

Beautiful Exchange

*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times
and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . .*

Heb. 1:1–2a

The year 1967 was a kairos year for my family and we still marvel over it. That year God broke in and did miracles. And none of us have been the same.

At that time my father Bill Worley had been an alcoholic for most of his adult life. Dad wasn't violent or abusive when intoxicated—I've thanked God for that mercy. When he was sober, Dad was kind and gentle. When he was drunk, he was passed out. In my earliest memories he is stretched across the sofa in the den. Sometimes he spent an evening with the family, but he was mostly absent from my life as a little girl.

Somehow he managed to keep his job as an accountant for a local firm in our hometown Danville, Virginia. My mom Sandra shouldered everything else. She was so self-sacrificing that my sister and I, three and six respectively, didn't know that our home was different than anyone else's.

I sensed the conflict between my parents but little understood the misery they both endured. There was the Christmas I had asked for a red bike. It was purchased ahead and stored at my aunt's home a half block away, awaiting the big day. Dad had agreed to fetch the bike as soon as my sister and I were tucked in bed Christmas Eve. But when Mom came downstairs to give the "all's clear," Dad was in a stupor, past waking. The evening was bitter and icy, but she'd just have to go herself. As she backed down the steep drive the wheels lost traction and she skidded into the mailbox across the street. Bless her, the bicycle was eventually placed beside the Christmas tree. I fondly remember that on the first fair day, Dad taught me to ride that bike in our backyard, but his companionship was a rare treat.

Dad's addiction and Mom's desperation were discretely concealed from friends and family. When Mom gave up and packed to leave, she always unpacked again. She never believed that divorce was a moral option. In his written testimony Dad recounts life as a slave to alcohol:

My daily alcohol necessity was three pints. This much I had to have just to function, what I had come to believe was normal. Over and above that, I was a very heavy social drinker. I drank as much beer, wine, and whiskey as anyone I knew.

My three pints were always consumed in secret. It was no longer a secret to my wife—had not been for a long time. She could easily find my favorite hiding spots. Even so, she knew nothing to do that might prove beneficial to me. If she poured it out, I would get more, if I did not have two more bottles already stashed nearby. If she diluted the alcohol with water, I could instantly tell. There was no way to trick me into consuming less. My body had come to need those three pints. Three pints it had to be, or I would soon be racked with nervous trembling.

My days began with an immediate trip to the bathroom where with trembling fingers, I poured the first of the daily dosage of liquid fire into my often gagging and retching throat. Sometimes, too often, it came back, but I would quickly follow it with another. Later, after a second or third straight shot, I could brush my teeth and begin getting dressed.

Lunch hours were spent driving my car around lonely country roads as I sipped long draughts from a bottle then chased the alcohol with a bottle of soft drink.

When evening came, I went home for the day, or to dinner should night work be required. (It frequently did.)

My immediate arrival was always preceded by a lengthy drive in the country for the same purpose. I remember thinking as I enjoyed the serenity and beauty of the countryside, how dull and dreary it must be without the pulse quickening liquid I drank. Little did I know my eyes were clouded and my senses dulled by the alcohol I credited with such excellent qualities.

Be Holy

Enter Jesus. January of 1967 Mom heard a sermon that changed her life. The pastor of her Methodist church preached on “A Life of Holiness,” a daily appointment with God for expressing concerns, listening for answers, reading scripture, and singing a hymn. Finally, here was something she could do! Hope surfaced for the first time in ever so long. She later said of that bright morning, “If anyone had offered to grant me a wish, I would have asked for holiness. Even more than financial freedom, a better marriage or help for Bill’s alcoholism, I desired holiness.” Here is Mom’s first-hand account of the first months of her quest for holiness:

I set aside 10:00 a.m. as God’s time. Susan was in kindergarten, and Sandra, three years old, was usually happily at play at that time.

I opened my Bible to Genesis 1:1 and began to read. Then I read some Psalms, then lots from Proverbs. I liked the book of Proverbs. I could identify with them. The Old Testament comforted me.

Bible reading finished, I then began to pray. “Dear God, make Bill stop drinking. I can’t stand him the way he is.” I poured out all my loneliness and all our other problems, which were numerous.

