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CHAPTER ONE

welcome to your heart

The spirit of bondage is gradually departing, and the hour of liberty, which he longs for, is approaching. —John Newton¹

I fidgeted restlessly as I sat in the church sanctuary and waited for my big moment to arrive. Thoughts were racing through my mind and my heart was beating rapidly with excitement as I listened to the speaker drone on and on. I was interested in only one thing, and I was having a difficult time waiting for it.

The speaker was a good friend of mine, a young woman who I had befriended at work, and I was thrilled that she'd been asked to give her testimony at church. Heather's testimony was an exceptional story of transformation, and I had been a large part of it. When I first met Heather as a coworker in the laboratory of a big city hospital, she was almost invisible. She spoke hesitantly and quietly, her facial expressions flat and unresponsive in conversation. Heather moved slowly, every step drawn out, every action painfully sluggish as though the simplest tasks in life were a heavy burden. I felt sorry for her. She was gossiped about by other workers and mistreated by some. Since she had moved to town to take this job, she had no friends and her life seemed sad and lonely. Heather needed help: she needed Jesus, and quite clearly, *she needed me!*

Having grown up in a strong and enthusiastic missionary household, I knew exactly what God wanted me to do. He wanted me to love Heather, to become her friend, and to share the gospel with her. I got to work immediately. I had just moved back to the United States after working as a missionary in Africa and was newly married to a man who was called to the ministry and attending seminary.

Evangelism topped the list of things that I knew God required of me, and to be honest, Africa hadn't gone too well in that department. I had worked for two years in a hospital laboratory and tried hard to witness to people and disciple them, but I hadn't led anyone to the Lord. In fact, I had behaved quite badly as a young, immature twenty-one-year-old missionary and had a nagging suspicion that lots of good people had wasted a great deal of money on me. No one else knew that I thought these things about myself, but I was tormented by my failure to be a good missionary. Ministering to Heather was my chance to redeem my reputation.

Heather turned out to be an even better project than I could have imagined. She responded beautifully to all my attempts to befriend her. Soon she was a fixture in our home and began coming to church with my husband and me. When I took a new job, she followed and moved to live near us and the church we attended. She made a profession of faith and seemed to come alive before our very eyes.

Heather's story was dramatic as it involved all the worst sins that good Christians could possibly imagine, sins like sexual promiscuity and abortion. Guilt and shame had shrouded her life and body, and she had lived life in zombie mode, walking through her world shielded from the gaze of others by a portable, invisible coffin of silence. As the guilt was lifted, her countenance began to change. She talked more, became more animated, and began to smile and laugh. After a couple of years, Heather began

dating a kind and gracious Christian man who proposed to her. New life took hold of her and transformed the invisible girl inside and out. This was a dramatic story, and I was the primary player on the stage of Heather's new life.

Yet as I continued to listen to Heather's lengthy narrative, I was starting to get annoyed. Heather's version of the story sounded highly inaccurate. She kept talking about God and what he had done in her life, but she hadn't mentioned my name even once. Annoyance blossomed into anger as I began to wonder if she was going to mention me at all. How on earth could she explain her story without thanking me and telling everyone how I had given my life to reach her with the gospel? Ministering to Heather had been costly to me, and surely I deserved some credit! What was more, this particular group of people had failed to be impressed by my missionary biography. They didn't particularly care that I'd gone to deepest, darkest Africa. In fact, they hadn't noticed me much at all, so I needed a little help in the notoriety department. Heather's story was finally drawing to a close, and my anger turned to fury as I realized that she had no intention of mentioning me at all. Bitter thoughts flooded my mind and I rehearsed what I would say to punish her for her foul ingratitude. I desperately hated Heather in that moment.

A MOMENT OF INSIGHT

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a thought appeared in my mind: *Barbara, you are a glory-hound and a limelight lover. This is not your story; it's mine, and all the credit and glory belong to me.* Never in my life had I had a thought quite like that before. It wasn't a voice; it was a thought, but a thought so powerful and moving that I felt suddenly swallowed up in a hot blaze of light that exposed me to the core of my soul.

I'd heard words like that before coming from the mouth of my college roommate as we competed shamelessly for the position of

president of one of the evangelical Christian fellowship groups on campus. She had seen things in me to which I was utterly blind, and she chose a moment on the steps of the dining hall to drop the bombshell on me four years previously. She told me, “Barbara, you are such a limelight lover and always have to be at the center of attention.” I was not rescued by a thought on that earlier day. Instead, anger rose up in me like a violent storm, and I gave my roommate a vicious shove that almost threw her down the stairway we stood upon. There was no metaphorical hot blaze of light to arrest my thoughts, only foul and bitter hatred toward a girl who would not adore me and who threatened my high view of myself.

