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Introduction

The story of the Bible is one of eternal redemption. Of how God takes the trauma and brokenness of those He redeems and transforms them into gifts for His use in ministry. This book is the story of how God transformed my life—from a near-death skull fracture, childhood sexual abuse, hopelessness, marital betrayal, spiritual bankruptcy and thoughts of suicide—to today being the minister of mercy at a historical church in the heart of Philadelphia. It is also the story of Tenth Presbyterian Church's ministry of mercy and compassion and will serve as an instructional guide for diaconal ministry; empowering Christians who are starting new ministries in the local church.

Today, so many churches are comfortable following the practice of previous generations who didn't involve themselves in ministries of mercy. Many, today, are fearful of thinking "outside of the box" and lack vision and biblical direction. One small group at Tenth challenged that same attitude and because of that many others caught the vision. Wanting to feed the hungry, they asked the question, "How can our ministry be different from a soup kitchen?" Because of their actions, lives have been transformed and captives have been set free—both those outside

the church and those in the pews. What would your church look like if you did the same?

Throughout these pages, you will learn about how people serve and what initially stirs up a person's heart for ministry. I hope you will be encouraged by their confidence for serving in areas that most Christians refuse to go. I hope, also, that you will be encouraged by a user-friendly framework for diaconal ministry and answers to several of the frequently asked questions (FAQ) on mercy and diaconal ministry I've received. Finally, I've included other resources that will benefit your ministry and your walk with the Lord.

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A Journey from Death to Life

Life is not easy for anyone. Growing up crippled and without hope, however, made life for me even more difficult. My journey has been filled with both pain and sorrow, grace and redemption; I've spent time in the valley, in the wilderness and on the mountaintop.

It was certainly not on my early agenda to suffer physically, emotionally and spiritually. But I suppose that is not what some in the Bible planned—not Job, nor Moses, nor Joseph. Like Job, I experienced loss. I felt like everything was taken away. Like Moses, I was suddenly in the wilderness, wandering and seeking God's direction, wondering what would happen next. And similar to Joseph in Genesis 50:20, I was betrayed. Yet, God used it all for my good and the salvation of many. Other passages echo my story as well:

“Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up.” (Ps. 71:20, NIV 1984)

“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.” (Joel 2:25 NIV 1984)

There are occasions when, in a pivotal moment, everything

changes—when God takes people’s trauma and brokenness and transforms them into gifts for use in ministry. This book is partially the story of how God transformed my life after surviving a near-death skull fracture, childhood sexual abuse, teenage hopelessness, marital betrayal, spiritual bankruptcy and thoughts of suicide as an adult. This book is also the story of how I became the minister of mercy at a historical church in the heart of Philadelphia and how the Church must continue its ministry of mercy and compassion to those suffering from their own trauma and brokenness.

How it began

I write through the eyes of someone who has been broken physically, emotionally and spiritually and who badly needed mercy and compassion. I am thankful for my parents, non-religious Jews, who were loving, compassionate, ethical and politically active, always fighting for the underdog and heavily involved in the civil rights movement. They gave me a good foundation and a concern for others. Life, however, would teach me so much more.

Impacts

At the age of five, my brother Michael and I were playing ball on the sidewalk as we very often did. I missed the ball (a rarity) and it went into the street. Michael recalls that I ran into the road after the ball just as a speeding driver hit me. Michael saw it all. He saw me lying under the back of the car and began screaming at the top of his lungs. He finally ran inside calling for our mom. She collapsed. Michael was both numb and shaking. I lay there, still and unconscious in the road, blood hemorrhaging from my ears, mouth and nostrils. My only movement was the

involuntary spasm of one hand back and forth, back and forth.

That is how it all began for me. I was just a normal five-year old boy, playing ball on the sidewalk with his brother. Then I wasn’t.

I’ve been told that a neighbor gathered me in his arms, placed me in his car and drove me to Paterson (New Jersey) General Hospital. The doctors told my parents, “We’re not sure that he’s going to live. We’ll have to drill holes in his skull to relieve the pressure.” After this was done, the doctors said, “Your son is going to make it, but he is still in a coma.” Several days later the doctor then says to the mother, “Your son will live, but he’ll never walk. We don’t know what his life will be like.” A week later, I woke from the coma and spoke four words—swearing, actually, at a male cousin. To my parents though, they were the most beautiful sounds in the world. I was alive. My left side was paralyzed; my right eye blinded. But I was alive.

I was alive.

Future recovery would include wheelchairs, heavy leg braces and hand braces. There would be more surgery and fifteen years of physical and occupational therapy at Kessler Institute in Orange, New Jersey and in the Passaic County Cerebral Palsy Association. After many years, I was finally able to tie my shoes. Given my initial prognosis, this was a remarkable success.

