

The Testimony of Bob and Cathy Donk

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Cathy closed her children's bedroom door, gripping the knob as she struggled to control her breathing. The sudden silence of the house assaulted her senses, thickening in her lungs, roaring to the fevered rhythm of her pulse. This was it.

Padding noiselessly down the hall, she lingered in the doorway, her writhing stomach icy with terror.

Turn around! her mind shrieked. Just turn around and walk away! You don't have to tell him. Not tonight, not ever...

She froze, her knuckles white on the doorframe, wracked by her indecision. She could hear Bob in the other room, and his unsuspecting presence sickened her with dread. It would be so easy, to walk the other way, to go into the bedroom and close the door and pretend that everything was normal, everything was fine. She was a Christian now—had Christ not forgiven her this sin? Why then, must she do this?

Cathy dug her fingernails into her palms, her wedding ring biting into her flesh. She knew why she had to do this. She could still hear her pastors' voices filling the receiver, urging her to confess. Cathy had called them in a panic as soon as she had hung up with Jay, pouring the entire story through the wire, choking on her shame, desperate for a solution. Their advice had been simple, direct, and the one thing she absolutely didn't want to hear: "Cathy, you must tell Bob before he hears it from somebody else."

Immediately, her mind had rebelled against their advice; the thought of standing before her husband and telling him about Jay was inconceivable, too terrifying to contemplate. Yet even as she tried to maneuver around the idea, Cathy knew she had no other option; her secret was out, and it was only a matter of time before Bob heard the truth.

She just wished it didn't have to be tonight.

Pressing her damp palm to her cheek, Cathy's gaze wandered sightlessly into the shadows, as she asked herself yet again what had brought her to this moment, to this place where even the idea of confronting her husband could set her stomach heaving with fear. Things had become so tangled, somehow, her marriage twisted into something foreign, complex, unrecognizable from the life they had once shared together.

The night that she had first met Bob suddenly flared up in her mind; they had both been just kids then, high school freshman who had met by coincidence at a school dance. What began as a mutual attraction quickly developed into something deeper. They had dated through high school, their relationship ending and resuming repeatedly during the years that Bob had attended the State University of

New York. Unlike the teenaged commitments of their peers, which faded with time and maturity, Bob and Cathy's bond endured the distance between them, and they were married shortly after Bob graduated from college.

That day, when Cathy had spoken vows of better or worse before the altar, she'd had no idea the magnitude and speed with which "worse" would descend. A few months after their one-year wedding anniversary, Bob discovered his father in his car, dead from carbon monoxide poisoning. Two days later, Bob was informed of his pending draft notice for the army, with potential service in Vietnam. This news arrived within hours of Cathy's discovery that she was pregnant. But Bob was spared the horrors of the war overseas, when, to the couples' amazement, God created a vacancy in a local National Guard unit, where there had not been one previously. However, the small comfort that this created was abruptly shattered when Cathy began hemorrhaging and later miscarried.

In spite of the grueling hardships that they encountered, the couple pressed on, each taking refuge in the solace that only the other could provide, bound perhaps even more tightly together by the tragedies they shared. As the days rolled on they stepped carefully forward, carrying the hope of better times like a light between them.

However, the true test of their relationship had hardly begun. During their fifth year of marriage, Bob, who had recently enrolled with a paramedic squad, rode along one night on ambulance detail as they rushed to the aid of a choking woman. Upon arriving at the scene, he was appalled to discover that the woman was not a stranger to him, but was Cathy's very best friend Marlene. Despite their best efforts, the team was unable to resuscitate her, and she passed away before Bob's horrified eyes. Numb with anguish, Bob had little choice but to go home and deliver the news to Cathy.

