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OUR STORY

## Paul's Story

A ringing echo accompanied the three distinct words my mother used when I, at nine, asked her what would happen if my friend “Tommy” had been molested by an older man. My mother immediately washed my mouth out with soap and reprimanded me for even asking about sex. I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

But “Tommy” wasn’t the child with the problem. *I* was the one who was dirty, damaged, and different. *I* was the one who had been sexually molested. As a child, I was in no way equipped to deal with my loss of innocence, and I did not know how to cope with those unfamiliar feelings. I immediately lost my sense of safety, my trust in my parents, and every ounce of self-worth a nine-year-old could have. I survived by burying those unpleasant memories. For the next 31 years, the pain from that unresolved incident threatened every aspect of my life: my childhood, my teen years, my relationships, my emotional health, my spiritual condition, my marriage, and every job I had.

As a teenager, I grew aggressive and manipulative; yet I maintained a likable personality and became a clown around my friends and family. When I was 13 years old and in junior high, on my very first day at a new school a teacher’s assistant asked me to go into the photography class dark room to develop film. Within minutes, behind closed doors, the teacher’s assistant began to molest me. I froze. I was emotionally paralyzed and could not move.

The sexual abuse from that school employee continued for

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13 months, during which I developed a personality that made me feel acceptable to those in my home and sometimes outside of my home to keep from being rejected. Yet within, I had an uncontrollable rage and showed anger while I was at school and with close friends.

My dad was pastor of a large church in the community. Soon he started hearing reports from the parishioners about my fighting, my foul mouth, and my aggressive and hostile behavior at school. These parishioners had heard the stories of my behavior from their children who saw me in action at school. One of the parents went to my mom and told her what I was saying. Because my mom had never seen this side of me, she wouldn't believe the reports. She said, "If Paul were like that, he would slip at home. We would see signs of it."

So I had one personality at school and another at-home personality that I kept under control. I lived this way throughout my teen years and beyond.

When I was barely 19, I married Judy. I brought home a partner whom I hoped would accept me as I was, including my darker side. The day after our wedding, the cycle of physical and mental abuse began, and it would plague our lives for the next 17 years.

It didn't take me long to realize that I was not prepared for marriage. The responsibilities of having a full-time job, preparing for our first child just days before our first anniversary, and then preparing for our second child just 11 months later were too much for me to handle. I began to run away from the marriage to avoid being an accountable, responsible adult.

I regularly moved from job to job and state to state, sometimes taking Judy and the kids with me. However, I often left them be-

hind for months while I “prepared” for them. What I was really doing most of the time was simply running so I could do what I wanted to do without anyone’s approval or disapproval.

Internally, I constantly sought a fresh start. But a fresh start never happened, because my troubles accompanied me everywhere I went. I began drinking excessively, took recreational drugs, and became involved with numerous women.

I knew something was wrong with me and that counseling didn’t have the answers I needed. I recognized my desperation and decided that going into the ministry might help me mature, become accountable, and take care of my family. As a child, I had felt a call into the ministry, and I had been running from that calling for years.

We took our first and only pastorate in a small Midwest town. Before long, some of the children in the church were running home with stories of Pastor Paul arguing with his wife and punching holes in the walls moments before leading the congregation in worship.

I thought the responsibility would stabilize me, but it only made the situation worse.

Disgusted with myself, hating Judy, and apathetic of our kids, I eventually moved them to another location so I could again be free to live as I pleased. I divorced Judy without her knowledge and stopped fighting my impulses. I succumbed to all the anger and rage inside of me.

I eventually began living with another woman. I battered her to the point of facing attempted murder charges with a penalty of 15-22 years in prison.

Loathing all I had done and frightened of a future behind bars, I fell on my knees before God and cried out in pain and de-

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spair. I blamed everyone and everything except myself for my problems. I spent close to a year in a recovery program to avoid the attempted murder charge. I spent more than \$20,000 in private counseling but could not get the help I needed. The program I attended did force me, however, to realize the issues I was dealing with were mine and mine alone. I had emotionally and physically abused every woman in my life. I could not shift the blame any longer.

