

Hopeless to Hopeful By God's Grace

By Tabitha Michaels

How did this happen again? What is wrong with me? Am I just crazy? I thought I was done doing these crazy things to myself!

These were the questions that kept running through my mind that morning, and recent mornings past, or long nights when I couldn't sleep at all. It has been years, probably 11 or 12, since I had tried to commit suicide, had abused myself by cutting my wrists or beating myself.

Now it was happening all over again, I felt the shame of waking up to bruises all over my body from the beatings with the belt, wire, or whatever I could get my hands on, or the cuts on my wrists from the razor blade. The pain was greater now than when I first did the acts to myself. Sometimes I truly believed I was crazy and that I had inherited the craziness that drove my grandmother to commit suicide. I did not realize at this time, but what was happening was a reaction to a current situation that triggered responses from long ago; a childhood of abuse and repressed memories.

Where was God? Why did he not answer my prayers? I begged God each day in my prayer journal to stop this, to not let this terrible thing happen. I could not understand why He chose to allow some things to happen to me, to my husband and our life together. Sometimes I hated God. Sometimes I believed He did not even exist.

It began when I sought counseling from our pastor. Unbeknown to me at the time, it had actually begun a lot earlier. He and his wife had befriended us when my husband and I first came back to church. We spent quite a lot of time with them and their youngest son. We enjoyed their friendship, looked up to them as parents and role models, studied the Bible together, sought counsel from them and worked together on church projects and committees. It seemed natural to ask the pastor to help me through a difficult time of discovering my past abuse. My husband felt uneasy and was not sure the pastor could separate his friendship from our counseling, but the pastor assured him it would be fine.

Looking back, it was the worst mistake of our lives. I had noticed odd things for quite some time, like the way the pastor would pay special attention to me, call or email frequently. I thought he just really enjoyed our friendship since he mentioned he did not keep many close friends. Due to my own dysfunction and lack of knowledge of the effects of abuse at the time, I could not understand what was happening. I tried to talk to my husband about it, but neither of us could understand, or knew how to discuss it. Then I started noticing more strange things and finally, I asked the pastor if he emailed all the church members the same way he emailed me. I was not prepared for his reply.

“Just you,” he said. That seemed to open the floodgates of email, phone calls and his sharing personal feelings for me. It wasn’t until much later that the pastor admitted, “I set my sights on you the moment you walked through the church doors that first day.”

I know it seems totally absurd, but I honestly believed that he could, and would, counsel and help me. I never dreamed he would use the time to further his own agenda. Immediately after we started counseling together, he tried to become physical with me. Eventually, after a few appointments, he raped me in his office. Then began a constant pressure and demand for physical closeness. I prayed that God would cause it to stop. I begged the pastor to stop and go back to his wife. He only begged me not to tell anyone and to run away and marry him. By this point, I did not believe I could quit counseling with him because I thought for certain I would die. He had taken complete control of my mind and convinced me that I could not live without him and that he was the only one who could help me. I was overcome by this situation which felt like hell, and I felt trapped. It mirrored my childhood abuse in a way I still cannot fully piece together. My reaction was to cut, hurt and abuse myself, and try to commit suicide.

When I finally disclosed the truth of what was happening, the pastor was fired. He then left his wife and stalked me for over a year. In fact, we have since moved and I am not quite sure whether the stalking has stopped.

My husband and I had a very hard time coming through this. We fought. Oh, did we fight! Accusations flew, but somehow, he always supported me. He tried to get me to open my eyes as to how I had been deceived and abused by the pastor. It was during this time that we were invited to a Tamar’s Voice meeting and learned the truth, that pastoral abuse is sadly common and that it is wrong. I learned it was not my fault. Someone in a counseling/pastoral or other powerful position has the responsibility to protect and nurture the one who is seeking help. He is not to harm the one he is trying to help.

I honestly do not know what I would have done without such a loving, compassionate and God-loving husband. I thank God for him each day, because without him, I surely would be dead. Several times he listened to God’s voice and, following a fight, returned home just in time to reverse the suicide action I had taken.

Where does this leave us now? Well, I am happy to report that after lots of therapy, the support of loved ones, friends and the church, the passing of time and healed emotions, we are doing very well. With the grace and power of God, we are closer than ever.

Am I happy this happened to us? Absolutely NOT! Would I recommend it to anyone? No way! Do I think God used this horrible situation to bring about needed change in our lives – personally and as a couple? Yes, I do.

Looking back now, we can both see how our relationship has become more intimate and honest. We are closer because we allow each other to share our deepest feelings. We both vowed to be honest with each other in all things, however small they may seem to each of us, and to report all suspicious behavior in the future so nothing like this could ever come between us again. Personally, I happen to think I have the best husband in the world. Not just because he stayed with me through this horrible ordeal, but because he loves me unconditionally. He could see how I was being abused and victimized when I could not. He knows the pain of my past and all of my mental and emotional health problems. He loves me ANYWAY! That is a gift from God!

So, where was God in all this? Well, I did not think He was there at the time. But now I can see clearly His intervention in all things – His working to bring good out of horror, His desire to draw me and my husband closer to Him, His desire to cleanse the church and to allow the pastor to make his choices, right or wrong. I believe God intends to use me and my husband as examples to other hurting couples and victimized women. We are proof of His power to save, heal, and improve broken and hurting relationships. The sad part is that the pastor has not chosen to confess, repent and return to God, or to his wife. God gives us all free wills and the freedom to choose what we will do and whom we will serve in this life. He allowed the pastor to perpetrate his evil schemes to abuse me, and my husband. He also allowed us to make the decision to stay together and heal our brokenness. I hope one day the pastor will take advantage of God's offer as we have. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

I love my husband with all my heart. I love God even more. I have come through this and have obtained a much better understanding of how the past affects our behavior and emotions today. I have a deeper relationship with both God and my husband. For that, I am thankful. If I had to go through what I went through in order to get here, then it was worth the heartache and pain. It was worth my own bloodshed and all the sleepless nights. God will always be with me and He has promised He will not give me more than I can bear, even though it may seem like it at times. I just need to trust in Him completely.

Today I praise God for the good works He has done in my life. I praise Him for the opportunity to share my testimony in order to help others who are struggling now. I praise Him that He brought me through the pain of my childhood and adolescence so that I may be able to help someone else who is hurting in the same way. I thank Him for my husband whom I love dearly. Most of all, I thank Him for the gift of eternal life through Christ Jesus, without whom I am nothing.