

## **Sherry - *Encounter With God; A Change Of Heart***

There have been many different encounters with God in my life. Some were like a lightning bolt and had very noticeable, life-changing effects. Others were more subtle and at the time seemed to change my life very little. But as they have added up over the years, I can see how these small encounters made corrections in the direction I was heading. They brought me to the place where God intervened and changed my heart.

When I was a child, I received Jesus as my Savior. My understanding of being saved was that you would go to heaven and you should be good. In ninth grade after taking a catechism class at a Baptist church, I rededicated my life to God and my desire was to live a life that pleased Him. He honored that, and through the years kept me in His hands. Unfortunately, I saw God as one who was easily displeased and I had no concept of His love for me. I was afraid of doing something wrong and was sure that something bad would happen if I failed to live up to His expectations. I thought I had to be good enough for God to love me and not punish me. As a result, I lived my life using a long list of what a Christian could or couldn't do. My Christian life was a constant struggle with a lot of guilt attached.

In the mid-90s, the sermons seemed to become focused on several topics such as legalism, judging others, the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, freedom in Christ, and the concept that we cannot please God with a set of rules. That made me very uncomfortable because if those things were true, then the way I had lived my life was wrong. I was frustrated and confused as I tried to hang onto the strict 'Christian' life which I believed pleased God. There was a division in my church that added to the frustration. The things in my personal life that had always been under my control were unraveling. Then David Anderson, a young man I had known and respected since he was a teenager, was diagnosed with cancer that ended up taking his life. Life was not fair! All of this brought me to a totally negative outlook, both toward the church and life in general. My list to please God was too long to be practical and I wasn't even sure if the Christian life was worth trying to figure out. I was ready to throw it all away.

One Sunday in January 1996, I walked out the doors of this church and said to myself, "I'm not coming back!" Because of several people keeping in touch with me and my own conviction that God did exist, I realized that I could not just turn my back and walk away. So after several weeks I came back to the service, still confused, but knowing that I needed to stay and work through some issues. The service ended with the song, "I Surrender All." I went forward, knelt at the altar, and said to God, "Okay, You're right. Something needs to change, but I'm not sure what or how. I'm not even sure if I want to change, but at the same time I know I can't continue to live with the fears, worries, confusion, and frustration. I don't know what to do anymore."

I had an appointment with the pastor the next day. I knew I needed to admit my rebellion to what he had been teaching and apologize for my negative feelings toward him personally. So Monday, February 13th, we had a long conversation. One of the subjects that came up was legalism. As we talked I began to see the possibility that I had been judging others by my standards without realizing it, and that was a sin. The rest of that day God used the conversation to get my attention and start me thinking in a new direction. The next day, on February 14, I knelt before God and confessed my judgmental attitude as a sin in my life. I repented and asked God to forgive me. I got up from that prayer thinking, "Okay, I've gotten rid of the hidden sin in my life and now I'm pure and righteous before God." Immediately, I knew that something was terribly wrong. I kept thinking, "I admitted my sin and believe God forgave me, so what's the problem?"

Matthew 6:22-23 says, "The light of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is healthy, your whole body shall be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness." My spiritual eyes had been blind for many years. I thought I had been seeing things clearly but my

sight was based on a lack of understanding of who God is and what is important to Him. Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." I thought I had lived my Christian life God's way, but I was very wrong. Oh, how I misunderstood the holiness and righteousness of God! How I misunderstood what sin was or how deeply it penetrated my life!

In a split second, God removed my blindness and showed me that in His sight my heart was full of sin that I had never recognized. I suddenly realized that I was not a "good Christian"-there is no such thing. I was only a sinner saved by God's grace. I wasn't a sinner because I was part of the human race but because I, myself, had a heart full of sin. For the first time in my Christian life, I realized that it was my sin, personally, that nailed Christ to the cross. I had lived a morally good life and had tried to please God as I understood it, but as the Bible says our righteousness is as filthy rags. God showed me a picture of that very clearly. I was standing before Him dressed in a torn, dirty robe. I will never forget it. My eyes were opened, and I remember going through that day repeating to myself, "I am a sinner! I am a sinner!" God showed me that the pride I had once had in living a "good" life, and the critical spirit toward others that grew out of that was sin. In those few minutes God completely destroyed the Christian life I had built. He gave me a picture of a house to symbolize it. It looked magnificent from the outside, and it was surrounded by water. I watched as God's fire consumed it and even the ashes were blown away. All the guidelines I had developed to live a good Christian life were gone. The only thing left that I could hang onto in the middle of the water was the foundation of Jesus Christ. I realized that I had nothing to offer God but my willingness to let Him be my Lord and Savior. My life was no longer mine. All my rights were gone. I had no right to judge others, dislike others, or hold bitterness against others. I suddenly realized that as I looked at other people and judged them by my standards, God was measuring my life by His standards and I fell far short.

I realized from that point on that God would have to build on the foundation. I was now dependant on His guidance and His direction. I no longer had to figure things out for myself; it was His work to lead me and change me from the inside. My work was to submit and follow. I was completely blown away by how wrong my understanding had been! I was amazed that I had never seen the truth before! I was totally humbled and broken by the holiness of God and yet utterly amazed that He was willing to reach into my life and show me my sin. Romans 5:8 ("...While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.") took on a whole new meaning. He died for me, even though I was a sinner. He loved me, even though I had leaned on my own righteousness. He refused to judge me harshly as I had judged others. He intervened to save me from my sin, my lack of understanding and the confusion it caused. He was and is truly my Savior!

God wants us to allow Him to go so much deeper than the surface of our lives. He wants and needs to change our hearts. He replaces confusion with understanding, pride and self-righteousness with humility, judging and criticism with love and acceptance, and rebellion with accountability and submission. I was now free to walk as the Lord led me instead of being shackled in fear by lists of "do this" and "don't do that." In my submission to Him, I was now secure. Through His loving, gentle guidance, He taught me that I could trust Him to protect me. Instead of struggling to please a God who would punish me if I failed Him, I now had a Friend who could share the load. The peace that had been so elusive to me became a part of my life and replaced the frustration. God continues to change me, but at times over the years, I have not wanted to see or deal with what the Lord needed to do in me. Yet, He has never abandoned me and I have been amazed at His persistence, patience, and willingness to wait until I was ready to say yes to Him with my whole heart.

God changed my heart as only He can do, and I am forever grateful for His continuing work in my life! May He be praised for all He has done and all He has yet to accomplish!