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P A R T O N E



FIRST  
THINGS FIRST

My hands were shaking and my voice quivering as I attempted to introduce my guest for the day's radio broadcast. Oh, I was a master at hiding my hurt and fear, but this day was harder than most. Today's guest was the director of a local Crisis Pregnancy Center. My guest had been arranged for me and the scripted questions written by one of our staff members. I walked into the interview totally unprepared for what God was about to do in my heart. You see, for years I'd been carrying secrets, lots of secrets. Secrets about past hurts and mistakes that I thought would destroy my ministry should anyone ever discover the "real" me. So every day, in every public situation, I painted on a big smile, quoted Scriptures as if my heart really believed them, and determined to win the lost and encourage the saints by living the "perfect" life.

After all, isn't that what it's all about . . . acting perfect and encouraging others to do the same? Oh,

how mixed up and deceived I was. I faked my way through the interview and couldn't wait to escape to my car. Finally, when I was alone, the tears poured out of my eyes. I kept thinking back to the interview and how the director of the center talked about hope and healing for women. Little did she or any of my staff know that many years ago I'd had an abortion. I desperately wanted what she was talking about, but I was a leader of a ministry, and what would happen if people found out about my horrible secret? I was sure I'd be banned by the whole Christian community and banished from the ministry.

Maybe some of you are in that place right now. As I've traveled around the country speaking, I can't tell you how many pastors' wives, women's ministry directors, and other women's ministry leaders have heard my testimony and afterward come up to me like a deer caught in headlights. Their tear-filled eyes are usually wide with fear as they pull me aside and say, "Me too. I'm living your story."

Though these ladies may have different circumstances surrounding their fear of being real, we have the same common denominator: Satan has been telling us for years that God could never love someone like us and could never really use us, but if we work hard enough at being good and showing others how to be good, then He might have mercy on us. Let me assure you that is a lie straight from the pit of hell. Satan is dogmatic about selling this lie to every

Christian who has ever sinned (which, by the way, is all of us), for he knows if we catch even a glimpse of God's grace and ability to work good from bad, then we would set the world on fire for Christ.

God loves you, my friend. God really loves you . . . not because you're good enough and not because you work hard enough; He loves you just for being you. In His eyes, you are beautiful and wonderful. You are His beloved. Isaiah 54:4 says, "Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth." Verse 10 of this same chapter goes on to say, "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken."

Do you understand what God is saying here? His love is unconditional, meaning it's not based on what you've done or haven't done. It is based on what He has done. He died on the cross, and His blood now covers your sin. He's calling you to not be afraid any longer and to let go of the shame of your past.

That day in my car after the interview I knew God was calling me to trust Him as I never had before. He wanted me to serve not from the "perfect" platform but from the place of one whose life had been radically redeemed. Slowly, God brought me to a place where I knew I was supposed to tell my testimony to our staff. I was terrified. I was still convinced that in telling my story I would shock our staff so

much that they would immediately ask me to step down as their leader. Finally, with tears streaming down my face, I told them my whole story.

Their reaction was not something I could have ever imagined. They gathered around me and poured their love and support on me. Then the miracle happened. God used my story to help them be vulnerable and real. One by one they all told their own stories, some of which were just like mine. God showed me something so amazing that night: I was not alone in my hurt and shame. Every woman has a story. Some are less dramatic than others, but nonetheless we've all fallen short and needed God's grace and forgiveness. We spend our whole lives trying to see if we really measure up, yet the Lord says simply to keep our eyes fixed on Him and to follow Him: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

We need to turn from those dark things that have been holding us captive for so long, listen to His tender mercy, accept His forgiveness, and rejoice in the Light of Life. We need to stop wondering if we really have what it takes to be a leader and realize God doesn't call the qualified; He qualifies the called. He's called you to take part in the Great Commission of telling God's amazing love and freeing truth to others. You are His light in the corner of the world where He has placed you. And make no mistake . . . it is He who put you in just this place, for just this time.

Won't you join me in setting the world on fire for Christ? Oh, what an adventure lies before us as we set forth leading women to the heart of God.

First, let's start with the flame in our own hearts, realizing we can't lead others any farther than we've already journeyed ourselves.