A few years after the auto accident, I was at least twice sexually abused by my older cousin, Douglas. Was the fact that my first “post-coma” words were curses at him an indication that this abuse was on-going? I never found that out. I didn’t have the courage to talk about it for another thirty years. By then, Douglas was in a California mental institution, and when I spoke to family members, no one was aware of the abuse as I told no one when it occurred.

However, because of the abuse, I was not only physically crippled, but felt emotionally crippled as well—with scars that would not heal for years and years. I felt broken with absolutely no hope of ever being healed. I felt unworthy and believed also that I was no good. Most certainly, I felt abandoned by God (even though at the time I believed He didn't exist). I grew up to be a very angry, sarcastic, bitter and hopeless person.

Faith was nowhere on my radar.

Impacts

As a pre-teen and teenager, my only escapes were baseball and bowling. I followed my beloved Brooklyn Dodgers and my heroes Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella. I always thought, *If they could make it, so can I*. As for bowling, this sport requires only one hand, and for many years I excelled and became a champion bowler.

At age sixteen, I finally fully recovered from surgery to lengthen my Achilles tendon. It was the first time since being hit by the car that I could stand upright and walk straight and run without tripping. My bowling had never been better.

Following a January snow storm the next year, I was on my way to participate in the finals of the state bowling championship. Driving my dad's Volkswagen minibus, (a vehicle with the engine in the back) I suddenly hit an icy patch, spun around and sped across a three lane highway. Looking ahead I saw the rail, and feared I was going to die. Just then the minibus was hit by another car. It spun around again and threw me to the ground. Everything went black. Soon after, I opened my eyes where I lay on the shoulder of the highway, just inches away from the rear tire of the minibus. With the help of the other driver, I got up and as there were no serious injuries—I was just scratched, after

all—got back in the car, which was running just fine, and drove home. Suffering only minor cuts and bruises, I said to myself, “Boy, I am lucky.”

Good friends, good news

Around that time and for the next few years, several African American Christians befriended me. We had a mutual friend, Jimmy, with whom I worked. It wasn't like I was their “project,” a sinner to be saved. No, they just loved me and cared about me. They told me some crazy stuff about their Savior, Jesus—how He had lifted them out of the “ash heap and the dung pile” (Ps. 113:7, paraphrased) and richly clothed them in robes of splendor. I repeatedly responded, “Go away with that. I have no hope. There is no God. Leave me alone with this Jesus.” But, then one day I met a man who was old, poor, blind, crippled and lived in a rat and roach infested apartment, who said that he was rich, whole and well. More and more, God brought me into contact with people who, though poor, said that they were rich. After years of fighting them off, finally I said, “These people may be crazy, but they have what I want.”

I studied the Bible in the company of poor people and worshiped together with them at Northside Community Chapel, an inner-city Christian Reformed church plant (chronicled in the book *Chains of Grace* by Stan VanderKlay). I remember reading the Bible for the first time and believing that this was God's Word. This was after years of denying His existence and being totally ignorant of the truths contained in Scripture. I remember the first time I read the Exodus story. I knew the story but thought it was something the film director Cecil B. DeMille had made up for his film, *The Ten Commandments*. This was an “Aha!” moment for me as a new believer, to read the Bible and

see that historically God had a plan to deliver His people and to save them from their sin, going all the way back to Genesis 3. I was beginning to believe what my new friends said about God—Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Yet, I still had some doubts. That is, until. . . .

Not again

I was driving down a narrow one way street on my way to speak to the minister about my belief in Scripture, about baptism and about church membership. Suddenly a child dashed out in front of my car. Before I could step on the brakes, I hit him, sending the three year old boy skidding and rolling down the road before he stopped—motionless. I buried my head in my hands, horrified. I heard the mother scream and visualized my own accident many years before: me running out, getting hit by the car, people screaming.

The police and paramedics came, and I followed them to Paterson General Hospital, the same hospital I'd gone to. I waited in a state of shock and disbelief, asking myself, "Did I kill him? Oh no, Lord. Don't let him die." Finally the doctor came out and said, "I have good news. Edwin is okay. He is badly bruised, but he has no internal bleeding, no breaks or injuries. He'll go home in about an hour and he should be fine." That news was such a relief. And at that moment, without a doubt, I knew that Jesus Christ was my Savior. Just as God had saved Edwin's life just then, I knew He had saved me from physical death many years before. More importantly, I also knew that God had saved me from eternal death as well. At that moment I knew that God had used a unique process of suffering to get my attention and had brought to me people who had suffered in a variety of ways, yet were victorious in Jesus Christ. I knew that I was saved for

all eternity. God got my attention, and soon after I was baptized and made my public profession of faith. At that worship service, my pastor used the text from Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor. . ." (61:1–2). I took that verse to heart—the Spirit of the Lord had anointed me to do something. He called me to bring the good news to the poor and to give spiritual sight to the blind. He called me to release the captives. But there were more changes to come.