This was completely different, however. I felt like the apostle Paul must have felt on the road to Damascus when Jesus confronted him and said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). It was as if I were mentally thrown to the ground, blinded by a glory so bright that I couldn’t bear it. Now the Lord was asking me, “Barbara, why are you stealing my glory?” I imagined a crushed and bleeding Jesus nailed to a cross, looking at me, knowing my thoughts, and asking, “How can you take credit for what I have done? Did you die for Heather? Did you give her faith and life? Did you open her eyes to see?” For a brief moment I felt deeply convicted, and the foulness of these sins threatened to consume me. I was shocked and undone by the ugliness of my thoughts, since I’d had no idea I was capable of such disgusting crimes against God and humanity! Yet it had been true all along! I had been sinning like this for years because my roommate had seen it clearly many years earlier.

Gradually, however, another thought dawned on me. Instead of feeling despair and rejection, I began to feel lavishly cherished. God was not at all surprised by my glory-loving, attention-seeking soul. I had been blind to the truth about myself, but Jesus had hung on that cross for *me*, for *this specific* sin. As I envisioned

myself standing before a bleeding Jesus, naked, ashamed, and exposed, I expected and deserved rebuke, disappointment, and rejection from my Savior. But this was not what I was receiving. Instead, he extended love, compassion, and infinite patience with my brokenness and weakness. I felt loved and treasured by God even though nothing had yet changed in me. I was a prideful Pharisee at that very moment, and in many ways I still am. On that day sorrow and gratitude rushed through my heart together as joyful companions for the first time. I responded, “Lord, I am so sorry that I am eager to steal your glory; it is true that this is really who I am. Thank you for loving me and forgiving me in the face of such treason.” Until that time I had always believed that God was lucky to have me on his side. Now I finally saw myself as a bitter enemy whom God had chosen to love and welcome as a precious child. For the first time in my life, grace looked and felt amazing, completely unexpected in light of my rebellious behavior toward God.

It would be years before I would understand what happened on that day. The Holy Spirit was beginning to open my eyes to see myself more clearly in order to free me from bondage to myself! Truth was starting to replace self-deception, and conviction was beginning to feel sweet instead of simply bitter and humiliating.

But those good and true thoughts were for a later time, because shame and embarrassment ruled this particular evening as my apprehension of God’s patient love faded away. My roommate had been right about me and I was mortified. Why hadn’t I seen it? How could a good Christian girl from a strong missionary family be so selfish and self-glorifying? How was I capable of such deep hatred toward others who were my brothers and sisters in Christ? How could I possibly be this sinful when I’d been a Christian for more than twenty years? What was this filth pouring out of me, and how would I ever survive it?

THE ANATOMY OF THE SOUL

Have you ever asked yourself those disturbing questions? Perhaps you have seen the secret inward sins of your heart that no one else sees and wondered how you could be such a bad Christian, or whether you're a Christian at all. Perhaps you are alarmed by new patterns of sinful behavior that you see emerging now and your own powerlessness to defeat them. Do you wonder about those old sins that have been around for a long time and that you cannot conquer no matter how hard you try? I hope it will comfort you to know that you are not alone. In fact, all Christians have this problem, whether they are painfully aware of the secret sins that hold them captive or still blind to them, like I was for many years.

The predicament we all share is that while we are new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) and have been given living hearts with which to know and worship God (Ezek. 36:26–27), we are still very sinful people. We remain weak, rebellious, and inclined toward drifting away from God until the day we see him face to face. Along with the hymn writer, each one of us can say that we are “prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.”²

You may not hear much teaching on this problem in our churches. Few people, and perhaps especially few pastors, are willing or able to open up their lives and hearts for public exposure and scrutiny. Most of us prefer to hide our sin and weakness instead of revealing ourselves and experiencing shame and humiliation. As a result, our churches have become places where we perform well for others and speak far more about our victories than our struggles. In consequence, many Christians wrestle with the agony of sinful failure in isolation and desperation. The silent message is deafening: Christians are people who quickly grow and change, and if you are weak and struggling you must not be a believer, or perhaps worse,

you are a particularly bad Christian in whom God is very, very disappointed.

This silence has not always been the case. In particular, there was one eighteenth-century pastor who was remarkably open about the secret sins of his heart—John Newton. You may know him as the author of the famous hymn “Amazing Grace.”

