



the fellowship message

"Proclaiming freedom for the captives." ISAIAH 61

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Daring to Hope by Joe Carson

"Life's not fair, then you die." What a downer. But like some sort of backward mantra, it had become a hymn constantly on my tongue, meditated upon day in and day out. Not only a phrase, but a way of life. My same-sex attraction, compounded with life's circumstances, created permanent frustration. I found myself repeatedly asking, "Why is life so hard... all the time?"

I was born into chaos. Even though my family went to church every Sunday and knew of the God depicted in the Bible, peace and serenity were a part of an alien vocabulary—my parents' vernacular revolved around dissent and discontent. Arguments hinged upon finances, the other spouse's alcoholism, each other's pursuits of happiness, and heaps of other anxieties I was unable to process while young. Our financial needs led my father into becoming emotionally and physically absent. His presence was traded for a swing shift with overtime, sleep, and episodes of "Married With Children" with beer in hand. He also served in the military, and was frequently out of the home for physical training. Needless to say, my relationship with him was lacking. On the other side, my mother would drown me in her distress, slowly transforming me into her second spouse, pampering and emasculating me. I loved my parents, but my brother and I weren't in an environment conducive to healthy emotional growth; I was irritated with the Lord for placing me here.

And as if family life wasn't difficult enough, my father eventually had an accident that led to the discovery of a brain tumor. Although the extraction of the walnut-sized mass itself was a success from a physical standpoint, it was replaced with a mountain of mental irregularities. The father we once knew and loved had been changed forever, later being diagnosed as bipolar and having an anxiety disorder. His brain injuries left him increasingly vulnerable to negativity, creating even more strain in the home. He could one moment be manic, being overly excited over whatever small thing he thought or saw, and then another moment he would become worried or depressed. He became suicidal whenever his worries were too much for him and he wasn't on his medication. The stresses of my home life weighed upon me daily. *God, why do I have to deal with so much craziness in my family? Why can't I have a normal home like everyone else?* I was a prisoner in my own home with no escape. Unfortunately, this was only one source of daily frustration and pain while growing up.

Even my body wanted to make me miserable. Multiple skin issues left me feeling uncomfortable and alienated, like a modern day leper. If it wasn't my psoriasis acting up, it was bad acne that left scars on my face and body. If it wasn't an insatiable itch or rash, it was a massive insecurity that was a byproduct of my acne. We saw dermatologist after dermatologist, but to no avail. I felt hideous, so I hid behind my hair and a hooded sweatshirt. Without the protection of my long hair or sweatshirt my skin would be exposed to the judgment and ridicule of others. Though these skin irritations may have been a minor annoyance to some, to me it was a compounded frustration, making life feel unbearable. I hated my appearance. I also



was self-conscious of my size growing up. I hit puberty well before others my age, and by fourth grade I was the tallest kid in school and nearing the height of some of the teachers. I was overweight as well, making me even more uneasy. *Jesus, why must I be so uncomfortable in my own skin every day? Why did you make me this way?* And still, this was not the end of my suffering.

The most difficult part of my life was struggling with same-sex attraction. It was the bane of my existence. I realized that I was attracted to men while very young. From the beginning I knew that homosexuality was a sin punishable by death in the Old Testament of the Bible. But even with my attractions, I knew that I wanted to follow Jesus! I figured that if I was a “good enough” I would earn Jesus’ love and access beyond the pearly gates. But my lustful temptations were a permanent barrier between me and my God. I was ashamed of my attractions. I hated myself the more and more I was tempted. *I can’t be gay and a Christian. Gays go to Hell.* I despised my temptations and I had zero grace for myself. Sometimes I would even harm myself as my own punishment for sinning. I retreated further and further into the dark, keeping distant from exposure. I thought my parents wouldn’t understand, that nobody would. I was frightened of letting anyone know my secret sin. *People can’t know I’m gay. Nobody will believe that I’m a Christian.* I was going to have to keep this a secret from everyone.