Then I sat there listening—wondering most of the time what it was like for God to speak to you and what I would do if He did. God’s time completed, I went about the rest of the day.

I went through this same routine, some scripture and some prayer, from January until April.

This time alone with the Lord became Mom’s lifeline. Her search for God had begun, or shall I say, the Great Shepherd of the sheep was determined to find her.

Revival

One Monday morning in May, my mom opened the newspaper to find a full-page article about a citywide revival. It appeared the opening service at Neil's Tobacco Warehouse in downtown Danville had been quite the success. As many area churches were sponsoring the event, hundreds of people had attended. Curious about the general excitement, Dad and Mom decided to attend Monday night. Dad, unimpressed, stayed home with us girls the next two evenings. Undaunted, Mom went on to the revival without him.

On Wednesday night the guest evangelist Dr. Philpot shared his testimony. He claimed to have been healed of alcoholism. Mom was a nurse and knew that alcoholism has no medical cure. Could God really save and heal an alcoholic?

By Saturday Mom knew enough of revival protocol and vocabulary to value altar calls. Obviously, what Dad needed was to be "saved," so she conspired to give him the opportunity for this life-changing experience. The plan was as follows: My Grandmother Worley would watch my sister and me for the evening, and Mom would somehow get Dad sobered and to the revival service. At the invitation for salvation, she would go to the altar in hopes that he would follow and be changed—perhaps even healed.

The "emotionalism" involved in this type of behavior was not part of her upbringing. She had never been to an altar for anything except communion, confirmation, and once to pray for her mother, but she was willing to submit to the process for Dad's sake. In her mind, people who were raised in church were already Christians. She would simply "rededicate" her life.

With dad's sister Mary Abbott as her accomplice, she was able to get Dad sobered with tomato juice and coffee and loaded into the car in time for the Saturday night service. As the three of them set out for downtown, they each lit up a cigarette. They were on their way to the revival! I'll let her tell you what happened that night.

I have no idea what Dr. Philpot preached on that Saturday night. I was waiting for the altar call. As soon as it was given, I moved right out. I arrived at the altar first.

I was standing there all wrapped up in self-righteousness and hoping Bill would come, when quite suddenly, I was aware of the presence of the Lord and was convicted of my *own* sins! I really thought I was going to faint. One thing I knew for sure was that I was an unrepentant sinner. I asked forgiveness for my sins and asked Jesus to come into my life.

Immediately, I was immersed in the love of God! It started at the top of my head and went to the ends of my toes. I was literally washed in love. I stood there knowing that in this moment I was without sin. I knew I had been born again. I knew Jesus as Savior and Lord. I was aware of the Holy Spirit as a workable force in my life.

To this day I don't know how I just stood there. I wanted to shout and leap for joy! Pieces of scripture flowed through my mind: "joy unspeakable" (1 Pet. 1:8), "peace that passes all understanding" (Phil. 4:7), "He went walking and leaping and praising God" (Acts 3:8) came into my thoughts, but I dared not! Yes, the joy and peace were overwhelming.

Then I heard Dr. Philpot telling all those that had come to the altar to go back into the prayer room. As I looked around, I was amazed at the number of people who had responded by coming forward—and right behind me was Bill.

We went into the prayer room, and the counselors were working with everyone. How wonderful it was when I was asked, "Do you accept Jesus as your Savior?" I answered with everything that was in me, "Yes!" I had never been so happy. I was given a little red Bible with scriptures for salvation and a page to fill in the date of commitment. May 6, 1967 became a very special date.

I went over to Bill. Two counselors were working with him. He readily confessed his sins. He was at least aware he was a sinner. All would go well until one of them would ask him if he wanted to accept Jesus as his Savior. He would say, "I've got to think about that." So it went for forty-five minutes until finally everyone gave up.

The three of us, Mary, Bill and I returned to the car. They lit up cigarettes, and I sat there with absolutely no desire for one.

