of lying. The old undertow of fear sucked at my guts. I was about to be swept back to sea for I had not been honest with the committee which had interviewed me for the Florida position.

The crisis exploded one Sunday morning when I stepped up to the pulpit to preach. On the pulpit stand was a petition asking me to resign. It was signed by 350 people, many of whom were sitting, smiling in the congregation. A group of men had hired a private detective and checked into my past. I had no choice but once again to slink home and huddle with my wife and children while the fire of God continued its purging work.

Those events took place almost 20 years ago. I'm not the man I was then. God has molded and shaped me into — I believe — more a man of God. But, perfection still eludes me. I am still vulnerable. But most important, I am no longer satisfied with my imperfection. Nor, thank God, am I intimidated by it. I have reached the point of recognizing that God uses imperfect, immoral, dishonest people. In fact, that's all there are these days. All the holy men seem to have gone off and died. There's no one left but us sinners to carry on the ministry.

If I had my way I would never again do anything wrong. Yet, like Paul:

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.

(Romans 7:18).

Dissatisfied with imperfection, I am now determined to move toward that goal of "conforming to Christ" — knowing at the same time it will never come because of my obedience — but out of my submission to the Holy Spirit. It is that obedience that leads to the fine art of living beyond control — beyond self-will and into the comfort of the Spirit's control.

If I can convey this message to anyone else who feels there is no hope, then this will not be in vain. Yet, at the same time, as I look back over my own life, I wonder if

any truth becomes valid or personal until it is burned into our souls by the branding iron of God. I admit I do not know.

Malachi draws the picture of God sitting in front of the melting crucible under which burns the refiner's fire. The fire has been stoked to white heat and is burning, purging the dross until only the pure metal is left. Only when the refiner peers into the crucible and sees the reflection of his own face is the heat turned down and the pure metal poured into the forms which bless the world.

My old friend Seabury Oliver says the only way man — any man — ever comes to know God intimately is through trouble. Perhaps he's right. On the other hand, when I realize that most of my problems, perhaps all my problems, have been self-inflicted, I wonder if all this fire has been necessary. I suspect not. I look at others around me, those who have served God without the rebellious spirit which seems to be so much a part of my makeup, and see they seem to have passed through the fire at very low temperature and intensity. Without much pain or suffering they have come to a beautiful, simple, yet valid understanding of the deep truths of

God. Others of us must pass through the very Valley of the Shadow of Death before we can say with a certainty, "My head is anointed. My cup runneth over.

Affliction, chastisement, hardship, suffering, — all are God's means to bring us to the place of obedience, to bring us to the place of the Spirit-controlled life. It is in these places, where the awful sins of life threaten to consume us, that we learn God can be trusted.

I am learning too that there is no fear when we approach God through His Son, Jesus. God is our daddy. He loves us. He is protecting us. And even though His hand may be against our backside on occasion, it is not there to punish but to direct. His voice is constantly saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it." ❏

JAMIE BUCKINGHAM has served as an editor for *Guidepost*, *Charisma* and *Christian Herald*. He has written 10 books and co-authored 17 with such people as *Corrie Ten Boom*, *Nicky Cruz* and *Jeannie C. Riley*. He and wife Jackie live in Palm Bay, Florida.

sin · gle (sing 'gl), adj. consisting of one only.



Being single can be rough sometimes, but it can also be even more rewarding. It can also be a tremendous time for evaluating priorities, discovering what really matters to you, and for honestly approaching God...and yourself. Keith and Andrea Wells Miller have been there and their book *The Single Experience* faces the unique issues you face...with the insight and personal honesty that will help you make your single experience really count.

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