Vocation and service

After praying and talking to many people, I was led by God to be a Christ-centered social worker, working for the government. While in college, I interned at my hometown Welfare Department in Paterson, New Jersey. Upon graduation I became an investigator and then a caseworker. With my hope in Christ and the knowledge of His mercy and grace, I could come alongside individuals who were suffering and offer material and spiritual resources to them and families who were impoverished and without hope. Even though government service restricted my use of scripture and prayer, I decided early on to obey God's law rather than man's. I would ask those with whom I met, "May I pray or read Scripture with you?" If they said yes, I would. If not, that was okay too.

I went on to work for another government agency in crisis intervention and public advocacy. At the *Action Now Center*, I had the opportunity to help people navigate through the social service system in such a way that they would become inde-

pendent of welfare or other financial needs and dependencies. But the biggest blessing was helping people become dependent on Jesus Christ in that process. And, although my supervisor warned me to keep my religious beliefs separate from my work, I sought—with my client's permission—to pray and read Scripture with those who came in for help. My boss would say, "You can't do this." And I responded with, "I can't not do this." For this reason, after five years, I was given an ultimatum: change, quit or be fired. I handed in my resignation and began working in, and eventually managing, my father's printing company.

This was one of many nudges by God; hints that a major shift in terms of what I would "do" with the rest of my life was underway. But not without more trials, of course.

Unanticipated changes

When I was twenty-seven, my former spouse and I separated. She left our home and I became a custodial single parent of three children ages six, four and two. I said, "I can do this. I'm a real man." I felt that I could take care of my kids, could work and could take care of myself, worship and grow in the Lord. And, I did. But, thirteen months later, upon my return home from vacation, I found that my former spouse with the help of others moved herself in and moved me out of my home. Imagine coming home and finding someone who should not be there residing in your home. On top of that, imagine that that had removed all your belongings and stored them in the basement. That was an awful experience! After two weeks of being a stranger in my own home and sleeping on the living room sofa, I moved out. I took only my clothes, books, records and stereo. Not wanting to put my children in a tug of war, I removed myself, got my own apartment and lived alone. I felt so much grief

and loss. I stopped caring about myself. On non-visitation days, I worked all day, came home and would consume liquor until I passed out.

This suffering and depression went on for about a year. In addition, my church attendance suffered, as did my relationship with God. I despaired of life and I felt suicidal. I was so miserable that I wanted God to take me and actually prayed that He would—I was too frightened to do it myself. The last time I drank to excess, I passed out, fell down, hit my head and woke up sometime later in a small pool of blood. I knew that I was in danger and might have died. I was so angry at myself and so sick and tired of being sick and tired with this sinful behavior that I screamed a Bible verse at God (as if He didn't know it). It was incredible. I look up to heaven and yelled with a clinched fist, "You promised you wouldn't give me more than I could bear (1 Cor. 10:13). Well that's enough, I can't take it anymore!"

Imagine how I felt. This was such an astonishing "Aha" moment. As I listened to these words of Scripture, the truth of the verse hit me for the first. It was true: God promised not to give me more than I can bear. He is faithful to me in the time of my temptation and trouble. He will come alongside me and give us a way of escape. I knew that I had wandered away from Jesus Christ for that full year, and I was scared of dying, and I could have died. I knew at that moment that I couldn't do anything without him. I surrendered.

In that moment and the moments to come, I rediscovered just how merciful God is. He saved me after being hit by the car when I was five year of age and saved Edwin when I hit him. He saved me from eternal death when I was nineteen. He even healed the emotional scars from the sexual abuse. He brought me through loneliness and despair when my children were taken

away and showed His faithfulness by returning them to me nine months later.

But the lessons were not over.

Getting my attention

In 1980, I married my lovely wife, Kate. Two years later, on Halloween night, Kate and I were driving to a family function. Streetlights lit up the dark road. Several cars in front of us stopped to let trick-or-treaters cross the street. We slowed down and stopped, too. The car behind us, however, did not. We heard the screeching of the brakes and then the sound of metal against metal as the speeding car driven by someone high on drugs slammed into us. I suffered a severe lower-back injury; Kate was uninjured.

