

# Chapter 1

## A HEART THAT'S BROKEN

*The LORD builds up Jerusalem; He gathers together the outcasts of Israel. He  
heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.*

—PSALM 147:2, 3

I was a young teacher, fresh out of college. Innocent. Naive.

She was a beautiful girl, an upperclassman in academy, gorgeous hair; even, white teeth; perfect complexion; rosy cheeks; a sensitive, caring heart. I'll call her Megan.

She mingled and talked with the other kids, yet somehow she always struck me as a bit lonely, as if she were on the outside, looking in, longing to be part of the action.

Were the other kids ignoring her? Or was she pulling back from them? I couldn't really tell.

Caught up in the whirlwind of teaching for the first time, I didn't draw her out a lot. I'd say, "Hi," as we passed in the halls, but I rarely took the time to sit down and simply talk, to see how she was *really* doing inside, to ask about her heart.

Months passed, and the school took the students on a weekend retreat. I'll never forget that weekend. Megan came to me and asked if we could talk.

"Of course." I smiled as we sat down.

She was wearing a long-sleeved shirt. (I hadn't noticed that she always wore long-sleeved shirts, sweaters, or sweatshirts.)

I caught my breath as I saw the pain in her eyes. *Has it always been there?* I wondered.

“What’s on your heart, Megan?”

She turned her head away. “I want to show you something, Miss Jill,” she said softly.

I waited, scarcely daring to breathe. *What’s going on here?*

She pushed up her long-sleeved shirt, clear to her upper arm. I couldn’t see her face. It was still turned away.

I glanced down at her arm. Deep, scarred lines of dried blood crisscrossed her pale skin. Tears filled my eyes. *She’s been cutting! Why haven’t I seen the signs?*

“Oh, Megan,” I breathed.

She shook her head and turned her arm so I could see a little clearer. Suddenly, I noticed they weren’t just random slashes in her tender skin. Some of them were, yes. But across her forearm, written with her own blood, she’d cut herself to spell one word—*Help*.

## THE PAIN

Even though it’s been well over a decade, I can still close my eyes and see the word *Help* etched in blood across her skin. *How long has she been seeking and pleading for help? How many days, weeks, and months have I been too busy to see the pain in this beautiful girl, so desperate for someone to notice?*

Our world is full of people like Megan: women lost and lonely, broken and beaten, hurting and helpless. I’m not talking about physical pain, although many women suffer from that. I’m talking specifically about emotional pain—to my sisters who can’t seem to find the face of Jesus, who feel scared and alone, who wander about in darkness, desperately searching for a way out. Or maybe it’s baggage they’re longing to shed but don’t know how; unspoken hurts that need to be forgiven, bottled up bitterness that must be released, a longing to be loved hidden in broken relationships.

Our Father hurts *with* you. He *sees* your pain; He *understands* your weaknesses; He’s *eager* to bring help, hope, and healing. After all, He’s the God who “heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3).

A couple of months ago, we had a special prayer for one of the women in our congregation. She’s a precious woman of God, and although she’s lived in constant physical pain, her countenance has always radiated peace, joy, and contentment. Whenever I’ve asked how she was doing, she’s always smiled and said, “I’m doing well, praise God.” Even when her pain has been almost overwhelming, she’s still smiled, remained cheerful, and

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spoken encouraging words. However, I knew that chronic pain is debilitating. Eventually, it begins to affect a person's attitude and spiritual walk with Jesus. So I began to pray earnestly for our sister—not just for physical healing, but for the strength and grace to endure.

On this particular Sabbath, we met in the pastor's office to pray. And before we did that, several people shared Scripture verses from their hearts. When my husband Greg's turn came, he repeated the verse I've quoted at the beginning of this chapter. How the Lord could heal the brokenhearted, how He longed to heal that woman's painful wounds. Instead of stopping there, Greg continued reading the next verse, where the psalmist says, "He [God] counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by name" (verse 4). How incredible is that? Our God is so big that He's named all the stars, even though scientists tell us they're innumerable! Yet the same God who holds up the galaxies and names the countless stars, stoops to this little earth, to a little church on this earth, to a small office in that church, even to the heart of my sister, and lovingly whispers, "*I see your pain, My daughter. I see your wounds. I love you with 'an everlasting love' (Jeremiah 31:3). I'll pour My healing and grace into your life.*" And that's what we prayed for. Physical healing, yes, if that was God's will. But, most of all, we pleaded for His grace to be made sufficient in her time of weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), for comfort and peace during this journey (John 14:27), and for continued joy in the midst of her physical suffering.

