

**In Search of**

# **F O C U S**

**Abiding in Christ Amidst Distractions**

# CONTENTS

## SECTION I – A Life Out of F.O.C.U.S.

Chapter 1. A HEARTACHE .....	3 - 10
Chapter 2. A DIVIDED HEART.....	11 - 22
Chapter 3. A LIFELINE BACK.....	23 - 33

## SECTION II – Finding F.O.C.U.S.

Chapter 4. F.O.C.U.S. Defined .....	34 - 35
Chapter 5. <b>F</b> EAR of God .....	36 - 44
Chapter 6. <b>O</b> WNSHIP of The Problem.....	45 - 58
Chapter 7. <b>C</b> HRIStLIFE – Living Like Jesus Lived .....	59 - 68
Chapter 8. <b>U</b> NITY – Healing From Past Hurts .....	69 - 86
Chapter 9. <b>S</b> IMPLIFY – Knowing the Basics .....	87 - 91
EPILOGUE.....	92
FOCUS™ (A Grace-based Healing Model).....	93 - 102

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version.

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## INTRODUCTION

God's people have forsaken Him. They have replaced Him with the twin gods of Humanism (Psychology) and Consumerism (Material Prosperity). As a result, Christians today seldom experience the abundant life promised in God's word. Disillusioned believers fill our churches every Sunday.

I know because I was one of them. Although I had been saved for a long time and was well-practiced in the external accoutrements of church life, my heart still ached for an authentic relationship with God. As a trained "Christian" counselor, I dispensed psychological counsel to fellow sojourners even as we all swam in a sea of self-indulgence dressed up as "gospel". Consequently my heart became divided. I was bedeviled by doubt, defeat and fear about the future. Thankfully, I hit a God-ordained brick wall and experienced a fresh infusion of His grace.

This generation is caught in the grip of idolatry and despair. God offers us a lifeline back to a proper relationship with Him. However, we must accept it on His terms. In Search of FOCUS is a modest attempt to show us a way back to God. Like David, my heart's cry is:

*"Teach me Your way, O Lord,*

*I will walk in Your truth*

*Unite (focus) my heart*

*that I may fear Your name."* (Psalm 86:11 NKJV)

## SECTION I

### 1

#### A HEARTACHE

It was a slow moving Saturday. Then the phone rang, and time froze.

“Hello...”

“N-i-c-k,” sobbed the voice on the other end.

“Hello...Uncle is everything alright?” Long sob.

“It’s Richard.” Loud, persistent sobs.

“What, is he in the hospital again?” I asked as terror raced up my spine.

“Nooo...I wish...Nooo...I wish. He is dead.”

Time froze again.

A scream, seemingly from the center of the universe, shot through my body. It seized my vocal cords and plucked them hard. My ailing wife came careening down the stairs, with our two-year-old daughter in tow.

“W-h-a-t?” queried my wife.

“Think Nicholas. Think.” I mumbled as I grabbed my forehead and squeezed hard. I felt my way toward the nearest sofa and flopped down. The annoying sound of the “off the hook” phone jolted time back into my consciousness. It had been a season of great joys and devastating losses.

A series of providential miracles and scholarships had gotten me through graduate school debt-free. I graduated with accolades. We moved into our first home and bought a new car. I was blessed with a job even before I graduated. I got licensed as a Professional Counselor within two years after graduation. However, the choicest jewel on our crown of joy was the birth of our

daughter. She was a beautiful baby inside and out, with a full head of jet-black hair, big brown eyes, and a perennially sunny disposition. Nicole filled the house with love, laughter, and latitude. It was the best of times.

It was also the worst of times. Shortly after our baby was born, my wife was stricken with a mysterious Parkinson's-like ailment that gradually made her unable to work or walk. We went to all the experts but no one could come up with a fitting diagnosis. Within a two-year span, I lost two cousins, an aunt, two uncles and my father. My Dad's death was the most tragic.

He died relatively young. A great deal of underexploited talent was buried with him. Dad was blessed with a very keen intellect and a charming personality. He rose from deep obscurity to high prominence very early in his life. He was trained as a Pharmacist but his passion was politics. Pharmacy supported a very lavish lifestyle. He built a sprawling mansion, complete with a retinue of servants. He married an emotionally aloof beauty from another country and begat several children in quick succession. In the evening and on weekends he hobnobbed with local politicians and other business leaders. Dad wrote speeches for key politicians and helped them develop campaign strategies. In return, they patronized his business and covered up his indiscretions. It was great. However, by the late 1960s, things had begun to fall apart.

Many of the puppet regimes that had been installed by the departing colonial powers a decade earlier began to consolidate their power. Political pluralism was squashed and freedom of speech was muzzled. The strong-man one party ethos took hold in most of West Africa. Cameroon was different only in the degree of repression required to consolidate a disparate collection of tribes, cultures, and dialects into a federation. My father bet on the wrong horse and lost. Thus began his debilitating downward spiral.

I distinctly remember waking up to Dad reciting passages from virgin speeches he wrote for politicians who had stopped calling long ago. It provided an outlet for him to vent his growing frustration with his virtual imprisonment. As a member of the vanquished opposition, his freedom was severely curtailed. His passport was seized and a travel ban was imposed on him. He was under constant surveillance. His business dealings were scrupulously monitored. Major contracts with the government were terminated. Invitations to social functions stopped. Dad was relegated to working in the pharmacy (isolated in part of the downstairs portion of our home) during the day, and nursing a lonely beer in the evenings. Occasionally, one of the few friends who had not sold out to the ruling party would visit. They would drink and whisper back and forth far into the night.

The family suffered alongside the business. It was very painful to watch Dad stew in his fettered creativity. His psyche was constipated and the system denied him even the dignity of a soul-cleansing laxative. He needed a public forum to exchange ideas. Without one, he began to spew his frustration on his family. He became verbally caustic, apathetic, depressed and fat. Mother left after a few years -- a cloud of accusations, hatred, xenophobia and unrequited love for her children trailing after her. There we were -- Felicia's brood: Richard, Patience, Nicholas, Celine, Fredrick and Evelyn. We were all young, spoiled, scared, vulnerable and hurt with no one to turn to. I turned to God.