O N E

GET A LOVE LIFE—  
YOUR OWN INTIMATE  
RELATIONSHIP  
WITH GOD



*Michelle McKinney Hammond*

Love is *definitely* my favorite subject! And I am most certainly not alone. Every talk show examines how to get the love we want. We are constantly reminded from the pulpit that God loves us. But what about *us* loving *God*? Not in the sense that we are all taught to say “I love the Lord,” seemingly by rote, but in the sense of cultivating an intimate love relationship with Him. Instead we prefer discussions on how to get God to do what we want. Seven keys to financial freedom. Five tips for stomping on the devil’s head (though Christ has already accomplished this, some of us still seem to feel He needs our help) . . . how to this, how to that . . . but rarely do we have full-blown discussions or teaching about being in love with the Lover of our souls. *Why is that?* I’ve wondered. Perhaps we are all so



busy trying to dot our spiritual i's and cross our religious t's that we've forgotten the first and most important reason we are in this thing called Christianity. For relationship. Yes, that's it! We are supposed to be having a *relationship*, a love relationship with our Lord. But why do we spend most of our time concentrating on anything but that?

As I pondered this question, the Lord reminded me of a situation that had occurred in my own life. Several years ago I met a dashing man from France while on Christmas vacation in Ghana, West Africa, where I spent the holidays with my father. He was romantic, passionate, all-consuming, and definitely interested in pursuing a committed relationship with me. We made plans. *Big* plans. He was to finish his course of study in Paris. I was to learn French so that I could converse with his friends when I met them. And we could reconvene in Chicago, where I lived, to continue our life together happily ever after.

Well! Several months after we had both returned to our respective homes, on the heels of a flurry of phone calls and faxes (there wasn't any e-mail at the time), without any prompting I received a "Dear Mary" letter—you know, the feminine equivalent of a "Dear John" letter. The gist of it was, "Dear Michelle, This is difficult for me but I must end our relationship. I find it impossible to continue this from afar, and I love and respect you far too much to lead you on. I feel that the person who is in my life should be close to me, therefore a long distance relationship is not something I wish to pursue. All the best."

Imagine my chagrin! I just didn't understand. After all, I enjoyed the notion of having a boyfriend . . . somewhere! I reveled in the idea of having someone in my life who loved me and longed for me . . . somewhere. I loved having the emotional security of a relationship without the responsibility. Without having to do the maintenance work. Hmmm . . . kinda like how most of us are when it comes to our relationship with God.



## LOVE FROM A DISTANCE

We like the idea that we are loved and protected by this awesome, fearsome, all-powerful God who is there for us . . . somewhere. We are happy to know that God knows us and is out there working on our behalf . . . somewhere. The truth of the matter is we love the concept of having a relationship with God, having the benefits of being His daughters and the future bride of Christ, without embracing the responsibility of cultivating the intimacy that is needed to maintain any love covenant.

Why do we do that? What makes us shy away from drawing closer to the heart of God? After all, from the beginning, His first agenda was to be as close to us as He could get. He took the elevator down from heaven to visit Adam and walk and talk with him in the cool of the garden every evening. It was never His intention to have to *write* to us. He longs to *speak* to each of us individually as He did with Abraham, Moses, and many others we read about in the Old Testament (and as Christ spoke to His disciples in the New Testament). But all of that changed because of one disastrous date with the Israelites. After they left Egypt and were on their way through the wilderness, God told Moses He wanted to meet with His people. They set the date, and Moses gave the people instructions to wash themselves, wash their clothes, and abstain from sexual relations for three days. God wanted to meet with a people who were cleansed without and within, with nothing, not even the distractions or residual effect of any other relationship, standing between them.

On that very special day, the Lord came down the mountain and announced the Ten Commandments to the people. They absolutely lost it! They freaked out! They couldn't handle the presence of God. His voice scared them. They told Moses it was too frightening to them. They suggested that he go up, talk to God, and come back down and tell them what God said. Little did they know that they forfeited more



than the presence of God that day. They forfeited the up close and personal, intimate fellowship with Him that was needed to solidify their faith for facing the impossible. On that day they crossed the line from relationship to religion. Though their fear was appropriate, their lack of interest in relating to God on any level cost them dearly.