After hours of arguing with God and justifying my life, my will broke. God spoke to my spirit and told me that I was not teachable but assured me that if I *became* teachable, He could help me.

The years of rebelling against God had seared my conscience, and I had to begin coming back to God as a child. Through my diligent study using the simplicity of *The Living Bible*, God drew me deeper into His Word and His promises, and my life irrevocably changed. I discovered the truth of who I was and how I had reached bottom. I began to learn there were reasons—though I had no excuses—for my years of abusive, controlling behavior. I also realized I was the one all along who needed to change. I had thrown away what I loved the most: my family.

After several years apart, God brought Judy and me back together. Our reuniting process was slow as we began to develop a friendship—something we had never experienced before. I had damaged her in so many ways that she no longer desired a relationship with anyone, let alone me. Reconciliation was not possible for either of us until God gave us a new love for each other and Judy learned to trust me again. This would take time and patience.

We were remarried just two days before what would have been our 23rd wedding anniversary, after being separated and

divorced for seven years. Our relationship was different from the first time around, and we were growing together as a couple—something new to both of us. Judy started to trust me, although she held some reservation due to the pain that had not yet healed.

Over time our kids discovered I was no longer controlling and manipulative, and they could see that Judy was truly happy for the first time in her life. All three of our children chose to come home, one at a time.

I was given the tremendous opportunity to start over with my adult children by reparenting them and teaching them what I had learned and by taking responsibility for all of my past behaviors. I validated their pain, listened to their needs, and shared how much I loved them. This started the healing process in their lives as well.

As our family began healing, the doors of opportunity to share with others in our community opened. As a family, we worked together to build the ministry we now have, which is called Life Skills.

Through the years, as Judy and I have expanded the Life Skills ministry with which God has blessed us, we have learned a great deal about how the unresolved traumas of our childhoods, manifest themselves in devastating adult behavior. Abuse, hatred, despair, self-loathing, immaturity, irresponsibility, emotional isolation, manipulation, anger, and the inability to bond to a marriage partner are just some of the manifestations of these lasting wounds.

As you continue reading, I would like for you to be aware of some phrases or terms that we will explain further.

**Arrested Development:** The wounds of our childhood

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hinder our emotional development. We grow physically and chronologically yet remain like children, holding on to our fears and rejection. In adulthood this dynamic makes us feel as if we're crazy, stupid, or defective.

**Reactive Lifestyles:** As we'll see in the following pages, our wounds drive our behaviors. We do not have automatic control of these reactive behaviors, because they're unthinking reactions.

**Developmental Reconstruction:** As we undergo the process of identifying our wounds and recognizing our reactive lifestyles, we'll receive the choice of letting go of the pain and starting to mature. As the apostle Paul stated in Eph. 4:14-15, "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ."

Your life may resemble this type of lifestyle. If so, I want to assure you that God is faithful and you can have hope. As you read, let your mind be open to what God has to reveal to you, and become confident that He has an answer to your pain.

The growing-up process is the development of Christ's character in us.

### Judy's Story

"I now pronounce you man and wife."

Those words announced what I thought would be the ultimate in a lifetime of happiness and excitement. Even though my mother had told me, "Life isn't a bowl of cherries," and all the other clichés, I didn't believe her—because my love with Paul was so special that I knew nothing bad could ever happen to us.

I had been dreaming of a knight in shining armor and the fairy tale existence. What a deception!

I had grown up in a home with parents who were respected in our church and community. I never imagined the man I would marry would abuse me in every possible way. For all purposes, the word “abuse” wasn’t even part of my vocabulary.

Few young girls imagine a life with the type of person I discovered Paul to be shortly after we were married. Even fewer would envision the years of loneliness, distrust, confusion, hopelessness, and suffering I went through during our first marriage. It was 17 years of turmoil.

Paul was my husband, I loved him, and he was the father of my children. The abuse made me feel as though I must have given him a reason to hurt me. After repeatedly being blamed for his anger, I began to believe it really *was* my fault and that *I* was the one who needed help, that *I* needed to change.