Now, Richard was dead! It was not supposed to be that way. His nickname was Shine, and shine he did. Small in stature and handsome with my mother's looks and my father's brains, Richard was everyone's favorite. He was always polite, never raising his voice to anyone. Although we had over a dozen bedrooms to choose from, he always let me share a bedroom with him. This was quite a sacrifice on his part. He was meticulously clean. I was a slob. He was

always measured and understated. I was a braggart. He ate sparingly. My motto growing up was “When all else fails, eat!” As older brothers go, he was a dream.

However, Shine was no saint. He introduced me to cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol and girls before I was a teenager. He loved girls. Unfortunately, this included several of my girlfriends over the years. He had spellbinding charm and would strike with the stealth and speed of a black mamba. I always forgave him because he was gracious to me in many other ways. Even though he was three years older than I was, he valued and respected my opinions. We went everywhere together. We attended the same exclusive boarding school. He would get me out of trouble before I even perceived that I was in it. I felt beholden to him. One day when an opportunity presented itself for me to reciprocate, I was only too glad to oblige.

Richard had gotten a girl pregnant. She was very beautiful. However, for a variety of reasons, she was deemed unsuitable as a mate. After the baby was born, we pooled our resources and offered her family hush money until we could face Dad. This worked for only a few months before the bottom fell out. We found out through the grapevine that she was planning to present her baby to Dad as his first grandson. We panicked and plotted our strategy. Richard, Patience, and I decided that I should claim the baby as mine. I already had a somewhat undeserved reputation for recklessness. We felt that it would be easier for Dad to swallow the pill if I took the fall. Unfortunately, Dad saw through our plot. In characteristic fashion those days, he listened, made some smart remark, then yawned and left the room. Richard was grateful and we grew even closer.

We spent many nights smoking pot and listening to Creedence Clearwater Revival and Linda Ronstadt as we made plans for the future. We both planned to travel abroad for higher education. Richard, however, felt that he had a duty to stay around until after his undergraduate

studies. Not me. I could not wait to get to the U.S.A. -- which I considered to be God's own country. I eventually left for the U.S. shortly after graduating from boarding school. Shine went on to the national University and got a Law degree. He joined a prestigious law firm as a junior partner. He did quite well for awhile before having a mysterious psychotic episode that lasted for over a year. He recovered and then left for Nigeria to reconnect with Mom. He joined another prestigious law firm established by a childhood friend. After a few years, he moved on and founded his own law firm, which he called, "Conscience Chambers." He was on his way back from court when he died in that car accident. Richard was 39 years-old and single. He left behind a son, some furniture, and a boatload of uncollected legal fees. He also left behind a devastated younger brother. The phone call with the dreadful news of Richard's death was the first domino to fall in a chain of events that would change my life.

The phone was still off the hook. I slowly got up from the sofa and shared the news with my wife. She reached over to hug me, but her weak legs gave way. We both fell on the sofa narrowly missing our toddler's head. Nicole thought that it was hilarious, thus blessing me with a moment of levity even as I twirled into the early stages of shock and grief. By 1:00 p.m. that afternoon, I was on my way to London to meet with Patience and Celine who lived there. My younger brother, Fredrick, was on death row in Nigeria, charged with treason. He had served as spokesman for the winning presidential candidate in Nigeria. A military strongman and his junta had annulled the election results and killed or imprisoned all the major players. Evelyn -- our youngest, was with Mom under very difficult circumstances.

We flew first to Cameroon, then traveled by road to Nigeria. Calabar is a picturesque seaside town in the southeastern corner of Nigeria. We were met in the outskirts of town by a caravan of family and friends. They escorted us, horns blaring, to my mother's compound.



Felicia lay supine on the bed. She was flanked by three women, sitting on the floor around her. I had not seen her in over a dozen years. She had aged a little but was still a very beautiful, middle-aged woman. I moved in close and lay beside her, placing my head on her bosom. I wept. My heart ached for succor, but none came forth. I pulled my head back slowly and locked eyes with her. A tear rolled down her beautiful face. If tears are the liquid words of the soul, then this one was a dirge. The love spigot had been turned off a long time ago as a survival mechanism. In our greatest hour of need, neither mother nor son could drink from each other's well. I stood up and took a deep breath. For a fleeting moment, I became one pulsating, broiling, giant heartache. I left her room. This time I was weeping for me. Next stop was the morgue to retrieve the body.

It was a dank, poorly lit building situated atop a hill, behind the hospital. It reeked of cheap antiseptic, overlaid with the distinct stench of death. My sisters and other family members waited outside while I went in accompanied by three other men. There were bodies everywhere. They were leaning against the wall, on stretchers, and some were on pallets on the floor. As an erstwhile medical student, dead bodies did not scare me, but this place was eerie. I had not seen Shine for awhile so I had to rely on toe tags to identify him. Besides, I had no idea how much damage the accident may have inflicted on the body. After a few minutes, I literally bumped into him – Richard Eno. The toe tag confirmed it. My brother was nude except for a piece of cloth draped on his loins. I called to the rest of the men and we wheeled the body into a holding area. This room had large open windows, which thankfully allowed copious amounts of seabreeze and sunlight into the room. I looked at my brother. His body was intact, but for a deep gash on his lower lip and an indented chest. Thankfully, the body had been properly embalmed. We proceeded to prepare it for the long journey home.

We left Calabar at noon the next day bound for home. A hearse transported the casket to the border, then transferred it to a pickup truck. I sat in the back of the truck with my arm resting on Richard's white casket. Under normal circumstances, it takes about four hours to travel from Calabar, Nigeria to Mamfe, Cameroon. This trip took 12 hours. About every fifty miles we were stopped by gun-toting "soldiers" of the regime du jour who demanded bribes. We also stopped at the border for a couple of hours where we had some property and family. We finally arrived home at about midnight. Mosquitoes had feasted on every exposed part of my body, but I did not care. Richard was home.