The beautiful part about this story is that the Lord truly did hear this woman's heart cry and relieved her physical suffering. Shortly after our prayer session, her pain began to diminish and soon disappeared entirely. Praise His name!

### THE MASK VERSUS GOD'S WORD

Years ago, on a typical Sabbath morning in church, my older sister and I sat side by side, legs dangling from the pew. Our hair was tied up in colored ribbons, curls cascading down our shoulders, courtesy of an awful night on those pink sponge rollers! Faces scrubbed and shining. Hearts? Not so much.

As the prelude played, people passed by and smiled. Sometimes, they'd stop and ask, "And how are the Penney angels doing today?" (Penney was our maiden name.)

"Oh, we're doing well. Happy Sabbath," we would answer and smile sweetly. However, the moment they turned away, my sister would vigorously

jab an elbow into my ribs. (Or did I start it? We're still working on that one.)

Our private elbow war would continue until the next person would stop and talk. Then, our cherubic smiles would reappear, and we'd sweetly answer their questions.

Hypocritical? Absolutely. Even as I think back on those days, I smile at such childish behavior. But, honestly, do we ever really grow up? Whether we're brand-new Christians, or whether we've been in church for years but are still babes in Christ, the mask of good Christianity is easy to slip on.

I ought to know. I wore it for years.

I grew up thinking my struggle was a solitary one. So many of the men and women I admired in the church seemed to really have it all together. They were always happy, always cheerful, always serving Jesus and saying the right things.

Then, as I grew older, people began to say those same things about me. "Oh, Jill, you really follow Jesus. You're always smiling, always seeking to minister." The truth was that many days I *did* walk right beside my Jesus—but not every day. Some days, I'd begin by spending time in His Word and praying. I'd feel connected to Jesus, but then bitterness or self-pity would suddenly rear its ugly head. Sometimes the accusing voice of Satan would whisper, "Who do you think you are, pretending to serve Jesus like this? Don't you know you're really a nobody?" And I would tremble with fear. I would fall to my knees, seeking my Father's face, only to find that my prayers seemed to hit the ceiling and bounce back.

What had happened? Hadn't the day begun with Jesus? Why didn't my feelings match my faith? If only I could *know* that God heard my prayers and was with me, all would be well. However, on those days when I couldn't *feel* His presence, I always doubted myself. On those days, I wore the mask I'd seen modeled for me during all my growing-up years—the mask of good Christianity.

I'm sure you've seen, or even experienced, this mask. Maybe you can't forgive someone who has deeply hurt you, and the resentment is simmering just beneath the surface. Yet you smile in church and pretend everything is fine, even while you tighten the lid on the tumult you feel inside.

Or, no matter how hard you pray, maybe you've never experienced peace in Jesus, never had assurance of your salvation. Yet you lead out in church—maybe even give Bible studies.

Perhaps you've just yelled at your kids, and then the doorbell rang and

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you greeted the person with, “Oh, it’s so good to see you again! Yes, we’re all doing well. Won’t you come in and have something to drink?” As you invite him or her in, you glance at your kids. Yes, they’re learning well how to model “good Christianity,” how to wear the mask.

As I was praying over this problem in my life, I suddenly stumbled upon (or rather, God in His mercy revealed) the answer to my problem with my feelings. I discovered the absolute power of the Word of God, the promises we can claim, and how our God can actually change our feelings to match our faith in His Word! As I began to experience God’s victory more and more frequently in my life, my joy grew. This was incredible; this was what I’d been searching for! God was truly able to keep me from falling, and to present me “faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24).

### THE JOURNEY

I don’t know where you are in your walk with Jesus, my sister. Perhaps you’re cowering in the corner, afraid to come to Him. If so, He says, “The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out” (John 6:37).

Maybe you’re angry at someone who’s hurt you, and you can’t release that bitterness. He promises that He has come “to preach deliverance to the captives, . . . to set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4:18, KJV).

Maybe you’re terrified of some diagnosis, disaster, or difficulty. He longs to take away your fear and fill you with His peace (John 14:27; 1 John 4:18).

No matter what your pain, problem, or issue, Jesus has a solution. He has a beautiful plan for your life, a plan to prosper you and not to harm you, a plan to “give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). He so desires you to have an abundant life (John 10:10)! Whatever your impurity, He can cleanse it (1 John 1:9). Whatever your sorrow, He’ll turn it into joy (John 16:20). Whatever your weakness, He’ll give you strength (2 Corinthians 12:9).

You don’t have to live in pain, defeated and downcast. Neither do you have to wear that mask forever.

You can be set free! And whomever Jesus sets free, is free indeed (John 8:36)!