This decision affected far more than just the everyday Joe and Sarah; it affected the leadership as well. Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders were invited to come and meet God after that. They went, saw God, and were not consumed. The Bible says they even sat and ate a meal together in the presence of God, but their actions later would reveal that they were unable to discern the power and glory of God. They had a religious experience that did not change them within. Perhaps they were too busy concentrating on natural bread to really feast from the spiritual bread God had to offer. Aaron went on to build the golden calf for the people to worship when Moses took too long to come back down the mountain, along with those elders. Nadab and Abihu decided to mix up their own concoction for the incense that was to be burned before God, and they were consumed in the fire for offering the wrong type of worship. So much for having an experience with God! He draws so very close, but we are still so far away in our own understanding if we are unwilling to be open to the fullness of Him in our lives.

Could it be fear that keeps us from drawing closer? What is it about God that causes us to head for the hills when He beckons to us? I think Isaiah the prophet summed it up best when telling his experience of seeing God. He said the first thing that occurred to him was his own state of being. "I am a man of unclean lips!" he cried. I think we avoid real intimacy with God because when we see Him as He is, we also see ourselves as we really are, and we look pretty miserable in comparison. It gets even worse. We begin to see everything through His eyes, and the sight is overwhelming when we view the world from God's perspective. Isaiah said in sad realization, "I live among an unclean people" (see



Isaiah 6:5). Seeing things through God's eyes can be quite overwhelming as we realize we are powerless to change the condition of the world as well as ourselves.

Ah, but here is the comfort. God is well aware that we are merely "puffed up dust" as a friend of mine so glibly puts it. He knows we stand in need of His help to become "spiritually correct," and He has made provision for our cleansing through Jesus Christ. Back in Isaiah's day He exhibited this same graciousness by sending a seraph with a hot coal to cleanse Isaiah's lips. As we confess our undoneness, God is faithful to provide the restoration that we need.

But this is only the beginning! Something happens as we enter into right relationship with Him. We are suddenly concerned about what He is concerned about. His burdens and cares become ours. As God pondered whom He could send as a messenger to the nation of Israel, Isaiah, overcome by the presence of God, had the nerve to raise his puny little arm and say, "Here am I. Send me!" How many times in your prayer time have you uttered before God, "Oh Lord, please send someone to do so and so . . ." only to hear the prompting of the Holy Spirit saying, "If that is your burden, then you are the one for the assignment. You see the need; go for it!" *But, Lord, it would be so much more convenient if You sent someone else*, we think. And yet we find ourselves compelled to reach out to a lost and suffering world because we feel God's heart toward His people.

And yet we worry that God is now going to take over our lives. *What else will He require of me? I don't want to be peculiar.* We shudder at the thought. It seems as though when we give God an inch, He takes more than a mile; the path seems unending with its twists and turns. Where will God take me now that I've said yes to Him? What will He do with me now? How many of my own dreams will I have to give up? We, like Isaiah, ask with great trepidation, "How long will I have to keep this up?"

We worry about how others will respond to the changes in our lives.



We, like Moses, who glowed when he came down from his mountain-top experience with God, seek to veil our experiences with God by downplaying His effect on our lives in the presence of others. After all, we don't want to upset anyone or appear too fanatical or religious. And yet we are told to let our light shine before men and women so that God will be glorified. Hmm, it seems as if it comes down to Him or us, doesn't it? There's not enough room in this temple of flesh for both of us to rule.

### GETTING UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Why do we need to get past all of these fears and apprehensions to embrace God up close and personal? Because, if we don't, we will never experience the fullness of the blessings and victory we crave for our individual lives, that's why. It is in the secret, intimate place with God that we find our greatest desire is for Him, not the things we struggle to acquire. This is our true reason for existing—fellowship with Him—and all other blessings flow from our peace with Him. If we forfeit the presence of God and interacting with Him on an intimate basis, we lose the greatest key to possessing the faith we need to obtain the desires of our hearts. The Bible tells us that those who know their God will be strong and do exploits! Truly the deeper our relationship, the greater our faith in His abilities to move on our behalf. Our beliefs dictate our actions. Our actions affect our circumstances for better or for worse. Are you getting the connection? It is safe to say that our ability to acquire favor and blessings above and beyond the free gift of salvation have everything to do with how we interact with God.