We buried him two days later, a few hundred yards from Dad's crypt. I held up pretty well, breaking down only at the funeral and graveside services. A week later I flew back home to the good old U.S.A. It felt really good to be back on U.S. soil. I thank God for this great nation. She may have her flaws, but she is still the only beacon of hope for mankind.

Although I was home with my wife and daughter, my heart and mind were still in Africa. I had difficulty sleeping. Too many painful and even frightening interjects would flood my mind every time I closed my eyes. I returned to work a few days later but could not focus during sessions. I had very little energy and no appetite. I wore my despair like a cloak.

I reached inside to draw from the fountain of living water that I presumed was there. I could not access it. I had wittingly and unwittingly shoved rocks into that fountain. It had become clogged. Although I had been saved and Spirit-filled for a while, I did not have an "In Him I move, In Him I live, In Him I have my being" relationship with Jesus Christ. Prayer had become a monologue to God, a mere recital of my daily wish list. Worship was something I reserved for Sunday mornings. I followed a "Read the Bible in One Year" plan but seldom meditated on the Word of God. I knew about God, but I did not know Him. In my time of despair

I turned to what I knew as the clinician son of a pharmacist. I began taking the antidepressant Effexor for focus and rest. I bought a new CD player and listened to Kenny G for “worship.” I moved to a house by the lake that I could not afford. I looked to my training in Psychology for meaning. All would fail me. My heart was divided and like so many Christians today, I did not recognize it.

## 2

**A DIVIDED HEART**

I was born again on a tepid day in March. The day began with a hangover. I was chasing after a “skirt” when Jesus interrupted me. It was, and still is, the worst sermon I have ever heard.

The visiting preacher was obviously unprepared. His voice was shrill and his presentation was disjointed. He sweated profusely as he mangled the English language. His attempts to create a sense of urgency failed miserably. Yet whatever he was saying was clobbering my poor heart. I felt like a man whose private misdeeds were being projected in real time onto giant screens in a stadium filled with strangers. My heart was pounding, my stomach was unsettled, and my throat was parched. I looked around to see if my misery had company. *Au contraire!* I was drowning in a sea of nonchalance. People were yawning, scratching, furtively gnawing on toothpicks and chewing gum. Others took turns fanning themselves and nodding off. I’d had enough. I looked for the nearest exit. I was seated on the center aisle, about four pews and an aisle removed from the right side door. I leaned over to tell the young lady who had invited me goodbye. Her eyes were closed. She seemed to be praying. I got up to leave. Wrong move!

The preacher got even more energized. Pointing directly at me he said something about being so close to hell that he could smell the smoke around me. That made me mad, and even more determined to leave. The battle lines were drawn. The congregation was now awake and spoiling for a fight. I was not going to reward this sorry preacher for his pitiful sermon. I engaged my legs and eased my way out of the pew onto the aisle. I then marched forward with every intention of veering to the right and getting “the hell” out of there. Instead Heaven came into my heart that day. It is hard to capture the complex emotions and thoughts that attended that life-changing moment. It was like being sentenced to die one instant and in the next instant

having the sentence commuted to life. Not just any life, but abundant life! My heart rejoiced and my spirit was revived. It felt really good to finally stop running. My days as a fugitive were over.

I had come close to surrender once before. It happened just before my mother left our family. Mass was over. The priest had left. I was alone in the sacristy, folding vestments and tidying up. Suddenly waves of liquid love invaded my being. I began weeping profusely, crying out “Yes Lord!” between sobs. I went home and announced to my family that I was called to the priesthood. My Dad laughed. Mother gave me an approving look but, as usual, kept her counsel to herself. Patience thought that I liked food and girls too much to make it as a priest. As for Shine — he supported and affirmed me. He even helped me draft a letter to the Franciscan Order of Priests in New York City. That was before the bottom fell out of our family.

After Felicia left, rumors abounded that she had engaged in an affair d’amour with one of the young priests in the parish. He was my favorite and was like a mentor to me. In fact, I had served as an unwitting liaison between my mother and Father Paul. I would take socks, underwear and handkerchiefs to him from her. It seemed normal to me. After all, priests regularly received gifts from parishioners. Over time, however, I became uncomfortable with the relationship. Father Paul was romantically linked with several other women in the parish. These stories bothered me. Besides, my family was disintegrating right before my eyes. Not surprisingly my passion for the priesthood grew cold and I wandered away from the faith. I flirted with Existentialism, Buddhism, and even the Bahai faith. Nothing could satisfy until that tepid day in March.

Kneeling down at that alter, all concerns about bad sermons and nonchalant saints faded in the background. That same liquid love I had experienced once before invaded my body again. This time I wept silently, my hands raised in a posture of surrender. What began in the sacristy

years before was consummated on that alter. The love of God ravished my heart, cleaning out globs of shame, sin, lack of meaning and pain. My heart was clean and singularly focused on God.

Shortly thereafter, I quit medical school. It was the beginning of my third year and I was about to embark on my clinical rotations. That decision sent my family into another tailspin. However, I had a heartfelt conviction that it was the right thing to do. I was an excellent student. Yet I always felt that medicine was what was expected of me. It was not what I wanted to do with my life. Despite vehement protestations from family, friends and even faculty, I stuck to my guns. A few months later, again to the chagrin of my family, I married the young lady who had invited me to church that March day. We barely knew each other. One sister, Celine, flew in from London to represent the family. So in quick succession I quit medical school, got married, got a job as a Laboratory Technician at the local college and settled into a life of domestic tranquility and conjugal angst. That angst would catch up with me almost two decades later. In the meantime, I was completely in love with God.

I could not wait to get up in the mornings. I went to bed with a song and woke up with a new song. I devoured my Bible and read every book on Christian living that I could lay my hands on. I ordered dozens of Christian books at a time from wholesale distributors. I would read them and then pass them along to friends. We lived only a couple of miles from my job which enabled me to hop on the bus at lunchtime to go home to worship and pray. These noon encounters with the Lord were really precious to me. I would weep and dance before Him. Invariably, waves of liquid love would wash over me. I would end up on the floor, prostrate before the Lord. Sometimes I fell asleep and woke up hours later. My co-worker, a fellow Christian, would cover for me.