The next morning I awakened with all the love, peace, and joy with which I had gone to bed. I looked out of our bedroom window at the most beautiful Sunday morning I had ever seen. I was tuned into nature. As I looked at our lawn, I saw each blade of grass. I saw each leaf on the tree, each different, and yet the same. I heard many birds singing, and yet I could hear each individually. They were all glorifying God. The grass was the greenest green, the sky, ever so blue. All of nature was sharp and alive with the glory of God.

I sat down from habit with my Bible and opened to the New Testament. Then miracle of miracles—Jesus was alive in the pages!

Give Thanks

My mom was a new creation. It was impossible for Dad not to notice. He curiously observed while she consumed the Word, frequented Bible studies, and developed Christian friends. As the weeks passed his spiritual hunger began to rise.

One day mid-June, during her Bible reading and conversation with Jesus, Mom came to this passage from 1 Thess. 5:18, “give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” The printed words seemed to leap off the page and sparkle. She discerned that Jesus wanted her to apply these very words as an act of her will and faith. She knew that something that seemed bad was about to happen, but she should praise God anyway.

A few hours later the “all circumstances” materialized. My father’s boss phoned to say he had fired Dad, who’d been seated like a zombie at his desk all morning. He was genuinely concerned, guessing that drugs were involved. He was right—Dad had added tranquilizers to his three pints of alcohol that morning.

This was the worst possible news because Mom’s private-duty nursing position had just ended, which meant no income at all. But hadn’t the Lord said to rejoice no matter what? “Choosing joy” became the overall characterization of the rest of her life.

Healed

It happened that the following day our family had been invited to visit friends in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, several hours away. Dad had never fully sobered from the day before and didn’t even know he’d lost his job. Mom helped him into the backseat where he slept most of the trip.

Later that afternoon she encouraged him to consider reading a book she’d just received from one of her new Christian friends, *Beyond Ourselves*, by Katherine Marshall.¹ In the first five pages Marshall had expertly addressed some of Dad’s questions about a personal God. “Just read the first few pages,” she encouraged.

As Dad read, faith was birthed and Deism (the belief that God created the universe, wound it up, and then stepped away to let it run on its own) began to lose its deceptive grip on his intellect. He devoured the entire book that same night.

On Sunday morning, Dad challenged God to personally reveal Himself in a specific way: He had a cyst on his lower eyelid that he could see in his line of vision. It had become a real irritation. He’d sought medical help but had been told that the cyst was too dangerously close to his eye to be surgically removed. Standing before the bathroom mirror, Dad prayed his first prayer in years, “God, if You care anything about me, remove this growth from my eye.” And God heard.

Back in Danville early Monday morning, Dad sheepishly entered the kitchen. Mom was preparing breakfast. “Do you notice anything different about me?” he questioned. She could

see nothing different at all. “Look!” he said, “The cyst is gone!” Could there be any further doubt that a loving God cared about Bill Worley?

Later that night Dad risked the prayer closest to his heart, “Jesus, take away my desire to drink.”

Wednesday morning the breakfast scene was repeated. Mom was seated at the table reading the paper when Dad appeared in the doorway. “Do you notice anything different about me?” She certainly noticed that he was beaming, but nothing more. Then he announced the miraculous truth. He had wakened that morning with no desire for alcohol and assured my incredulous mother that he would never drink again—he never did. He was completely healed.

In his formal written testimony, the opening paragraph reads, “I was an alcoholic. Yes, I said I *was*, not *am* . . . I am convinced that God is as alive and active here on this earth right now, as He has ever has been at any time in the history of man.”

Slipping to the cemetery near our home, Dad knelt at his father’s grave and submitted his life to his *personal* Savior, Healer, and Friend.

The next year he composed two poems about the Answer to his search.

Lost and Found

I rent my garb of inner-self,
Tore at my mental hair;
All of my life I’d searched for God,
But missed Him everywhere.
I sought Him in the church, at home—
Elsewhere along the way.
Each place I looked, He’d been and gone;
My thoughts turned to dismay.

Dismayed, but sure He could be found,
I went back to my task.
Someone must know just where He dwells;
But who? Who could I ask?

And then one day I chanced to think;
My search had been all wrong.
I’d looked for something tied to space;
I’d sought Him in the throng.

