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Revelations

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BECKY LEWIS

I used to be an evangelist. Well, ok, not a real evangelist.

I never got on TV and said God would make you rich if you gave me money or stood on a street corner holding a placard, railing at the masses to repent or burn in hell.

I did, however, join a march once in downtown Dallas. Singing praises to God, I held a placard, but I can't remember what it said. And I belonged to a non-denominational, Bible-thumping, charismatic, hands-in-the-air, face-on-the-floor evangelical church. I was there every time the doors opened and I tried very hard to be a good evangelist. I just couldn't get the hang of it; I never felt comfortable telling people to either surrender their lives to a loving God or they would char in the great toaster below. It just never sat right with me.

The beginning of the end came when my spiritual mentor and idol decided that I was possessed. I had crossed her on a spiritual point relating to another girl. (Ann had her own disciples. A posse of five or six girls who thought she channeled God. She used to sequester herself in her apartment to fast and pray. I remember going over there after one of these episodes. I could tell she hadn't slept. Her eyes were on fire as she paced and prophesied. We thought she was the holiest thing walking the planet.) It was such a minor thing, I don't even remember what it was about, but I do remember time standing still for a few seconds. Neither of us spoke. There was electricity in the air. Then, she said, "What just happened?" and I said "I don't know" but I was shaking. I had never crossed her before. She coerced my best friend into a deliverance intervention. They kidnapped me and took me to Ann's apartment.

"Ann. I'm not possessed!"

"Don't you speak to me you demon from hell!" she screamed.

"But Ann..."

"Come out of her in the name of Jesus!"

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This went on for quite some time, my claiming to be me, her claiming I was a demon. I don't think my friend knew what to think, so she mostly kept her head down in prayer, looking up occasionally, wild-eyed. Being the relatively normal, sane, God-loving, demon-fearing person I was, I freaked out. Really freaked out. I prefer not to remember the gruesome details, so suffice to say I had, what I now understand to have been, a three day panic attack. It was hell. But God, in his mercy (oh, yes, I still believe in God), brought me out of it.

There were two scriptures that worked their magic on me; "Christ in you, the hope of glory" and "It is God who works in you to will and to do according to his good pleasure." After reading these two scriptures over and over again, I suddenly understood that being a Christian meant that God lived in me and any changes that needed to be made, He would make; that if He wanted me to do something, He would lead me to it; if He wanted me to say something, He would put the words in my mouth. I didn't have to strive for perfection. God would work out perfection in me, or not, according to his good pleasure. I started laughing. For the first time in three days, I was full of joy and I truly felt like a different person. I even made people start calling me "Becky" instead of "Rebekah." (I had been called "Becky" until I started my career and decided "Becky" wasn't sophisticated enough.) "Becky" was who I really was. Not pretentious "Rebekah." Needless to say, my relationship with Ann was never the same.

You would think this enough of an epiphany but no, like the Jews who wandered in the desert for forty years because they seemed to forget God's miracles as soon as they happened, I lost the wonder of it rather quickly. It was still inside and I still understood the truth of it, but I guess it needed to ferment. It was only the first epiphany. There was another to come.

After my unfortunate episode with Ann, I joined a women's group at church. About a year later, it was decided that I would lead my own women's group. Me? In leadership? Are they nuts? They must be desperate. At first I refused, but then a small voice inside said, "In ministering, you will be healed." Ah, a paradox. Like, "Those who teach, learn." "If you build it, they will come." Ok, I get it. I'll give it a shot. I loved to preach anyway. Only to the choir, of course, who soaked it in like dry sponges and praised the wisdom God had given me. Preaching to the unwashed masses, who weren't interested and seemed to have an unholy force field around their hearts, was much less satisfying. So it went well for awhile until, in our leadership

meetings, I started recognizing the manipulation they were asking us to inflict, not only on our poor flock but also on the unwashed masses. Then I started noticing it in our church services.