I got very involved in my church and gave of myself and my substance beyond the needs of the congregation. Fasting, retreats, Bible studies, and all night prayer vigils took up a big part of my life. Christian television provided lots of spiritual food. I hung onto every word that was preached. Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, and James Robinson were my favorites. I ordered their books and tapes and received their newsletters on a regular basis. Every time they expressed a need, I sent in my offering. My relationship with the Lord was the central element in my life. I lived out of the “God-place” in me. I had dreams and visions. I would discern people’s needs and meet them even before they expressed that need to anyone. Every day with Jesus was better than the day before—and then some. One day I noticed a trend in my reading material.

Sitting on the floor reading my Bible, it dawned on me that the only books I did not give away were ones on Inner Healing and the care of souls. The rest were usually read and given away. Could this be my calling? Could this be why I was passionate about the art of medicine but did not care much for the mechanical aspects of that discipline? Is this why I was drawn to Psychiatry even though my Dad wanted me to be a surgeon? It was a “Eureka” moment. Few things in life match the excitement unleashed by the discovery of God’s purpose for one’s life.

*“For you created my innermost being.  
You knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Your works are wonderful;  
I know that full well.  
My frame was not hidden from you  
When I was made in the secret place  
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth  
Your eyes saw my unformed body.  
All the days ordained for me  
Were written in your book before one of them came to be.  
How precious to me are your thoughts [aims, goals, purposes] O God!  
Were I to count them,  
They would outnumber the grains of sand.” (Psalm 139:13-17 NIV)*

It was a wonderful discovery. Everything in my life made sense when viewed in the context of my calling. There were no plans beyond quitting medical school. I just waited for God to reveal a new direction. He is faithful and He confirms His word. That same night, my Pastor asked me to facilitate a weekend retreat for the young couples in our church. It was wonderful. Shortly thereafter, I began getting invitations from other churches to facilitate retreats or teach on topics like anger, forgiveness and shame. I was soon ministering almost every weekend.

Although the issue of my calling was settled, how that calling would be expressed was still unclear to me. Seminary, psychiatry, psychology were all options. I knew enough about psychiatry to rule it out. Seminary or psychology? I just was not sure. While contemplating these options, I “happened” upon a well-known televangelist who had also founded a University. Right in the middle of his program, he stopped and gave me a Word. Really. He said something like, “There is a young man who’s been seeking the Lord for direction. The Lord is calling you to the counseling ministry. The Lord says apply to [this University] and He will take care of the rest. Amen. Praise the Lord.” He went on with the rest of his program. I was flabbergasted! He might as well have come into my living room personally to deliver the message. I called the University and requested an application kit. Several months and many miracles later I enrolled in the Graduate Counseling Program at this University.

The campus was beautiful. The facilities were first-class. I loved the coursework and excelled right from the start. Campus life was exciting. We had noon worship service Monday through Friday in addition to many other opportunities inside and outside of the classroom to commune with God. Initially, God’s presence was palpable in my life. Unfortunately, about a year later, like Samson, “...I wist not that the Lord was departed” from me. (Judges 16:20 KJV).



The religion of psychology began to rule in my heart. It was no longer about healing sinful souls through the power of Calvary. It gradually became the curing of sick minds using human methods. Dependence on God was replaced by the wisdom of men. I was being trained to assume the role of expert. My schoolwork, and later my practice, took precedence over my walk with the Lord. Sure, we would refer to the Bible sometimes, and even pray before or during classes. However, secular atheistic psychology was driving the train. At best, the Bible was in the caboose. Diagnosis eventually replaced discernment. The promise, “With God all things are possible” was replaced by the ideology that, “Some people have holes in their souls and cannot be fixed” (so called personality disorders). The clinician gradually replaced the priest. Precious souls became merely clients or patients. The language, assumptions, opinions and worldview of psychology became elevated above my knowledge of God. Psychopharmacology (the use of pharmaceuticals to cure diseases of the soul) began to assume a central role as a cheap substitute for the spiritual fruit found in Galatians 5:22. Thus the birthright of the believer (love, joy, peace...) could be obtained through medication without sacrificing the agenda of the flesh and without renewing the mind.

In 2003, noted Psychiatrist William Glasser published a book entitled “Warning: Psychiatry can be hazardous to your mental health.” In it he challenges the widely reified view that there is a biological basis for most of the so-called mental disorders. He posits that the mental health establishment has sold out to the drug companies. Consequently, the “experts” do little or no counseling. Instead, they collect lists of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, obsessions and compulsions, label them as mental illnesses and then treat them with mind altering chemicals like Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft and Ritalin. Glasser further warns about the dangers of treating unhappiness with chemicals. He presents a sound argument that a plurality of Christians

today have more faith in unproven psychological/psychiatric assumptions than they do in the time-tested, powerful Word of God.<sup>1</sup> There was a painful self-recognition in those words.

My heart had become deeply divided. Guilt and the conviction of the Holy Spirit were routinely reframed. Sin was filtered through a biopsychosocial lens and blamed on anthropology and biology. Moral relativism ruled. Not surprisingly I began to develop a high tolerance for sinful thoughts and behaviors in my life and in the lives of people I associated with. I chose to do my internship at a Family Service Agency run by Clinical Social Workers who were militant New Agers. They were very competent clinicians who fervently believed that fundamentalist Christianity was pathological. Of course, this milieu compounded my backsliding. I was offered employment when I graduated. I stayed at this agency until several months after my trip to Africa to bury my brother Richard.

I went to work one lovely spring morning and by noon my world was crashing down around me. While I was away in Africa, one of my long-term, high-maintenance clients dropped by the office for an unscheduled session. She had been assigned to me five years prior while I was still an intern. In retrospect, she really needed salvation but within the confines of my secular practice, I could not talk to her about God. How ironic that to actually heal her (with the Word) would have been a violation of professional ethics! When she found out that I was out of town, she got very upset and accused me of propositioning her. It was simply not true.