The older I became, the more and more I struggled with my sexuality. My attractions had gained even more control over me, and it felt as if every day was a war. I would fight temptation as hard as I knew how, but too often I would give in to sin. It was a horrific cycle that constantly made me question if there was any chance for me to be righteous in God’s eyes. Exhaustion didn’t even scratch the surface to describe the toil this unending battle between my flesh and my spirit caused. I connected so well with Paul in Romans 7 where he expressed his frustration with himself. “I don’t know why I do what I do. I do what I do not want to do.” brought this frustration to the Lord daily, and from time to time I was shown Scripture proclaiming hope for me. However, it wouldn’t take much for me to forget the new-found hope I had. Shortly afterward, I would only be crushed by another temptation or lustful act. I never felt good enough, like a filthy sinner, unworthy of a gracious God.

Growing up in this permanent state of stress, frustration, and anguish, there were many seasons where I genuinely hated my life and myself. Suffering for such a long time made it very difficult to believe in anything beyond my depression and

the familiar feeling of being overwhelmed. Knowing Jesus as my personal Savior didn’t seem to be enough to distract from the daily frustrations and negatives in my life; even the promise of Heaven didn’t seem to outweigh the Hell I experienced on earth. It was difficult accepting that the Lord of all Creation loved me, yet wouldn’t take away my sinful sexual desires. I really doubted if He cared about my pain at all, as if He turned a deaf ear to my cries of distress. I knew in theory that the Lord wanted me to experience life to the full (John 10:10), but it felt as if the enemy stole, killed, and destroyed any ability to place a positive spin on my life.



Today, through Portland Fellowship, God has revealed that my pain does in fact matter (Hebrews 4:14-16). He hears my cries for mercy (Psalm 10:17-18). He reminds me that He works all things for the good of those who follow Him (Romans 8:28). There is a hope for me and a future (Jeremiah 29:11), and He will carry on til completion the work He has begun in me (Philippians 1:6).

Thankfully, the Lord has proven Himself to be much bigger than my circumstances, bigger than my family’s dysfunctions, bigger than my imperfections, bigger than any sin I commit, and stronger than any amount of hopelessness I face. He already overcame the world and death itself (John 16:33)! This knowledge doesn’t always make it easy, and I cannot say that all of my frustrations have disappeared, but the Lord has crushed their crippling effect over my life. He has instead begun the process of turning these enormous difficulties into something He can use for His glory and my benefit. He loves to make things new again (Isaiah 43:19).

Though we have a long ways to go, the Lord is moving in my family. God has used Portland Fellowship as a tool to help me understand my own needs and the brokenness in my family, and instead of blaming the Lord or my parents for the dysfunction, I can now empathize with my parents. Where there was anger and bitterness, there is now a deeper understanding of their own pain. Where there seemed to be zero hope for a relationship with my dad, God has begun to heal and open up a way. Although my skin isn’t perfect, it no longer feels like the end of the world when that insecurity comes up. Instead of remaining discouraged by my weight, I’ve learned to manage it and value myself and my body more. And lastly, my struggle with same-sex attraction is now placed in perspective. I recognize that nothing but the blood of Jesus can change me, and I don’t have to earn His love. My life is a work in progress. He is continually working in my life and my frustrations no longer control me, because He has the power to break every chain.

solid ground: keeping our faith secure jason thompson

Since the inception of Portland Fellowship we have offered discipleship programs for men and women struggling with unwanted same-sex attractions. Although the resources used have been adapted over the years, the message has always remained the same: Our God is a God of redemption and transformation.

In the 1980's, men like Jerry Heacock, Ron Mar and Phil Hobizal led groups by presenting Biblical truth and personal experience of God's grace. The resources were limited, but the Spirit of God moved through these men as they offered hope and God's healing power. In the early 90's we used the *Living Water's* program written by Andrew Comiskey of Desert Streams Ministries and then in the mid 90's, Phil wrote the *Taking Back Ground* program, which we have been using as our principal ministry curriculum.



Incredibly, the number of participants who have attended these programs are now close to one thousand. Unlike a church congregation, these groups were offered as short-term opportunities for healing with the long-term intention of integration into church life. The hope has been that ongoing support and encouragement would take place in small groups, personal friendships, Bible studies and discipleship programs. As we know, the process of healing does not come to completion at the end of a program, but rather it is a continued process of maturing and growing in Christ. For many, these support programs have helped them get grounded in their church and have found profound and lasting healing, while others have struggled with making deep connections and have experienced doubts and setbacks.