People want to be accepted and loved. They want to feel worthy. In church, this is doubly so; no, this is quadrupally so. From the pulpit, we received the mixed messages that God loves us, but only if we love Him; He forgives us, but only if we ask for it and try to live perfect lives; He wants a relationship with us, but only if we hold our tongues just right. During our sometimes two hour worship services (this is two hours before the preaching started) people would speak in tongues, cry, fall prostrate on the floor, laugh, prophesy, and the list goes on. Sometimes I didn't get it. Why was that person reacting that way? What was God doing with them and why wasn't He doing it with me. There had to be something wrong with me.

I soon realized, however, that it was not just me. I began to understand that most people felt this way but instead of wondering about it, they would mimic the behavior in an effort to one, be accepted as spiritual by those around them and two, hoping that God would find them worthy enough to make it real. I began to see how people strove with God and each other to be accepted and loved and to feel worthy.

Ok, guilty. As previously mentioned, I did my own striving with God and with the other members of the tired and sick Body of Christ. I remember getting up at five o'clock in the morning so that I could pray and read my Bible, seeking God's wisdom and leadership. I listened only to Christian music (the rest of it was obviously deviant), read only Christian books and the Bible

I didn't have to strive for perfection.

(others would corrupt my morals), watched only Christian television (ditto), had only Christian art on my walls (so my eyes would see only what was beautiful and holy), threw away all my old books and albums (I still cry about that), had a fish on my car, stopped smoking and drinking, went to Church four or five times a week and successfully alienated my family and non-Christian friends. I would beg God to make me like the great evangelists, John the Baptist, Elijah, Joyce Meyers. I would go to prayer meetings to wage war with the devil. I begged God to love me, to forgive me, to make me like Jesus. It was pathetic.

I started having panic attacks, regular and severe. At first, I didn't know what they were and thought that God was punishing me for something. The feeling was too much like the one I had when Ann announced I was possessed. I prayed and cried and begged God for forgiveness. It wasn't until later that I went

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to the doctor and found out that the feeling was not real in the sense that it was caused by a chemical imbalance in my brain. He gave me tranquilizers which made them go away temporarily and then, later, an anti-depressant.

However, in the meantime, we had a revival at church. Prophets came in and did their thing. People crowded the church hoping they would be “chosen by God” to have “a word” spoken over them. People were going to the altar to have someone lay hands on them, where they would then fall to the floor in a faint, presumably with the power of God running through them to cleanse and beautify. I went to the altar too, but nothing happened, except one of the elder’s wives said that God was going to change my life. Yeah, whatever. Thanks. I went back to my seat in tears and my best friend leaned over and said, “God’s timing is perfect.” What? What! God’s timing is perfect? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Here I am having panic attacks, thinking that God is angry with me. I’m trying to lead a group of women, some of whom have lives that are way out of my league to help. I’ve got an angry husband, a stressful job, and all I want is to fall on the floor and feel God’s power flow through me. God’s timing is perfect?

That was it, the proverbial last straw. Something inside broke. I left the church then. I knew I had to. I knew God wanted me to, but I didn’t really understand why. Suddenly, all of the striving stopped. I couldn’t do it anymore. I stopped praying. Well, at least regularly. No more church, no more worship and no more Bibles. I moved from Irving to Dallas. I let my son listen to non-Christian music. I let my husband put his Gauguin back on the wall (Gauguin’s art being half nude women in Tahiti). I felt lost. I wasn’t sure who I was anymore. But somehow, I knew I was in the right place.

Then one day, I was in a bookstore and ran across a book called “Dark Night of the Soul” written by a monk in the 14th century. I opened the book out of curiosity; after all, I did feel I was having my own dark night of the soul, and found that he was describing to me exactly what I was going through. He talked about how a new convert will go off on an emotional high and tell everyone how Jesus saved him (her, in my case) but then, at some point, the high wears off which leads the convert to strive for the high to return. He talked about God’s desire for us to trust that he loves and cares for us even when we don’t feel it. It was a difficult read but it said exactly what I needed to hear.