For God can know no bounds or ties;
He has no home as such.
He dwells somewhere beyond the skies;
He dwells in each of us.

Paradise Found

The chill that races up my spine
When wondrous chords are struck,
Is God’s own hand upon my back;
A tune, His fingers pluck.

His gentle laugh is heard at length
In gurgles of a brook;
His happy thoughts are shared with me
In joy found in a book.

His fresh, sweet breath blows ’cross my cheek

In breeze of summer night.
The twinkle in His eyes shines forth
In each star's blinking light.

The snowflakes that so gently fall,
Upon my upturned face,
Are tears of joy God shed for me—
A servant of His grace.

B. A. Worley, November 5, 1968

In less than a week, my father had been healed and saved. It was time to pray about next steps. Dad had never loved accounting, but neither had he dreamed of getting the chance to do anything else. Now God called him to explore his new faith by returning to school. By fall he was a student at Candler School of Theology, Emory University in Atlanta, and my mother had a nursing position at Emory Hospital. Nothing is impossible with God.

I didn't know the details of my parents' conversions for many years, but I *felt* the transformation. I still remember the exciting seven-hour move from Danville to Atlanta, wondering aloud about the language of the people who lived in that far away place. (Atlanta might as well have been India for all I knew. I was every bit a small town girl.) My smiling mom assured me that Georgians spoke English too.

Atlanta

For the next five years mom supported the family, working all three shifts at the hospital, while my dad tackled seminary classes with their mounds of reading and research papers. He arranged his classes so that he could be home with my sister and me when Mom was at work. In these years I came to love this Dad I'd never known. He liked to play games and was a good listener. He taught me to play chess and became my trusted confidant. These were sweet, grounding years of family life, the sweetest that I had ever known, and I still treasure them.

During this Atlanta season, my parents were impacted by a move of the Holy Spirit known today as the Charismatic Movement. The Holy Spirit taught them through experience and personal study about Himself—His fruit, His gifts, His power. Once again the Lord set a precedent for the rest of our lives.

Daddy graduated from seminary in May of 1971 with his Masters of Divinity degree, but didn't necessarily feel called to preach. He and mom believed that they would possibly oversee a ministry for recovering alcoholics. As they waited for the Lord's guidance, they discussed contacting the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church at the first of the year.

Unexpectedly in early January 1972, Dad was admitted to Emory Hospital with a blood clot in his left arm. The diagnosis was infectious endocarditis, a rare bacterial blood infection that settles in the heart, damaging the valves and producing blood clots that can be fatal. In Dad's case the infection was traced back to dental work performed the preceding week.

My sister and I didn't understand the extent of his illness. Probably no one did. Each evening my mother, sister and I eagerly visited the hospital and shared the news of the day. As a treat, my parents allowed my sister and me to take the elevator all by ourselves to peer into the newborn nursery window. I was crazy, crazy for newborn babies. (See the chapter "The Prayer That Must Know.") Then we returned to Daddy's room to kiss him goodnight before heading back to the lonely apartment without him.

At this time of crisis for us all, God, in His grace, provided a word of knowledge. In the middle of the night, Dad awakened suddenly with the realization that he would soon die. Reaching for his Bible, it fell open to 1 Kings 20:1, “In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amos went to him and said, “This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.””

My mother rejected the forewarning. With the spiritual gift of faith, she resolutely believed for a complete healing. Hadn’t the Lord healed Dad before? But Dad *knew* God had spoken and rested in peace beyond understanding. Obviously, this prophecy wasn’t shared with my sister and I, who were elementary school age. They held it between the two of them and waited.

Pale, thin and weak, Dad returned home the first of February. He was consistent with his antibiotic medication, diet, and exercise regime, but he also resolutely put his “house in order.” He instructed Mom concerning their legal documents and encouraged her to build a house. When Mom asked if they might visit Danville for Easter, he responded, “Let’s not waste the time we have left.” He kept the weeks uncluttered to better enjoy the here and now.

One morning in mid-February, Dad offered to walk us the short distance to school. He was so breathless before we had reached even the midpoint that he half collapsed on the path to rest. Seeing our frightened faces, he urged us to continue without him, overriding our anxious questions by assuring us that he was okay. He wasn’t, but he eventually made it home where he confessed to Mom, “I thought I was going to die right there on the path.”

