

Chapter 1

Sam Kneels beneath the Cross

Most Sunday mornings Sam arrives at church early to pray. His wife doesn't mind; she can get their two small children ready by herself, and besides, she wants to give Sam the space he needs to get himself right before God.

Ever since becoming a Christian three years ago, Sam has struggled to keep his mind on the things he knows he should be doing—taking care of his family, serving the church, being molded into a Christian man. But since the brief euphoria of his conversion, his life has descended into inner turmoil. He knows he must fight the good fight of faith; he has been taught that he must crucify himself daily in order to win the crown of glory; he is convinced that he must surrender his wicked heart completely, as Christ Himself surrendered all on the cross.

He thought he had done all that last Sunday. Pastor Gale delivered a moving message and Sam felt so convicted of his own sinfulness that he went forward and re-dedicated his life to God. He cried. He broke. He experienced God's forgiveness.

Yet, here he was, one week later, kneeling at the same altar. As he prayed, Sam recited phrases derived from Scripture: "There is no good thing in me, that is, in my flesh. The human heart is wicked and deceitful. I must decrease; You must increase. My life is nothing. You are everything. Not my will but Your will be done. I must die, that Christ may live in me."

Jesus Came Out of the Tomb...So Can You!

Sam is not a sinner in the conventional sense. He doesn't get drunk, cheat on his wife, or steal when nobody's looking. He does lose his temper at times, and he gets frustrated with his children. His wife says he withdraws too much, and he knows that he should not let himself be depressed. But Sam isn't as concerned about these problems as much as he is about what he considers to be his chief failing. You see, Sam dreams. And he believes that his dreams will lead him into error and cloud his focus to become a man of God.

Sam dreams of owning his own business, but he fears that his motive is a desire for wealth and independence. So he stays at the job his father-in-law gave him a few months ago, managing home rentals. He hates it, but he believes that it's his flesh which is rebelling and that the process of subduing those desires will be good for him in the long run. Sam also dreams of going back to college, but with two small children for which to care, Sam also sees this as a selfish desire. Finally, Sam dreams of things that he will face only when he is too weak to resist them, such as running along a moonlit beach holding the hand of a beautiful woman whose face he sometimes can see, sometimes not. He cannot bring himself even to name the sins he believes are behind that vision, but it disgusts him thoroughly that as a Christian he even could imagine such evil.

That Sunday morning, Sam bowed his head against the carpet of the altar. When his aching heart could pray no longer, he looked into himself to see if his guilt and self-revulsion had left. After sensing its

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continued presence, Sam concluded with a desperate sense of failure that his surrender to the Lord was not in total, that deep in his treacherous heart he must be holding something back, keeping something from the Lord, something that his fleshly self finds too precious to give up, some sinful treasure that he cannot sacrifice to God, at least not for very long.

Sam got up from the carpet with no answers. Putting on his welcoming smile, he began greeting people as they arrived in the church lobby. It was wonderful seeing everyone, family, friends—real friends. He honestly loved the people. A few quick words put him back in touch with each one. He belonged. He even felt a certain respect and sense of responsibility here. He knew this was his church home.

When worship started, the people were more enthusiastic than usual, so it was quite uplifting, and Sam was able to bathe for a moment in the love of God. How grateful he was for all God had provided: family, job, health, and friends.

When Pastor Gale came to the pulpit, Sam was comfortably sitting with his arm around his wife. Life was good.

Pastor Gale always brought a truth from the Scriptures from which each person could find a few nuggets. Then Pastor drew the service to a close—as he always does—reminding people of their sinfulness, hinting about how evil this present world is, and quietly, yet firmly, telling the people of their need for Jesus and His sacrificial death. Pastor Gale then invited people who felt convicted of sin to come forward for prayer.

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A handful of people responded. Sam knew he could go forward and kneel with them again. He knew better than anyone the carnality of his own thoughts. He easily could number himself among those at the altar.

But this Sunday Sam decided to stay seated. Not that he was rebelling or disagreeing with anything Pastor Gale had taught, but he had been there so many times before. He had tried to die to everything within. Would it do any good to go forward one more time?

In reality, Sam could not afford to go up there. He couldn't publicly walk to the front again, kneel in humility before God, and then walk away...only to battle with the same thoughts. Sam could not allow himself to accept the fact that he found no power for freedom at the altar. He knew without a doubt that Jesus is real, but he had embraced all that his church was offering, and he had not found any real freedom from the battles raging in his mind. If he went forward one more time and it did not help, Sam knew it would devastate his faith. It was too risky. It was safer to stay seated.