John Newton was born in 1725, and for the first six years of his life he benefited from the love and teaching of his mother. She was a devout Christian who faithfully taught him God’s Word and filled his young mind with psalms, hymns, and teachings from historic catechisms. When she died John was left to the care of his father, who was a moral man but had no faith in God or interest in religion. At the tender age of eleven, he found himself working on a ship for the first time and keeping company with other rough sailors.

Newton soon became a young man who could swear and blaspheme like the rest of the crew. He took perverse joy in profaning the name of God and in stirring up trouble and chaos wherever he could. Despite many attempts at moral reform, it would be another eleven years before he was converted. He would go on to describe himself as one whom God rescued against his own will.

During his sailing career, Newton was involved in the slave trade and captained several vessels on voyages to pick up fresh cargo in Africa. Although he was not immediately convicted of the perversity of the slave trade at the time of salvation, he held distaste for this occupation that required chains and shackles. Eventually, health problems forced him to abandon life aboard ship and settle into a more stable job as surveyor of the tide pools in Liverpool. Newton’s mother had predicted and hoped that he would one day be set apart for the ordained ministry of the Word of God, but Newton barely dared to hope that one who had been as sinful and perverse as he had been could ever be given such a privilege. Yet this is exactly what God did.

After several years of growth and training under godly evangelical ministers, both inside and outside the Church of England, Newton was accepted as a minister in the established church and was made vicar of a church in Olney, where he served for many years before moving to London. He became known for his pastor's heart and his great skill in counseling the large numbers of people who came to him—or wrote to him—for advice. Through years of ministering to people in every stage of life, Newton became an expert on “the anatomy of the soul” and took particular interest and joy in studying the progressive work of spiritual growth in believers, what theologians call “sanctification.” Newton was captivated by what God teaches his children through the complex process of sinners maturing in grace from the time of salvation onward.

Excellent books have been written on the subject of sanctification, yet Newton's work stands above the rest for one simple and (to us) shocking reason. He was open about the fact that he was still a wretched sinner long after he became a Christian. Many believers are willing and eager to talk about what big sinners they were before they were saved, but few invite you into their hearts to see what huge sinners they still are now. This is risky stuff. People might look down on you and reject you if you do that. They might not come to your church or listen to your sermons. They might trash your reputation and gossip about you. These dangers are indeed real. However, Newton had such great confidence in the love of God for him and such a great love for those he counseled that he refused to participate in the conspiracy of silence. He would not allow other believers to think more highly of him than they ought to think.

From his tremendous knowledge of Scripture, his vast experience as a sinner himself, and his service as a pastor of sinners, John Newton noticed that God is up to something purposeful and specific in the hearts of those he saves. If you were to ask

Christians around the world what God wants from the people he has saved, most would probably answer “obedience.” There is great truth in that answer, but it is not enough. If the sovereign God’s primary goal in sanctifying believers is simply to make us more holy, it is hard to explain why most of us make only “small beginnings” on the road to personal holiness in this life, as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it (see Catechism Q. 113). In reality, God wants something much more precious in our lives than mere outward conformity to his will. After all, obedience is tricky business and can be confusing to us. We can be obedient outwardly while sinning wildly on the inside, as the example of the Pharisees makes clear. In fact, many of my worst sins have been committed in the context of my best obedience. Before the night of Heather’s testimony, I saw my relationship to her as a loving mentor to a young convert. Much of my behavior toward Heather was exactly how I should have acted. However, I was also a judgmental, self-righteous, and entitled Pharisee who craved recognition for all that I had done. My outward obedience actually became the framework and context for my inward sin.

In the same way, when we witness to unbelievers, we are obeying God. Yet if we are full of pride as we do it, looking down on those who find it difficult to witness and don’t do it, we can be sinning even while we’re obeying. If we think that the person who is rejecting the gospel is doing so because they are less intelligent or morally inferior to us, we are sinning. If we take credit for the new life of faith that only God can give, we are sinning. Christians thus face a seriously disturbing predicament: when we are most successful in obeying God, we so often also hear that whisper of self-exaltation and superiority. We cannot escape it. If this is true of us even in our best moments, what hope is there for us in the race toward true holiness that changes us inside and out?

John Newton teaches us, however, that God's goal in our sanctification is not merely better obedience and increasing sinlessness. He observes that if God had wanted to do so, he could have made us instantaneously perfect at the moment of our salvation. After all, we know that he will make us instantly perfect when we die or when he comes again, and since all things are equally easy to the all-powerful God, he could as readily have sanctified us completely the moment we were saved.