One memory hurts me still. Just two nights before his death, as Dad was leaving my bedroom after goodnight kisses, I called, “Goodbye!” Oh, my, what had I said? I’d meant to say “goodnight.”

Immediately, he turned back. “Why did you say that?” In my confusion, I thought up what I hoped was a reasonable explanation. “When you were in the hospital we said *goodbye* at night.” I sensed he was alarmed, and I wanted to say anything that would take that look off his face. Looking back, I believe God was preparing me for Dad’s departure.

Ashes

On the morning of March 8, 1972, after my sister and I had left for school, my mother entered the bedroom to find my Dad struggling to breathe. Mom administered resuscitation, but Dad left for Heaven before further help could arrive.

In that helpless moment, alone and unable to revive him, my mother glanced toward the window where the morning sunlight streamed into the room. In her spirit she realized that Dad was departing in that beam of light, but she didn’t wish him back. She knew that he wouldn’t want to return from the glories of Heaven, so she simply released him. As she let go, a firm assurance of God’s peace enfolded her.

After His funeral in Danville, our family of three finished out the school year in Atlanta, then moved back to Danville to be near extended family. All of the rest of my growing-up years were spent in this dear place, surrounded by the people I loved most. Though we returned home in ashes, the Lord provided “the oil of joy for mourning” (Isa. 61:3). In time the Lord taught me to know Him as Father.

For my mother’s complete testimony of these experiences and a lifetime of walking with the Lord, see her book *The Lamp, Be Aglow and Burning with the Spirit*, by Sandra Strange.²

Following Jesus for Myself

I joined my parents in The Faith in late summer of 1972, just a few months after my father's death. Mom advised that since I was now eleven, it was time to consider receiving Jesus as my personal Savior. It was an idea I'd never considered, but felt was the right decision to make.

It happened that we were attending a weeklong revival in the little country church where my parents had been married. On Thursday night when the altar call was given, I went forward mostly out of obedience to my mother, little understanding what "accepting Jesus as my Savior" meant.

I walked decisively down the creaky, wooden center aisle and knelt on the red velour altar cushion. The guest evangelist, a kind man named Jim Maharaj (from the island of Trinidad of all places), knelt facing me on the other side of the altar rail.

He asked me a series of questions. "Do you repent of your sins?"

I didn't really know what sins I might have committed, but as I paused and thought about the question, I suddenly felt an inward conviction that he was right. I was a sinner. I was truly sorry about that, so I answered with a simple, "Yes."

"Do you accept the free gift of salvation provided by the death of Jesus on the cross and the shedding of His blood?"

"Yes."

"Do you want Jesus to come into your life?"

"Yes."

I repeated a prayer after him phrase by phrase asking Jesus to forgive my sins and take my life as His own. And that was it. The beautiful exchange was made.

I returned to my seat—but everything had changed. I remember leaving the church that summer evening feeling light and new. The trees looked greener and the sky bluer as we made the short trip in the car down the hill to my Grandmother's home. I was already sensing that my whole life was transformed. A part of me that had previously been unstirred had now awakened in a single moment. I've never been sorry that I had made that decision.

My dad, mom, and I were three completely different people, but we equally needed a Savior. Dad had intellectual questions and an addiction that he was powerless to change. He didn't believe that it was possible to have a personal relationship with God. My mom wondered about how to be holy and how to save her marriage. Because she was a "good girl" raised in the church, she assumed that she already had a relationship with God. I was an insecure child missing my daddy and needing a Father. The Lord knew each of us intimately and was willing to meet us as individuals, exactly as we were. Jesus pursued us until we knew Him for ourselves. How I love Him for that.