Grief infiltrated their lives like a famine, its hunger clawing through their days and nights, filling them with the aching void of someone lost that can never be returned. Unlike their previous hardships, Marlene's death twisted their hearts individually, making them unrecognizable to each other in their sorrow. Bob, who had witnessed the tragedy firsthand, wanted nothing more than to block the terrible images from his mind. Anxious to escape, he turned inward, refusing to talk about the events that surrounded the death or his feelings on the subject. Cathy on the other hand, was being torn apart from the inside out; only by talking about the incident did she feel she could move on, as if words could transform Marlene's incomprehensible death into some semblance of sense. The more that Cathy tried to talk to Bob about Marlene, the more Bob turned away from her, unwilling to relive the horrible moments when he had watched his wife's beloved friend suffer.

Bereaved of her best friend and barred from the solace of her husband, Cathy found herself drowning beneath the weight of her own loneliness. Stricken with anxiety attacks, sinking into depression, she turned increasingly to prescription drugs and alcohol to numb the misery she felt. Bob had become a closed door to her, and lost in her isolation, she was unprepared for the day when Jay Talbot,

Bob's best friend, phoned simply to ask her how she was holding up. As she drank in Jay's comfort over the phone, a frigid thorn of resentment crept into her heart as she wondered, "Now, why can't Bob do this?"

Things escalated with frightening speed. What began as innocent, therapeutic phone calls became lengthy conversations in person. Fueled by her desperate desire for companionship, Cathy soon found herself embroiled in a full-blown affair. Her double life split her down the middle; on the one side, she was disgusted with her actions, sick with the knowledge of her unfaithfulness. However, the other side of her relished the attention and affection Jay offered, his presence a thin yet adequate fill for the emptiness inside her. So for three years she stuffed her shame into a ball and hid it deep within the recesses of her heart, paving over her pain with substance abuse and the brief escape her time with Jay provided.

Life continued in this manner until one particular day when Cathy turned on the television and came across a Christian program. Something about the speaker's expression and sweeping voice caught her attention, and before she knew it she was fixed on the screen, enraptured by the message of love and forgiveness that could be attained through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Although she and Bob were active members in their church and had established deep, personal connections with their pastor and his wife, she had never heard the message of salvation explained so clearly before. For years, Cathy had sung the hymns and prayed the prayers, listened to the teachings of her pastors and studied the spirituality of her peers, yet never had she cried out to God and felt adequately answered, never had she experienced for herself the power of the personal relationship with Jesus that she had heard so reverently described.

But that day, plagued by her sorrow and the shame that still throbbed in her like an old wound, the speaker's words were infused with new life. They reached out to her, drawing her in, until she found herself kneeling on the living room floor, crying out to Jesus to enter her heart and save her from the terrible pain she held inside. And He did. She felt Him, flowing through her soul like liquid light, throwing wide the darkened doors of her heart and cleansing her with peace. The following day, eager to experience more of the program that had helped transform her life, Cathy flipped once again through the T.V. channels. She had never tuned in to that station before...and she never received it again.

Re-forged in God's forgiveness, Cathy ended her affair with Jay, believing that God had closed that part of her life, and neither she—nor anyone else—would ever have to revisit it again. She had continued thinking so until just hours before, when Jay's panic-stricken voice had lanced across the phone line, shattering her security with his news: his wife had found out about them.

Found out. The words pounded over and over through her brain as she numbly hung up the receiver, as she listened with mounting terror to the inevitable advice of her pastors, as she stood in the shadowed doorway, grappling for the strength to stand before Bob and betray her secret and her marriage along with it.

Cathy clenched her fists to keep them from trembling, and swallowed her ragged breath back into her lungs. Offering up a final, silent prayer she emerged, deaf to everything but the blood exploding in her ears, and approached her husband.

Her confession felt shapeless, soundless, as if her devastating words were formed from nothing but the thin air she was struggling to take in. They echoed off the walls, filling the space between them with their terrible roar, until finally she fell silent before her dumbfounded spouse. Carefully, Bob came forward, moving closer and closer until she was forced to meet his eyes. There, to her astonishment, she saw not anger but compassion, not resentment but deep, unfathomable love. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper, but it contained all of the warmth and emotion she had felt when she first accepted Christ. "Is *that* what you've been carrying around with you all these years?" he murmured, before folding her into his arms.