I began journaling my thoughts and, one day, as I was thinking about the striving and the desire to be God's great (evangelical) voice on the earth, I had a vision. Not a vision like I was taken to the heavens and shown angels and trumpets and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. No, it was just a picture in my mind of this huge, fire-breathing monster of a man/animal, roaring and waving his arms about, and I knew I was seeing a picture of what I had envisioned a "good Christian" to be. Here was my cross between John the Baptist and Elijah, breathing fire down from heaven, calling for repentance and burning up all the chaff along the way. And, in that moment, I heard a small voice inside say "That is not me. That is not who you were created to be." I picked up my Bible and found passages that described Jesus as gentle and kind, healing and loving all those around him, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. "This is who I am," said that small voice, "and this is who you are meant to be."

Have you ever heard of "thought clusters?" Someone once told me that most people think in clusters of thought, as opposed to linear thought: once sentence after another. Well, in that moment, I had a cluster thought. I felt so much love and acceptance from the One I needed it from the most. All at once, I remembered the first epiphany about no need for striving. I remembered when I was a teenager doing drugs, sleeping around and drinking myself into the toilet, someone asked me

"How can you believe God loves you when you do the things you

I went to the altar too, but nothing happened...

do." And I said, "Because God is my father. He loves me no matter what I do. If you had a daughter and she was doing drugs or sleeping around or even killed someone, would you stop loving her? No, you wouldn't because she is your daughter and you love her no matter what. Well, that's how God is. I'm his daughter and He loves me no matter what."

Out of the mouths of babes. What ever happened to that girl? That girl grew up and was corrupted by the non-denominational, Bible-thumping, charismatic, hands-in-the-air, face-on-the-floor evangelical church. But, that girl was still me. And I understood in a moment that I had gotten it all screwed up.

God is not about punishment. He's not about following rules. He's about love. He is love. When we love someone or someone loves us, that's God. When we act kindly toward someone, when we feel compassion or empathy, when we give, that's God. God is not tearing down the house, so to speak, so He can rebuild

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it; He is building it, brick by brick, as we live and breathe. He is our breath. And there is nothing, absolutely nothing that we can say or do or think that can separate us from that love, even if we wanted to. So, what is there to fear? Nothing. And that became my new motto: "No fear," just like the Nike commercial.

So, ok. Wow! I pondered this for awhile and, being the relatively normal, sane, God-loving, demon-fearing person that I was, I had to test it out. I went back to Egypt, in a manner of speaking. I started listening to rock first. Man that was good; I had missed it so much. God didn't smite me. No panic. My car didn't break down and I didn't get sick. Cool. So then I started reading non-Christian books. I actually got interested in Buddhist thought. Still no fire down from heaven. No small voice reprimanding me. My son said "I love you" and my husband was happier. I started having a beer now and then. Still nothing and slowly I began to believe it. Really believe it.

It's been many years now. I don't want you to get the idea that nothing bad ever happens to me or that I'm always happy. No. But, I am peaceful most of the time; even when the bad things happen. I still don't go to church or read the Bible but I love God and I talk to him a lot, mostly to say "thank you" but sometimes to ask for things. Recently, my son was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. He's been deeply depressed and suicidal. I get scared sometimes, but then I remember that God loves him more than I do and He's building my son's house, too. Life is hard sometimes, unfair. We're not perfect yet, so we screw things up and make life imperfect. And, of course, the old adage "we learn from our mistakes" is only sometimes true.

Am I still a Christian? I think so. I just can't buy into the church anymore. I used to be angry. I guess I still get angry sometimes, but not for myself. I think that, just like the Pharisees of old, the church lays a burden on us that we we're not meant to carry. We don't need the burden of worrying about whether or not God loves us or approves of us. He never intended that for us. "Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." Rest, yes, from fear and worry about hell which (admit it) is why most want God to love them, so they don't go to hell. I'm not sure I believe in hell anymore anyway. At least, not the way the church thinks of hell. Even if there is a hell, it is not intended for us. Why would God want to put his children in a place like that? Besides, we are more than capable, and apparently willing, to create our own hell on earth. We don't need a devil or demon for that. No. We just need to trust God and leave demons and hell to him.