Pause with me and consider God's initiative in the preceding narrative:

- A sermon on "holiness"—His idea, His power
- An evangelist who had been healed of alcoholism sharing that testimony in a warehouse revival, not ten minutes from my parent's home—His idea, His power
- A forewarning to receive bad news with joy and the faith to do it—His idea, His power

- An invitation for a weekend in the Shenandoah Valley and the gift of a book—His idea, His power
- The faith to ask for healing and receive it—His idea, His power
- The strength and peace to release a husband in death—His idea, His power
- A mother's suggestion to consider receiving Jesus as personal Savior and a daughter's obedience to follow that leading—His idea, His power

Accepting who Jesus is and what He has done for you and me is the foundation of the book that follows. Great good news! He has already initiated a relationship with each of us.

The Exchange, A Letter from Jesus

My dear child,

I have waited a long time for you to decide what to do about Me (2 Pet. 3:9, 15). If you want Me, I will come to you. If you don't, I'll wait. You are worth the wait (Rev. 3:20). I have chosen you (Isa. 43:1). I will never give up on you (Heb. 13:5–6).

I'm grieved that the relationship I desire to have with you has been so poorly explained and represented. Things that have made you fiery mad about Christianity and the Church make Me even angrier (Luke. 11:46). The things that have made you feel afraid of choosing a relationship with Me have deeply grieved Me. I ask you to forgive those who have misrepresented Me.

The truth is I wanted a relationship with you so much that I died on your behalf so that I could offer it to you now. I knew you could never earn it on your own, so I earned it for you many years before you were born (Eph. 2:8, John 14:6, Rom. 3:24, 2 Cor. 5:15). I thought of you as I died in your place so that you could have a relationship with Me. I now offer you the forgiveness of every sin. Every—single—sin. I'm listening. I care deeply.

I proved my willingness to give you new life when I died for you, but that was only the beginning (Rom. 5:6–8). I will also gift you with My friendship (Rom. 6:23, John 15:13, Prov. 18:24). You can't imagine all that I have planned for you (Rom. 8:32).

The decision to follow Me has nothing to do with an altar call. It has nothing to do with a certain church or baptism. It is not a certain prayer or place. It is simply this: You give Me all your life and I will give you all of Mine in exchange. (John 3:3, Rom. 10:9–10, John 3:16).

If you decide to take Me up on this relationship, I give you permission to make the exchange anywhere you choose: in your favorite chair, lying on your bed, under a tree, kneeling, running. The place and time are *your* choice. At the point of exchange, I will take all of your life. Over time I will make it everything you always wanted it to be and more: a life that makes a difference, a life that blesses people, a life that leaves a legacy (Eph. 2:10, Jer. 29:11–14).

Understand that I will expect you to follow Me because your life will be Mine (John 15:14), but you never have to be afraid because I will lead you in ways that bless you and I will provide the strength and desire to walk with me (John 10:27). As we travel together, I will teach you to love Me.

Those who know Me well will tell you that I am the kindest person they've ever known, and that they've never regretted making the exchange (Eph. 2:6–7, Jer. 9:24).

I love you. I'm waiting. Call to me. Don't wait too long.

Your truest Friend and Savior,
Jesus

* See Appendix One, "Who is God?" for a biblical perspective of Father God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

Going Deeper

Questions for Small Group Discussion

1. Living with an addiction is heartbreaking and depleting. Are you struggling with an addiction or the addiction of someone you love? Is there anyone who knows the whole

truth? Do you have a trustworthy confidant who will pray and listen? If not, who could you contact for support?

2. Have you ever pursued holiness? How could you make this pursuit a priority?

3. What is your worldview? Who is God? How involved is He in His creation—specifically with mankind? What is His character? What is the nature of man? Is mankind inherently good or evil? Are you willing to allow the God of the Bible to reveal the answers to these questions?

4. When a crisis comes, do you choose to rejoice? When have you seen God change a problem into a blessing?

5. Have you experienced a miracle or healing? What is the miracle you need right now in your life, or the life of someone you love? What is your specific prayer?

6. Have you lost a loved one? How did God prepare you for that loss? How has God comforted you since that time? Recommended reading in the midst of grief: Rebecca Springer's *Within Heaven's Gates*.³

7. To which of the three testimonies shared in this chapter do you relate the most: Bill's, Sandra's or Susan's? Has God pursued you personally? In what ways?

8. Have you made the "beautiful exchange"? If so, when did you make this most important of all decisions? If not, are you ready to make it now?