As a young girl, I thought my home was perfect. During my teenage years, I realized I had a much better rapport with my dad than with my mom and that my brother had a better relationship with my mom than with my dad. I didn’t know why, but I felt as if my mom didn’t like me, so I focused more on my dad and my relationship with him. My brother was mean to me. He locked me in barrels, threw me into swimming pools, sat on me under water, and broke things, blaming me each time for whatever happened. My mother stuck up for him, so I began to believe that what I said wasn’t heard, let alone important. I believed I didn’t matter. I stopped turning to my mom for comfort or affirmation and turned to my dad because he would fix my problems—or at least make me feel better. This pattern set me up to readily accept the blame and abuse in my relationship with Paul.

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Paul was the new kid in town. We were both in the same church youth group and soon started a pattern of on-again, off-again dating. I wasn't alarmed at Paul's instability and his need to control me. He was a guy, and that was just how guys were, I figured. My parents never really approved of him and were convinced that he wasn't good enough for their little girl. I felt that my parents were wrong about him, and I was determined to prove them wrong.

In spite of my parents' disapproval, Paul and I were married during my senior year of high school on a Saturday morning in December 1960. The occasion was one of the saddest I've ever faced. Even I wasn't elated about it—and I was the bride! I wanted a real wedding—Paul didn't. Paul wanted his dad to marry us, but his parents were extremely busy, so we wedged the event into their time frame. We enjoyed very little planning, made no arrangements for pictures, and a honeymoon was out of the question.

The day after our wedding, my brother got into an argument with Paul, so I stepped in to stop the fighting. Paul shoved me into a wall. His reaction hurt me physically and emotionally. I began to fear the man I had just married. Was my dad right? I didn't want to hear anyone say I told you so, so I began to keep the secret.

Behind closed doors, Paul abused me physically, sexually, verbally, and emotionally. I lived under constant threats of abandonment, intimidation, humiliation, and total control. I couldn't open our mail, make phone calls, or have friends, and I had no access to our finances. Paul came to my workplace and took my paychecks and spent the money. I had to beg for money for personal items or things for the kids. He lied, manipulated, broke all trust, and isolated us again and again. No matter how perfect I tried to be, no matter how obedient I was, I was never good enough for him.



For years, Paul moved us from one place to another for his benefit. Three weeks after Paul moved us back to Minnesota, my daughter asked why I hadn't unpacked the family room full of boxes. I told her I wasn't sure we would be staying and that I didn't feel I even belonged there.

She assured me that everything would be all right this time and encouraged me to grab a box and get started. In one box I thought was mine, I opened an envelope that contained a paper on which were written the startling words: "Hegstrom vs. Hegstrom / Uncontested Divorce."

I went numb. I remember thinking, *Who is this man? I don't even know him.*

I could cope with most of his actions, but this was the ultimate blow. I was not about to live with a man when I was not even married to him.

After the initial shock of finding the divorce papers, I was determined to get out on my own and go on with life. I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders. I had to go through the emotional roller coaster and mental anguish of grieving a lost marriage. God got me through thoughts of suicide, depression, major loss of self-esteem, and doubting that He loved women—especially me.

On the other hand, Paul seemed to get by with everything without consequences. While his family suffered through years of turmoil and abandonment, he was winning again. Through all of this turmoil, I still begged God to bring him back so we could start over again. As I continued praying and time passed, God graciously took away my feelings for Paul and my desire to have him back. I was able to continue my life without constantly dealing with the past. Living with Paul had been like opening a fresh wound every day.

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When women are in abusive relationships, they often don't realize they're not really keeping the secret and hiding the abuse. Often those around them can see the mess in their lives, yet they feel they are keeping it hidden and have everything under control. They must come to the place where they learn to identify the need, seek the truth, and accept God's grace to guide us them healing.

Paul and I have been remarried now for nearly 23 years. We have been free from any type of abuse this time. Day by day we bond and work on issues as they arise. I continually realize that Paul and our circumstances have changed. Our commitment, combined with a deeper understanding of our pasts, is to build our complete trust in each other. We're all familiar with the time-honored truth that "actions speak louder than words." Trust is earned, proven by time and behavior. This is difficult, but it can happen, and life can be good again—or, as Paul and I have learned, as we deal with the past and move forward, life can be better than we ever dreamed possible.