Let's be honest: if the chief work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification is to make Christians more sin-free, then he isn't doing a very good job. The church throughout the ages and throughout the world has not usually been known for its purity and goodness. Instead, it is wracked by a constant history of strife, violence, and hypocrisy. People often cannot differentiate a believer from an unbeliever by their apparent goodness. In fact, there are many unbelievers who are morally superior to Christians and live lives of far greater nobility, generosity, and purpose than we who profess faith in Christ.

God could have saved us and made us instantly perfect. Instead, he chose to save us and leave indwelling sin in our hearts and bodies to wage war against the new and blossoming desires to please God that accompany salvation. This is a raging battle that we often lose, and that often leaves us feeling defeated and joyless in our walk with God. Yet Newton also points out that since we know God does all things for his own glory and the good of his people, his decision to leave Christians with many struggles with sin must also somehow serve to glorify him and benefit his people. This is shocking news, isn't it?

Think of what this means. God thinks that you will actually come to know and love him better as a desperate and weak sinner in continual need of grace than you would as a triumphant Christian warrior who wins each and every battle against sin. This makes sense out of our experience as Christians. If the job

of the Holy Spirit is to make you more humble and dependent on Christ, more grateful for his sacrifice and more adoring of him as a wonderful Savior, then he might be doing a very, very good job even though you still sin every day.

WHY IT MATTERS

What difference does it make whether you believe that Christians should go from strength to strength and live victorious lives of obedience, or whether you believe that Christians will remain on earth in a state of great weakness and utter dependence on God for every single good thought? *It makes all the difference in the world.* It matters immensely what you believe about yourself and about God. It matters that you have a true and accurate assessment of who you are as a believer before God, what God expects from you, and what you should expect from yourself. It matters a great deal that you understand what the Holy Spirit is up to in your life and how he does his work. Jesus invited us to live lives of joy and rest at the same time as we pursue the hard work of striving to obey God and grow in holiness (Matt. 11:28–30). I know many Christians who are trying hard to be holy, but few who are able to balance that hard work with joyful resting at the same time.

If you are a discouraged Christian who is surprised by your sin and sure that God is disappointed with you, then you need truth from God's Word to free you from the emotional roller coaster ride of your successes and failures. If you are a proud Christian who feels better than others because of your many strengths and triumphs, you need God's Spirit to show you the truth about your heart and humble you. If your peace now rests in what you are able to do, then where will you turn when you fall and commit sins that you never dreamed you could? On that day, you will need to know this truth to survive your failure and rejoice in the middle of it. Whoever you are and whatever spiritual state you

find yourself in, I urge you not to give up on finding your joy *in Christ* in this life. Sinless perfection and complete peace and joy must wait for heaven, but abundant joy here and now in Christ is your birthright and your inheritance, even when you sin and fail miserably to be a good Christian.

John Newton shows us from Scripture that true sanctification is all about growing in humility, dependence, and gratitude. Joy blossoms in our hearts not as we try harder and harder to grow, but as we see more clearly the depths of our sin and understand more fully our utter helplessness. Only then will we take our eyes off ourselves and look to Christ for all that we need in life and in death. Only then will we truly cherish our Savior and believe that we need him every minute of every day, and that without him we can do nothing (John 15:5).

Newton also demonstrates that God has some surprising ways of freeing his people from the bondage of their own performance and leading them to the joy and freedom of resting in Christ alone. If it is true that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9 KJV) and that we will continue to struggle with our depraved hearts throughout our lives, our ongoing sin can actually be the means God uses to glorify himself even while humbling us.

What if God chooses to glorify himself as much in our sinful failure, by bearing with us patiently, as he does by demonstrating his power to change us and strengthen us for obedience? What if sin continues to have victory over our best intentions many times each day? Is it possible for us to have profound joy even when we find ourselves sinning a great deal? We will investigate these important questions in this book, in order to understand ourselves and God’s way of working in this world and in our hearts individually. We will begin our exploration by observing John Newton’s description of the three stages of Christian growth and by noticing *what* God does in each stage

and *how* he does it. Buckle up, my friends—there is serious joy ahead!

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What did you expect that growth as a Christian would look and feel like when you were first saved? How would you describe the way in which your growth has taken place?
2. Do you secretly consider yourself better or worse than other Christians? Why?
3. Are you shocked by the sin you still see in your heart and actions? Why or why not?
4. In what new ways have you been seeing patterns of sin that have actually been around for a long time?
5. Do you tend to share your sinful failure with other believers, or do you tend to hide it and cover it up? Why?
6. What do you think God's goal is in sanctifying you?