Through a series of bizarre events, the story developed legs and eventually resulted in a formal complaint lodged against me with the Board of Professional Counselors. I was shocked to learn that a key colleague had been instrumental in the complaint for reasons that were later revealed. I was asked to resign pending an investigation. The Board was backlogged and advised me not to expect adjudication for at least 18 months, during which time I was not

permitted to work as a counselor. It was an awful time. My wife's yet-to-be diagnosed mystery illness had progressed to the point where she could no longer walk. We moved our belongings into a friend's home and took shelter wherever we could find. My days were consumed by finding whatever work would meet the essential needs of my wife and three-year-old daughter. I did manual labor, volunteered in exchange for food, and "counseled" wherever and whenever I could. I also facilitated some groups at my alma mater. My erstwhile friends and coworkers shunned me. In the end, we lost our home, our car, and my heretofore celebrated reputation as a counselor. The days were long, dreary and dark. This one day was longer, drearier and darker than the rest.

It had rained earlier that day. We needed some groceries, so I decided to walk to the store. I was about half way there when a slow moving car plowed into a pothole and drenched me in muddy water. I looked at the occupant of the car. I was shocked. It was a former classmate. I had helped this person considerably in their preparation for licensure. I expected at least some acknowledgement or a ride to the store. Instead the car kept moving and eventually faded into the distance. I just stood there soaking wet. The tears were flowing freely now, mixing with the muddy water dripping down my face. I was at a breaking point. After what seemed like an eternity, I slowly turned around and began walking toward my alma mater. The campus was about three miles away. I walked steadily and resolutely to a very special place. It was a small special collections chapel tucked away on the second floor of the library. It had beautiful stained glass windows and plush carpets.

I went there often during my first year. I would read my Bible, pray and oftentimes just prostrate myself before God. This time I did not pray. I could not pray. I just rushed in and fell on my face, sobbing like a baby.

“Forgive me, Lord. Have mercy on me. Help me, Lord!” I sobbed, chest heaving and gasping for air.

I lay there for a while, oblivious to the occasional traffic in and out of the chapel. I was in a state of suspended supplication, emptied of my own resources. I probably lay there for a few hours. Then I felt it. It was tiny ripple at first. Then it grew into a wave. It traveled up my left leg, then down my right leg and then stopped. I quit breathing—my breath baited by wretched longing for divine approbation. God is so faithful. The cascade of liquid love tumbled down my head and soon encapsulated my whole body. Oh, what sweet washing! What sweet release! Thank God for His relentless pursuit of my straying heart. I left that chapel refreshed, strengthened and hopeful again. I eventually made it to the supermarket that evening. Somewhere between aisles seven and eight, my beeper went off. It was the Assistant Dean of the Counseling Program at my alma mater. She informed me that a rapidly expanding ministry in Dallas had called her. They were looking for a licensed counselor to head up their counseling ministry. She felt very strongly that I was the man for the job. I literally sprinted home.

It took several excruciating weeks for the logistics to be worked out. I finally flew out to Dallas for the interview. I was astounded at how mild mannered and shy my prospective boss was in private. This larger-than-life super-preacher and prolific author is nothing short of electrifying behind the pulpit. The interview lasted about 15 minutes. I knew instantly that I had favor with him. It was obvious to me that he was looking less at my credentials and more at my heart. He is a great man. He has had a seminal influence in my spiritual development. His absolute conviction about God’s absolute power to heal absolutely inspired me. His love of God’s Word and his ability to stand under pressure impressed me. I still strive to emulate him in those areas.

I got the job. We moved to Dallas soon afterward. It was indeed a pit to palace experience for me. This was a dream job. It afforded me myriad of opportunities to utilize my gifts. With the favor of the Senior Pastor and the support of the Administrator, we built a world-class counseling center. We all kept very long hours and worked hard. However, we did not mind. We felt privileged to be part of what we believed to be God's A-team. Literally hundreds of people joined the church every month. God's anointing was palpable throughout the ministry. Those were historic days.

Several months after I arrived in Texas, the Board of Professional Counselors finally gave me a hearing. I was advised to retain an attorney. I declined. I was confident that God would vindicate me. I flew back to Virginia to face the Board. It took them all of 15 minutes to completely exonerate me. I left the building feeling relieved, wiser, exuberant and more than a little angry. It seemed to me that underneath the pompous veneer of professionalism and ethics, the mental health establishment is essentially controlled by some very sick people. Flying back to Dallas, I toyed with the idea of suing my former employer for the unjust persecution and baseless slaughter of my reputation and financial standing.

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord" reverberated from deep within. The director who had so callously orchestrated my downfall suffered a near fatal heart attack at about the same time. By the time of my hearing, his agency had become a shell of its former self. I called his wife to offer my condolences. However, my motives were not pure. Somewhere in my heart was a gloating chamber that was fueled by the role he had maliciously played in my troubles. Still, I had to repent. Life was good even though the novelty of my new job had begun to wear thin.

I increasingly became part of the underbelly of this juggernaut disguised as ministry. There was a roiling turnover of staff. The average tenure of administrators was less than a year

and we were constantly adjusting to new leadership. One had to always walk the gauntlet, never sure of who was the “sacred cow” du jour. There were concentric circles of power and influence; the closer you were to the center, the less disposable you became. Thus competition for the inner sanctum was fierce. Backstabbing, sycophancy, bribery, spying and even blackmail were fair play. There was no clearly defined merit or incentive system. We breathed or held our breath on the whim of our leader.

Also, the grueling work and travel schedules left very little time for personal ministry. The ethos of “It Is Now Our Turn To Be Blessed” suffused the atmosphere. Consequently, people wore clothes that they could not afford, drove cars that were way above their pay grade, lived in homes loftier than their status in life, and attended a church that was seemingly on a perpetual building campaign. The philosophy seemed to be, “Consume all you can and leave the mess to God!” Understandably, the place reeked of lasciviousness. It was a spiritual hospital and naturally attracted lots of broken people whose hearts needed mending. However, acting “spiritual” was an open invitation to be derided. No need to be a “Super Saint” when a loving God understood and would forgive all transgression. Cheap grace ruled the day.