God got my attention again. Not physically able to manage the print shop, I was out of work for four years. I wasn't producing anything and wasn't making any money. How empty I felt when those things—those props of job and income—were taken away. I saw that my self-worth was in my work, in what I produced, and in the amount of money I earned, but not in whom I was in Jesus Christ. I hit bottom again. Once again, I needed to look to things above. And I had all the time I needed, because I was on my back with severe chronic pain. One thing I could do was pray and read Scripture. In doing so, Job became my best friend—Joseph, Moses and Hosea, too. I discovered God's presence in the wilderness with Moses, and dealing with tragedy with Joseph, Job and Hosea. I re-discovered the God who strengthens me and gives me hope. During those years, as never before, God revealed His mercy and grace to me and exposed my spiritually bankruptcy. He showed me that my identity is not in what I do or how much I earn, but in Him alone. I went from

saying in anger, "Why are you doing this to me?" to saying with humility, "How are you going to use this for your glory and my benefit?"

The answer to this question came when God gave Kate and me the opportunity to take biblical counseling courses at a Messianic synagogue in Brooklyn. We attended for six weeks and after that, God opened the doors for me to go to Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) near Philadelphia for one and a half years.

Since the accident, I had been living with chronic back pain. After completing my studies at CCEF, I enrolled elsewhere—this time in the "low-back school" run by Kessler Institute (where I had therapy and surgery many years before). There I was taught how to temporarily abolish pain and teach new body mechanics to my muscles and limbs to further avoid pain. I prayed about the next step. When would I be physically ready to work? Where would God lead me? How would He use my new counseling skills, my experience working in the urban arena and that of running a business? For eighteen months I applied to fifteen positions in cities across the United States including bigger cities like Chicago and New York, and smaller ones such as Ames, Iowa and Redlands, California. There was also one position in Philadelphia that I really didn't want and didn't apply to, but my Kate (who I always listen to) said, "You know, God can't say yes or no about Tenth Presbyterian Church's Ministry of Mercy unless you apply." So I applied, and the rest is history. That was 1988. Since then, the ministry I direct, ACTS (Active Compassion Through Service) has sought to make Tenth Church a safe and welcoming place for all people to worship and know the Lord—especially those who have previously been ostracized or stigmatized by churches.

Because of God's redemption and healing in my own life, and with the help of the church, I have been able to bring the same mercy, compassion and hope of God to others with the goal that they too might be drawn to Jesus.

And God absolutely draws people to Himself, but how does He exactly get our attention?

Our life experiences.

God uses our families, our rearing, our schools and our neighborhoods. He uses accidents and injuries and trauma, heartache, abuse, abandonment and failure. And yes, God even uses success to remind us that there is nothing in us that allows us to stand apart from Him. For everything we possess or experience comes from God's hand alone and He uses all our experiences for His glory and our benefit. His timetable is perfect, and His grace sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9). My favorite illustration of this is Genesis 50:20 where Joseph—betrayed and abused by his brothers—says, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

Serving with the grace I've been given

I can serve others because of my thorough understanding of how God has served me. When I think about the new life He has given me, I remember it with tears of joy and sorrow. It took me about fifteen years as a believer before I thoroughly understood God's grace. Before that, every time I looked in the mirror I saw someone ugly and unworthy. Have you ever had such a horrible feeling? I still saw someone who, because I had been abused, was no good and not worth saving. But that masked the God's truth. I couldn't change the image that I saw, but I could remind myself of that in Jesus Christ, I'm clothed with His righteousness,

and all is forgiven.

Now when I look in the mirror, I see the redeemed person that God sees. There are old wounds, yes, but there are now scars, and the wounds are healed. The past doesn't hurt anymore. If you've suffered some form of abuse, you know it is like a truck dumping its load of stones on you. Life becomes difficult. And the long restoration process begins by removing one stone at a time, recognizing that God has the power to come alongside with a backhoe to take that entire burden of stones on Himself.

What prevents that from happening many times is that we don't give Him permission. Sinful pride has you and me holding on to things that hurt us instead of crying out to God for relief. But if we understand God's grace, know that we are forgiven and realize that the past is gone; we can look in the mirror with a new perspective as new creatures in Christ. Now when I view myself, I see the limp, I see a hand that still doesn't function well; I see a lip that does not go up on one side. But I know that despite the past injuries, I am whole. I am a recipient of God's mercy. I can be vulnerable with strangers and friends because I know who I am in Jesus Christ. I can be totally vulnerable because I know Jesus as the advocate who has come alongside of me, has gotten under my skin and has taken all my emotional baggage on Himself. I know Jesus saved me from sin and freed me to serve. God made me His instrument and gave me the heart of a servant.