Cathy thought that was the end of it. After so many years of estrangement and silent pain, her burden had been lifted, and she nourished the hope that once again she could give herself whole-heartedly to her marriage. She never suspected that, like her, Bob would have secrets of his own to confess.

Less than twenty-four hours after Cathy's emotional declaration, it was he who stood before his wife, struggling for words. Bit by painful bit, the story came out: with their relationship fraying, Bob had given in to temptation. He confessed to Cathy that the last several years had been peppered with infrequent, one-time flings, many induced by alcohol and all outside of their community. Furthermore (as they later pieced together), Jay's wife had found out about him and Cathy long before she had confronted Jay with her knowledge. The woman's pain and rage had meshed into a quiet desire to see Cathy suffer as she had, and she began to pursue Bob. Lost in his grief and alienated in his marriage, Bob had eventually given in to her persistence, resulting in a one-night stand with Jay's wife mere days before Cathy confessed. For nearly seven years, Bob had harbored the searing shame of these moments of weakness within him, never dreaming that Cathy was living a lie that practically paralleled his own. When he had finished his account, Cathy greeted his acknowledgment of his guilt with the same devotion, compassion, and forgiveness he had shown her. That night, they held each other as they hadn't in years, without reservations, without fear, their hearts as new and exposed to one another as if they had been married only hours before.

In the following days, the pervading atmosphere of love and warmth continued to grow. Although their admissions had been terrible, the peace that washed over them afterwards began to heal their wounds, soothing their previous pain like ointment. After years of secrets, the shadows that had stalked the edges of their marriage had been chased away by truth, and the very air seemed cleaner with relief.

Despite this, Bob and Cathy knew that there was still progress to be made. The long wall of trust that they had built together had crumbled beneath the weight of their mistakes, and it would take time and effort to build it back up. In order to do that, the couple committed themselves to a new standard of accountability: they regularly informed each other of where they were going, and when. As their communication increased, the broken pieces of their faith in one another began to reform, becoming stronger with every new day.

In a further attempt at restoration, Bob and Cathy began counseling with their pastor and his wife, and continued the long, arduous journey to a strong and healthy marriage. The emotional and spiritual guidance they received from their pastors proved to be essential to their healing process. The couple held Bob and Cathy to an even more rigorous standard of accountability while simultaneously coaching them in the ways of God's forgiveness and compassion. During this time, Bob made his own personal commitment to Christ, discovering for himself the power of God's redemption as his relationship with Cathy intensified with love and understanding.

The next twenty-five years would see the benefits of their salvation and their dedication to one another. To spare themselves unnecessary hurt, Bob and Cathy resolved to put their past behind them, recalling their testimony only to benefit other struggling couples with their own infidelity or similar marital problems. With God's help, Bob and Cathy were able to turn their previous pain into an instrument of love, as they ministered to those suffering from the same pain that they themselves had experienced.

As time progressed, Bob would sense the spiritual call to enter the pastoral ministry full-time. With God's guidance, he went on to found a new church in Maryland. He was later appointed the Executive Director of Marriage Savers of Frederick County in Maryland, an organization designed to help prepare couples for marriage and aid troubled spouses in salvaging their relationships.

Having trekked through thirty stunning years of marriage, there came a day when, absorbed in some mental errand, Cathy found herself pausing once again in her doorway. Surrounded by memories, her fingertips glided across the painted wood, as if searching out traces of her former heartache in the grain. It wasn't there.

Instead, her heart pulsed with steady warmth, filling her with a sudden rush of gratitude for the enduring love she had experienced, both from her husband and from her Savior. She and Bob had stumbled so often in their walk together, their path lined with the jagged silhouettes of the obstacles that they had encountered. Yet out of the ruins of their mistakes, Christ had carved new words: Forgiveness. Mercy. Redemption. Release. A smile played across Cathy's lips in the semi-darkness, the taste of the words like honey on her tongue. With a final, contented sigh she strode forward into the adjoining room, into the light.