Ignoring the wisdom learned from the proverbial frog in the pot in danger of boiling to death lest he note the change in temperature, I gradually settled in and began swimming with the tide in order to survive. The searing mandate to live close to the Cross of Christ and to facilitate encounters between hurting souls and the Savior was a rapidly fading memory. This mandate had been stamped on my soul as I lay prostrate in that library chapel. Sadly, my cheating heart was at it again and it was apparent that the god of psychology was only partially dethroned in my heart. Now I had added a twin god — consumerism (material prosperity). I enjoyed the travel, exclusive hotels, good food, executive services and the quasi-celebrity status that a semi-close

affiliation with my leader afforded me. I began to aspire to even greater things. My focus shifted from God to stuff. Against which, God, speaking through His prophet, warned us millennia ago!

*“For my people have committed two evils;  
They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters  
And hewn for themselves cisterns --  
Broken cisterns that can hold no water.”* (Jer. 2:13 NKJV)

Here I was again. A faint yet persistent discomfort began to creep in. My mind was filled with filth. Even strangers walked up to me in different cities and to prophesy that God wanted me to move on. I had dreams about being suddenly cut-off. I refused to take heed. I had endless conversations with my now wheelchair-bound wife and peers about leaving, but still I stayed, anesthetized by the comfort and security. There was always just one more paycheck, one more trip, one more honorarium and then I would resign. Besides, my wife needed the health insurance, right? One day my divided heart crashed against its own evil desires and like the wayward children of Israel, I had to choose that day whom I would serve – God or man. The nest had become increasingly uncomfortable and I resigned under a cloud of acrimony. This was a God-ordained shove. However, this time I was confident about the future. I felt destiny’s call. Sitting in a dark chapel close to my home, I put on a spiritual cape and took a leap of faith. Crossroad Encounters, in gestation for several years, was born that day.

## 3

**A LIFELINE BACK  
(The Gift of Desperation)**

“Hi my love.

You [sic] know I had to do this. I love making you happy, that is what I live for.....

I want you to have something from me every morning when you awake, of course, EVERY NIGHT is not possible, this one is, so here goes.

I have had the guitar that I have now for roughly eight months, and I love it. It sounds so good, and because of the budget that I was on, I couldn't afford to spend \$980 on what I really wanted, so I played this one, and it only costs \$169, jeez. Anyway, like some guys name their cars, a lot of us musicians name our instruments, and I have had so much trouble naming mine, because I just play you know, and nothing suitable [sic] ever came to mine until I met you. My secret name for it is B\_\_\_\_\_, but right now it has the pleasure of being BCY, Ok, or B. I lay my fingers on B\_\_\_\_\_ everyday, on purpose, across her neck gently, and I caress her strings, sometimes with her volume soft as a whisper, and sometimes as loud as your passionate scream, and always with the romance of a rose in summer. You are my one love, my only love, and my last love, and I promise the passion, the feelings I have for you, and the eternal love I have for you are real, and infinite.....

I LOVE YOU B\_\_\_\_\_ CAROLYN Y\_\_\_\_\_ [His last name]. AND I CAN'T WAIT TO CALL YOU MY WIFE.

Love eternal, Timothy.”

The sweet, romantic love-note to my wife was, tragically, not from me. Fifteen years of disease, death, deferred dreams and arrested libido had come to this — ashes for sacrifice. I was devastated. Completely wiped out. I went through a physical and emotional meltdown. Looking back now it all makes sense.

This latest chapter in our angst-laden relationship was unleashed by a phone call one Sunday morning. Her sister called to inform her that her brother had attacked their parents and was killed in the melee that ensued. Her father sustained substantial injuries to the head and was in the hospital. Due to health and other considerations, my wife could not attend her brother's funeral. However, we supported the family as best we could. Her father's injuries were not life threatening. However, he slipped into a deep depression and lost the will to live. A decision was



made to uproot her parents from their Caribbean home and to resettle them in New Jersey. It was closer to their children. Her father died several months.

After the funeral, my wife spent a couple of weeks with her family before returning home. I noticed an ominous change in her. Her eyes were dead. It was like looking into the eyes of a snake. I quit looking. I had quit looking a long time ago. I suggested that she get some grief counseling. She assured me that she was fine. Over the years, I had learned not to try to make her do anything. She just added more symptoms to an already impressive list that was still confounding doctors. She became more detached than usual and began spending more and more time on the computer. Many times, she literally spent whole nights on the computer. When confronted, she insisted that she was writing poems and chatting with other poets. One night I woke up suddenly and sneaked into the computer room. She was transmitting her pictures to someone via the internet. I was tempted to bust her. However, I went back to bed. I was tired. I felt controlled by what I believed to be “contrived helplessness.” There had been too many battles and I had grown weary of the struggle.

Primarily, there was the battle for her health, which she refused to fight. The battle to get her to drive again took a grueling 13 years. The battle to get her to decide what she wanted to do with her life was lost, as was the one to get her to deepen her walk with God. The battle to get her to care more for our child was only a partial victory. It was like pouring water into a cup with no bottom. I gave up and gave it to God as best I could. I was a spent force. What energy I had left was now focused on God, our child, and paying bills — especially her medical bills and the outrageous phone bills she generated. Over the years my fondness for her dissipated and was replaced by a cold, paternalistic, brooding condescension. I hated feeling that way. I prayed,

fasted, and pleaded with God to take those feelings away. They just grew worse over time. I was in despair, yet I held it inside.