Over the past couple of years, I have seen some within our ministries lose footing, doubt the Lord's good character and even shipwreck their faith. This should not be a surprise, as we know that we have an enemy, the devil, which seeks to steal, kill and destroy the people of God. This sad truth has caused me to question and pray how Portland Fellowship can be a refuge for those who have completed the program but need or desire ongoing support.

Recently I've been calling some of the alumni of the *Taking Back Ground* program to get a feel for where their lives have taken them. With each call that I made, a sense of anxiety flooded my heart as I wondered what type of response I would get. Would they be grateful for the call and share of their faithful journey? Would they be dismissive and uninterested in the continued work of Portland Fellowship? Most concerning, would they be angry and hostile as their lives made a drastic turn away from the mission and ministry of PF? Thankfully, my calls so far have been with those who were glad to hear from me and wanted to catch up.

One alumnus from the 1997 *Taking Back Ground* year shared that life is good and his family is good, but one concern is the availability of a safe place to talk about struggles, temptations and doubts. He has been in church groups, but as life goes on, relational changes take place and groups disband. Although he has experienced God's healing work, he expressed the need for connection with others for accountability and continued growth.

So, to the alumni, I ask, are you in need of encouragement and support? And if you are doing well, would you like to come and encourage and support others? This fall, we are starting a new group called *Solid Ground*. This group is only open to those who have participated in our programs, and it will include opportunities to grow in Christ, connect with others and receive prayer and encouragement. If you are interested in getting updates about how the program will be structured, including the day and time, please email or call the office to be put on the *Solid Ground* notification list.

My hope and desire is for you to walk faithfully with Christ all the days of your life. I pray that you hold true to the words of the Christian Hymn "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less" by Edward Mote, in which he writes: "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly trust in Jesus' Name. On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

July - August calendar & services

tuesday nights in July/Aug
living waters training
Currently, leaders from our Taking Back Ground program are spending the summer learning the curriculum Living Waters, a program that we will be offering in the fall.

“Living Waters: Restoring Relational Integrity” is a 20 week in-depth healing discipleship group. This is for any Christian seeking healing in the areas of sexual and relational brokenness.

Living Waters lays a Biblical foundation for sexual and relational wholeness. If you are interested in being a part of this group starting in October, please contact us at the office or email drew@portlandfellowship.com.

July 18 the hope group

Join us for our family and friends program for a time of prayer, encouragement, support and a great meal. 6:30 p.m.

July 8-9 drew speaking

Drew will be traveling to Kansas City, MO, and teaching at youth and pastoral training events at Colonial Presbyterian Church.

additional updates

www.portlandfellowship.com

Please take advantage of your online profile. If you don't have a username, please email or call us to access your record.

speakers, counseling and youth support can be arranged through the office.

Deeper Foundations: Summer Series

Finally, summer has arrived! That means it's time for Summer Series at PF. We invite you to come join us at the house on Wednesday nights at 7 p.m., from July 9 through August 27, 2014, as we gather to learn more about God's design for our lives.

We will work towards establishing “Deeper Foundations” for our life in Christ as we talk through a variety of topics concerning our identity in Christ, how we relate with others, and ultimately how the Lord desires to be at the heart of all these things. Our desire is to make the Lord the basis for all that we are, and out of that strong foundation, the basis for all that we do.

We will be going through a number of video teachings from highly respected individuals in the ministry field, as well as some personal teachings on the Armor of God from Scripture. Our heart is to provide and foster a community of love and encouragement as the soil for growth and see the blessings of the body of Christ honoring God together. So come enjoy the rich life of fellowship as we pursue a life given over to Christ together. Call the office to let us know you are joining us! As you consider all the Lord will have us do, please join us in prayer:

Prayer for our Summer Program:

... that God would give Julie & Cole the wisdom they need in leading the program in a way that honors Him and draws people closer to Christ.

.... that each participant (this is opened to all individuals seeking a deeper walk- friends, family, supporters, and new participants) would have their hearts encouraged and receive His truth and love.

Prayer for Solid Ground, our new alumni group:

... that the alumni who become a part of it would be strengthened in their faith. Pray that they would be encouraged to remain steadfast in their convictions and walk with the Lord.

Prayer for our fall Living Waters program:

... for those who are struggling with same sex attraction, pray against the shame that binds them. Pray that they would be moved with courage to join our discipleship program.

... and for God to break through in their lives, to instill hope in their hearts and bring victory to them in this area of their lives.



PORTLAND
fellowship

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