

When Beth saw Jackson sitting at the table, her knees went weak and she would have collapsed if her father hadn't been holding her up. Then she saw that Jackson was already weeping, shame and remorse written in every line of his slumped figure. She knew this was much harder for him and she was encouraged, strengthened to give him what her Father had given her.

When Beth and her dad sat down across from him, Jackson didn't look up. Beth suddenly felt God's love for this lost son welling in her heart. She had tried to plan what to say but nothing had come to her. The words flowed now.

"Jackson, God loves you," she said earnestly. "He wants you to be his son. He wants you to be forgiven and free."

Jackson just shook his head, still not looking up.

"He forgives you and I forgive you. What you did to me was very wrong, but it's nothing compared to what I've done to God himself." Beth leaned earnestly across the table. "We all sin against God, every time we victimize someone else, like you did to me, but also just in the simple fact that we don't obey him. I knew him for twenty-six years before I finally accepted his love. I didn't know until recently how much that hurt him. More than you hurt me, much more."

Beth didn't try to stop her tears. "God gave up everything to make us his children. He even gave up his life. He has suffered with the pain of every rape and murder ever committed. He took all that guilt upon himself and he

forgives it when we repent. He is awesome and incredible, both perfect love and perfect justice. We can never, ever worship him enough.”

Jackson still cried, still looked down, but Beth knew he was listening.

“There’s so much to tell and so little time,” Beth ran her hands through her hair, “but I only have to plant. So here goes. ... Jackson, you sinned big time. One sin led to another and another and now you’re here. God wants it to stop. He wants to free you from your sins, release you from your guilt and give you a new life.”

She took one shuddering breath and nudged her dad. He took the picture out of the pocket of his jacket. She held it close to her heart for a moment.

“We sin but God works in spite of our sins to bring life, love and joy into the world. In spite of your sin, he brought joy into my life.” Beth laid the picture on the table. Jackson looked at it in shock. “His name is Daniel. God brought beauty from the ashes of what you did. I love Danny but if I don’t forgive you, his father, that love will poison him for life, not prepare him to serve God. But even more than for Danny’s sake, God wants me to forgive you just because that’s his will. So I do. I forgive you. Not because you deserve it or even want it but because you need it and God wills it. And he wants you to forgive yourself. He wants you to let him set you free, in spite of your circumstances.”

Jackson stared at the picture, stunned.

“He looks like Jared.” Fresh tears flowed down his already drenched cheeks.

“Your oldest son?” Beth asked. He nodded.

“Why didn’t you ...?”

“Abort?” Beth shook her head vigorously. “I won’t kid you and pretend like I didn’t think about it, but I couldn’t see how taking an innocent life would redeem what had happened to me. The sins of the fathers are not to be visited upon the sons. I couldn’t do it.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because God wants you as his own,” Beth said simply, “and he’s given me a way to reach you.”

“But what I’ve done, to you, to my wife, to my kids,” Jackson said, “it’s unforgivable.”

“Nothing is unforgivable,” Beth leaned forward again. “Jackson, ask the chaplain about King David. He committed adultery, maybe even rape, then he committed murder to cover it up. He had to live with the knowledge of his sin and the consequences, but he was still called a man after God’s own heart. He wasn’t defined by his failure but by his love for the Lord. God won’t remove your sins from the eyes of the world, but he will remove them from his own eyes. If you turn to him, you’ll be pure and innocent again, all your sins covered by the blood of Jesus. You can become like Christ himself, as innocent in God’s eyes as if you’d never sinned at all.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, sir, but your time’s up,” the guard said.

“Just one minute,” Beth held up a hand. “Jackson look at me, in my eyes.” He looked up slowly. “You know me. You know I don’t play games. I forgive you. You no longer have the right to cling to guilt and shame for what you did to me. Let it go. Let God free you completely. Go see the chaplain, please. Someday your son is going to want to meet you. Please be a man after God’s own heart when that time comes.”

Beth and her dad stood. She picked up the picture regretfully. “I’m sorry but they said I couldn’t leave it with you. But I can write and send pictures through regular mail. I’m not promising to become a pen pal or anything, but I will let you know how Danny is doing.”

They walked to the door, and Beth turned again.

“God loves you, Jackson. He really does.”

When the last gate clanged shut behind them and they walked to the car, Beth suddenly stopped and looked back at the imposing edifice behind them.

“Will he be okay, Daddy?” She frowned with concern. “Was this the right thing to do?”

“You spoke God’s word to a hurting soul,” Dad said. “You planted the seeds, now God will send someone else to water them. We’ll pray that eventually someone will bring in the harvest, but what you did is right, even if Jackson doesn’t accept it. That’s all God asks of us, to do the work set before us and let him worry about the results.”