I was counseling other couples and seeing great results. I was ministering the Care of Souls in seminars all over the country and getting wonderful confirmation that I was on the right track. People routinely wrote to thank me for something I said that had transformed their lives. I knew that I was anointed to assist in the healing of souls. To this day, I feel and sense God's empowerment each time I counsel or teach. Yet behind the scenes, my life was a mess. I felt like a hypocrite in my inability to foster healing in my own home. Looking back I can see all the missed opportunities where the right intervention at the right time may have brought healing into our lives. What is it about me that kept this dance of despair going on for so long? Was it pride, a sense of entitlement, a "hole in the soul," cultural hang-ups, charismatic deception, hubris, unhealed wounds from my childhood or all of the aforementioned factors? Was I enjoying my status as a longsuffering husband who stuck it out with a perennially ill wife too much to give it up? I always found creative ways to include that "nugget" in my seminars.

In truth, my wife did make several attempts to signal to me that she was in deep distress. I would usually acknowledge her pain but would do little to alleviate it. She was not always weakness and illness. She could have a very sweet and nurturing side as well. She was a beautiful woman who would give her last meal to a stranger in distress. She stood with me through different storms and seldom complained. She believed in me when others did not and would have an encouraging word when I felt like giving up. She did her best to make our home a hearth. Although she had conflicting feelings about our daughter, it made sense given the context of her own childhood.

My wife was 25-years-old when we met. She still lived at home. She had ambitions for college that had to be sacrificed on the altar of the family needs. After high school, she taught kindergarten for a couple of years, then picked up a job as a technician in a government-run research facility. These jobs kept her at home while her siblings went on to better things. Her brothers went away to colleges in England and California. Her sister went to a local nursing school and lived on campus. My wife continued to cook, clean and suffer insults. To add injury to insult, she paid room and board as soon as she began working. At 25, she was still under the juvenile restriction of a curfew. All of the major decisions in her life were made by her parents. She was like a city whose walls had long ago been broken down. Men took advantage of her, beginning with an older neighbor who violently stole her virginity. Every time a relationship got serious, it was derailed when the prospective groom's family learned about her mother's psychotic episodes. Besides, few men could handle her smothering emotionalism. Well, enter yours truly into the picture. This fool rushed in where angels feared to tread.

My own childhood experiences were different but no less intense. I was as disengaged as she was entangled. My mother left for another country just as I entered puberty. My father was a broken and bitter man who became apathetic toward his children. He fed us and took care of the bills. That was the extent of his interaction with us. We went through a string of wicked step-mothers and step-siblings. My older sister did the best she could to nurture us. Fortunately, I spent most of my time between puberty and young adulthood in boarding school. It offered me discipline, predictability, spiritual direction, friendships, and a medium in which to excel. It also offered me a surrogate fatherly love through the Marist brothers who ran the school. Still, the fallout from the disintegration of my family marked me deeply.

I began smoking cigarettes and marijuana at a young age. I also drank. When I was home on vacation, I had no curfew. I would come home in the wee hours of the morning, stoned and drunk. I craved my father's discipline. The best I could get was, "You are destroying yourself by yourself." Meals were disorganized. We ate whatever was available, whenever it was available. I had girlfriends all over town. Their families fed and nurtured me on a regular basis. News from mother was sparse and sporadic. I used to nurse fantasies of a tearful reunion. There were usually lots of gifts and a solemn covenant to always stick together. One day I heard that Felicia had given birth to another child. The fantasies ceased. They were replaced by a visceral distrust of women. I drifted from relationship to relationship. I left home at the age of 19. The first stop was at my mother's home but there was nothing there for me. I moved on to Lagos, Nigeria, and shortly thereafter I traveled to the United States. After several years I left for France to attend medical school. I lived in France for three years before moving to the Caribbean to finish my studies in one of the university's satellite programs. I was broke, disgusted, on the rebound and lost, when some mutual friends introduced me to my future wife. She invited me to church and I surrendered to Jesus.

I do not remember asking her to marry me. She swears that I did. After my conversion, her church embraced me and her Pastor began to disciple me. Her parents virtually adopted me. Everyone was so nice. Then there was the food, a lot of food. For an erstwhile starving medical student, this was Heaven on earth. We met in January, became engaged in March and married in August.

The honeymoon was over almost before it began. I knew in my gut that I was in deep trouble. I could do nothing right. There were the constant comparisons to past lovers. I could not kiss like this one. I was not as tender as that one. She wept. I disengaged. She demanded. I quit

trying. Then there were the senseless arguments about nothing that were inflated to mask deeper issues. Take, for instance, the cereal argument that led to a yelling match because she insisted that we finish the Cornflakes before we could open the Raisin Bran. To my consternation, my new wife took off running. She was like a wild animal that had just broken free from its cage. I ran after her and brought her back home. As quickly as it started, it was over. It was as if nothing happened. This pattern repeated itself every time she was under pressure. It only ceased after she lost the use of her legs. We religiously spent Saturdays at her parents' home. She still cooked, cleaned and shopped for them. Thankfully, after a couple of years, we moved back to the United States but the problems only grew worse over the ensuing years.

We were two very wounded people who professed Christ as Savior but had never allowed Him to be Lord over our conjugal situation. We never appropriated the healing balm from Emmanuel's side to heal the calluses in our souls. At the very least, we should have had a prolonged engagement during which intense counseling, soul care and spiritual guidance could heal our souls before we even considered setting a ceremony date. Even after the marriage, we were the type of couple that would need regular counseling "check-ups" because the wounds were so deeply embedded. At the time, we did not know enough to seek help and none was offered. We consistently attended church and were even in positions of leadership. I wonder. Did anyone notice the pain? Could anyone discern the agony? Could it be that many of our leaders are struggling in their marriages too? Are we engaging in a dance of deception in which we turn on the "happy button" at church but go home to angst, despair and sexual frustration? Could this account for the scourge of pornography that is now raging in our churches? Was it too late for us? Were we destined to become yet another divorce statistic? I truly believed that my wife and I had settled the issue of our covenant before God. We were going to stick it out

until our “change” came or until death took one of us. I was shocked when she told me that she was leaving for awhile. I discovered the email from her paramour the day after she left. It sent me reeling. That was the worst moment of my life.