Now you might say, "You know, Michelle, you are absolutely right! I have allowed my own shame, my own feelings of inadequacy to keep me from drawing closer to God. I have been overwhelmed by all I see around me. I have been afraid of what God would do to me if I made myself available to Him. I've held back because I have not wanted to



come out of my comfort zone. Yet I do feel a longing to have a passion for Him. I feel as if I've been merely going through the motions of being a Christian without the joy and the excitement I once had. How do I get it back?"

I hear you. I have been there myself. And God has the answer for us all. In the book of Revelation He advised a church that had grown religious to return to its first love. He acknowledged that its members were good little Christian "do-bees," doing all the right things, but obviously they weren't having a very good time doing it. They were acting out of duty, not love. God wanted them to do the right thing not because they were *supposed* to but because they *wanted* to. Not out of a *subservient* love for Him, but a *passionate* love for Him. He wanted them to be hot for Him. Not lukewarm. He wanted a people who were on fire for Him. If they didn't turn up the heat in their hearts, He threatened to remove their lampstands. Without light they would not be able to see the path that they should take to reflect His light to the world. Without a light they would be of no use. Therefore they would be removed. The light was crucial to their witness, their ability to be a beacon in their community, their effectiveness, their ability to function as a church. In other words, He wasn't "feeling the love," which meant there probably was not a lot of dialogue going on between them. They were no longer seeking His instruction. They were being obedient by rote. They were on automatic, heading toward darkness if they didn't reconnect with Him.

God asked them to remember the height from which they had fallen. To recapture the excitement they felt when they first discovered His love. I think He was saying, "Remember how rich our fellowship was? How you couldn't wait to be in My presence? To talk to Me or to read about Me?" Recall all of that, and repent. That's right. We owe God an apology. Not just to make an admission that we've been remiss in our relationship with Him, but to really acknowledge our laxness from His viewpoint. Consider how you feel when someone you love ignores you



or makes you feel as if you are not an important priority. Mm, hmm, I knew you would understand. On that note renew your relationship with God as an old married couple might renew their vows. Refresh your commitment to Him. Start over. Make new plans to be with Him. Find creative ways to spice up your relationship with Him.

It is important to note that when we get to heaven we will not be attending an employee banquet. We will be the collective bride, attending our very own wedding feast. The honeymoon will not be enjoyable if you are not in love with the groom. As a matter of fact, I think it's safe to say if you're not in love with the Groom, you won't be invited! Those trying to sneak into the banquet will be told, "I never knew you." Oh, my sisters, to know Him is to love Him; the two cannot be separated. He is more than wonderful. A faithful Lover of our souls. Altogether lovely and desirable in every way. Why should we love Him so completely? Because He first loved us! He is the embodiment of the perfect love story.

Every woman wants a hero who will pursue her, fight for her, and rescue her from the dragon. Is that a fantasy? No, it is not. They say that truth is stranger than fiction and that fairy tales are birthed from the true desires of our heart. Well, we don't have to stop at the imagery of being swept away by a knight in shining armor when we can have a love affair with the Prince of Peace, the Lord of lords and King of kings, Christ Jesus. Because the true love story is that He left heaven to pursue us. He fought for us by dying on the cross, descending into hell, snatching the keys of hell and death from that dragon Satan, and leading captivity captive. On that note He ascended into heaven, where He is making plans for our wedding day. He is building us a fabulous mansion where we will live and reign with Him forevermore! Now that's a love story I can get into. You can too. After all, the truth of the matter is if you are a part of the body of Christ, not only do you serve Him who is Lord of all, you are engaged to a divine fiancé! You are guaranteed to have a heavenly romance throughout eternity, but God wants





it to start right here, right now. So until our ultimate wedding day, all we have to do is keep the fire in our hearts burning with passion and expectancy.

**Michelle McKinney Hammond** is a speaker and singer at women's conferences, universities, and churches. She is also a cohost of the Emmy-award nominated show *Aspiring Women*. As the Founder and President of HeartWing Ministries she dedicates full-time service to writing and speaking, inspiring Christians to return to the basics of a love-driven relationship with God. She is also the author of more than twelve books including *Get a Love Life: How to Have a Love Affair with God*.