I broke down and wept. My stomach was tied up in knots. My mouth was dry. All manner of wild imaginations flooded my mind. The tears flowed freely. I do not know whether I was weeping for my 10-year-old daughter or for myself. My heart still remembered the pain of watching my own mother leave suddenly. Then waves of rage began rising up inside of me. Rage against myself for missed opportunities. Rage against my wife for abandoning her child and betraying me. Rage against my rage. I was hurting and felt completely alone. As divine providence would have it, my daughter was spending a few days at her best friend’s home. The arrangements had been made long before her mother’s departure.

I called my Pastor and gave him the news. We met in his office. He prayed with me and assured me that we had his unwavering support and prayers. I returned home. Leaning against the door, I slowly took stock of the place. The sofa was old and worn. A thin layer of dust covered the bookshelf. The carpet was stained in several places. The wall between the living room and the kitchen was streaked with dark blotches. These were my wife’s palm prints. She used the walls to support her weight when she walked back and forth. A mixture of dog urine, cat litter and rotting food hung over the living room like a cloud. I realized that my wife had left home long before that weekend. The enemy sneered at me. “See what you get when you put your trust in God?” “Liar!!!” I yelled back at him.

The accusation stung nonetheless. On the surface, the evidence seemed to favor the accuser, the father of lies and confusion. For three and a half years, I had truly walked by faith. I turned down very lucrative job offers and gave up the practice of psychotherapy. I did not

advertise my counseling ministry. I did not try to make things happen. Whatever came my way was a Godsend. This stance alienated me even further from my family and the few friends I had left. We had many lean and difficult days. God was faithful yet the reality was painful. Waves of weariness overwhelmed me. I sank to my knees, lay on my side and then pulled my knees toward my chest. I was setting a nice table for a pity party when deep within me, God's Word began to stir. Part of a sermon I had recently preached in New Orleans began to pour out of me:

*“Though the fig tree does not bud  
and there are no grapes in the vines,  
Though the olive crop fails  
and the fields produce no food,  
Though there are no sheep in the pen  
and no cattle in the stalls  
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord.  
I will be joyful in God my Savior.  
The sovereign Lord is my strength.  
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer.  
He enables me to go on to the heights.”* (Habakkuk 3:17-19 NIV)

I began praising the Lord, laying there on that stinking floor. The tears ran down my face into my mouth. I did not care. I just continued praising the Lord until I drifted into a peaceful sleep. I slept until noon the next day. When I woke up, I sensed a feeling of dread trying to work its way into my heart. I was about to succumb to it when a verse of scripture literally exploded deep within my heart.

*“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I  
live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the  
life which I now live in the flesh I live by the  
faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave  
Himself for me.  
I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if  
righteousness come by the law, then Christ is  
dead in vain.”* (Galatians 2:20-21 KJV)

Wow!! The power of these verses! The revelation that Christ in me would work this situation out instantly anchored my soul. This was not my fight. It was His.

“Get up and eat some food.” Yes, Lord.

“Quit worrying about Nicole. I have covered her with my love.” Yes, Lord.

“Get cleaned up. Put on a crisp white shirt and go to Bible study.” Yes, Jesus.

When desperation, despair, emptiness, brokenness and pain are met with praise and worship, that is our lifeline back to divine purpose. It is our lifeline back to God. It is quite simple, yet few choose that path. Most of us are too busy using our own resources to cope with our God-ordained heartquakes. Too often we needlessly prolong our pain. How do we do that? We stray far from God and our hearts become hardened.

In the lowest moment in my life, God’s grace carried me. Grace led me to praise and thanksgiving. Praise demolished the spirit of heaviness. Mourning turned into dancing. Worry was replaced by peace. Meekness and empathy vanquished my rage. Sure there were still details to be worked out. God would do the work. My sole responsibility was to abide in His presence and I was determined to praise and thank my way through the storm. Life away from God’s presence was simply to frightening a prospect to consider. With God’s help, I prayed that this was a permanent “tipping point” for me.

#### TIPPING POINTS

God anointed and appointed Jonah as an agent of repentance for the people of Nineveh. At the right moment, God commissioned Jonah and sent him to Nineveh. He rebelled and fled from God’s presence. The Bible says that Jonah went DOWN to Joppa (bastion of idolatry) then DOWN to Tarshish (city full of wealth and material prosperity). He finally winds up DOWN in the belly of a divinely chosen fish. The last “fall” was Jonah’s tipping point.

From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said:

*“In my distress I called to the Lord  
and he answered me.*



*From the depths of the grave, I called for help  
 and you listened to my cry.  
 You hurled me into the deep  
 into the very heart of the seas  
 and the current swirled about me  
 all your waves and breakers  
 swept over me.  
 I said 'I have been banished  
 from your sight;  
 Yet I will look again  
 toward your holy temple.  
 The engulfing waters threatened me,  
 the deep surrounded me  
 Seaweed was wrapped around my head  
 to the roots of the mountains I sank down;  
 the earth beneath barred me in forever.  
 But you brought my life up from the pit,  
 O Lord my God.  
 When my life was ebbing away  
 I remembered you, Lord  
 and my prayer rose to you.  
 to your holy temple.  
 Those who cling to worthless idols  
 forfeit the grace that could be theirs,  
 But I, with a song of thanksgiving  
 will sacrifice to you.  
 What I have vowed I will make good  
 Salvation comes from the Lord.*

(Jonah 2:1-9 NIV)

Nineveh was saved. Jonah returned to God's presence in spite of his pouting.

If need be, God has a fish prepared for you. What you do in the belly of the fish is up to you. Will you return to divine presence or will you settle for the cheap substitutes the world offers?

What is your tipping point?

How much perplexity can you absorb before you surrender?

Are you making it from day to day with the help of medications that suppress your despair at the expense of divine intimacy?

Have you learned to adapt to your circumstances?

Are you using things like money, religion, psychology, medications, human relationships, sex, alcohol and drugs as props that keep you from falling into the arms of a loving God?

My prayer is that we will allow our present and future dilemmas to tip us back to divine presence and purpose. God wants us to conquer our circumstances, not just survive them. Add worship and thanksgiving to your despair. Offer them to God. He will give you refuge and offer you his strength.