

by Joe Hallett
AIDS
OF
STORY



Touching the UNTOUCHABLE

Some trees turn as brilliant as fire in the autumn sun. But other trees turn brown and withered, clutching their dead leaves like old rags. The dying leaves help me to reflect on my own mortality – and on the short span of our lives here on earth.

I think people are like trees. Some of us will flame brilliantly like sugar maples as we approach death. We will look forward to the promises of God and surrender our lives into His care. But others will wither and cling to the dying ashes of this life. Their self-centered lifestyles will deform them, making them like a twisted oak clutching its dead leaves.

I wonder what your autumn will hold? Will you blaze scarlet and gold in the light of the fading afternoon? Or will you struggle as you watch your colors change? Death is always present within us, like the gold and red concealed beneath summer's green. Our choice is simple: Either we can submit ourselves to God and become His beautiful creation, or we can clutch our frail egos and cling to our selfish desires.

But if we allow Him, God will transform us into His image. If we surrender to Him, our lives will surely reveal His beauty.

How will you live in your last days? That is a question you need to ask yourself every morning. Will you honor God today with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength?

Will your last days on this earth, no matter how painful, reflect the glory of the Lord?

I can only answer for myself.

My answer is yes.

"I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God..." (Job 19:25, 26 NASB)

Here are some organizations that provide help and information for those who have HIV/AIDS or for anyone interested in ministering to people with HIV/AIDS:

Exodus International
P.O. Box 2121
San Rafael, CA 94912 (415) 454-1017

A referral organization that can put you in touch with HIV/AIDS support services as well as ministries for those walking out of homosexuality.

Exodus Europe, c/o True Freedom Trust
P.O. Box 3
Upton, Wirral, Merseyside
ENGLAND L49 6NY

Exodus South Pacific, c/o Liberty
15 Eagle Terrace, Torwood, Brisbane, 4066
Queensland, AUSTRALIA



For local help or information:

"Touching The Untouchable" was reprinted from an article in *The Last Days Magazine*, a colorfully illustrated publication filled with challenging articles, ministry opportunities, and more!

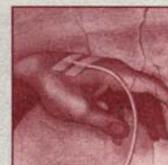
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Are You Searching?

If you want to know more about what it means to be a Christian, we have some information we'd like to send you. There is no charge or obligation. Just write to Last Days Ministries and ask for the free packet "Walking With Jesus."



Another WiseTrack from Last Days Ministries
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It was March 25, 1986 – a day I'll never forget. All of Heidelberg, Germany, was alive that day with the fresh brilliance of spring.

I had escaped early from work that afternoon, so I quickly hurried out of my Army uniform into the freedom of civilian clothes.

As I was walking out of the barracks, my First Sergeant stopped me and said to call the hospital concerning some tests I'd taken recently. I was strangely apprehensive. Why would the hospital call me now?

Two months earlier I had undergone a physical in preparation for my departure from the Army, but everything had checked out normally. As I dialed the hospital, my heart was pumping wildly. Stumbling over the words, I said, "I'm returning your call."

The words tumbled into my ears like water crashing over a falls. "Your blood test was abnormal."

I faltered, pausing for a moment. "What does that mean?"

"Your blood test was positive. We would like you to come in immediately."

Dazed, I hung up the phone. My hands were shaking. It felt like the end of the world.

During the years I'd been involved in the gay lifestyle, AIDS had hung over my head like an ax ready to fall at any moment. Just two weeks earlier a friend of mine had confessed that he had tested HIV positive. I thought back to how I had felt then. I was sad for him, but mostly I had felt incredibly relieved. It wasn't me.

Well – now it was.

The moment I heard I was infected with AIDS, a verse from Job burned into my brain:

"Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, whom God has hedged in? For my sighing comes as my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; but trouble comes." (Job 3:23-26 RSV)

The First Months

I'd left the gay lifestyle nine months earlier and had started to walk the way God desired. I was steadily deepening in my Christian faith – so how could this happen? How could God allow this to happen to me? I felt betrayed, shattered, and rejected by the God I wanted to love.

I was consumed with fear.

In those first months of dealing with AIDS, I woke up each morning thinking perhaps it was all a bad dream. But then reality would come crashing down once more.

"Oh God," I prayed, "please just let me live until autumn."

Fall would come, and then I would plead with Him to let me live until spring. Although I wanted to live, there were no dreams for the future. It was as if everything ahead of me had been wiped out. Only darkness remained.

I wanted to point my finger at someone, but who could I blame? God had been warning me away from homosexuality for years. I'd wanted to be loved and held by someone, but that had ultimately brought me only shame and death. Over and over in my mind I kept repeating Rom. 6:23 – "the wages of sin is death."

Somehow I felt I deserved this fate. I had earned it, so how could I go to God with my grief? He wasn't under any obligation. After struggling my whole life with self-hate and loathing, AIDS seemed to be definitive proof that I was indeed vile and disgusting. Not only to myself, but to God. Surely this was my punishment.

But even my dark confusion couldn't force me to reject God. Death lurked behind every door, and only He could answer my need for security and love. Only God could keep the darkness from overwhelming me. I cried out to God and leaned upon Him with my whole being.

Then He reached out His hand and covered me. He reminded me that He chose to love me. God already knew the very worst about me, yet He was committed to me through His Son who had suffered death on a cross so that I might live.

Though Jesus was not guilty of my sin, I knew He could identify completely with the rejection and despair I was experiencing.

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised and we esteemed Him not. Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed." (Is. 53:3-6)

Love Never Fails

Many people tell me how brave I am to be living with AIDS. They praise me for my hopeful attitude. It reminds me of how often we applaud the handicapped because they go on with their lives in spite of difficulty. But I believe the choice to survive is more akin to common sense than courage.

Personally, I identify much more with cowards than I do with heroes. I am a coward, yet living with AIDS has forced me to come face to face with some hard choices. On a daily basis I have to choose whether to allow my pain to make me bitter, or to go on with my life and find the good that can be gained through loving God and other people.

I choose the latter.

But making the right choice doesn't automatically make the situation easy. I am often hurt and frustrated by the well-meaning "one-liners" Christians throw my way. The verse that says "God works all things together for good" (Rom. 8:28) doesn't necessarily encourage me in my darkest hour. There are times when a Bible verse thrown your way in the midst of suffering is no substitute for a hand, a hug – or even a tear. Scripture is always true, but when Christians use it to distance themselves from another's pain, it wounds rather than bringing healing and life.

Often I feel Christians are just exhorting me to be "more spiritual." They tell me to trust God in all circumstances. Yet trusting God doesn't mean I won't feel pain and sorrow – Christ's tears in the garden proved that. What I really need is someone to listen to my cry of anguish. I need the love and mercy of Christ revealed in the face of a friend.

I remember one time when I was in the hospital and my pastor came to visit me. He didn't pump me full of Bible verses, shake my hand, and leave content that he had served God. Instead he knelt by my bed and told me I was important to him.

Here was a man who had preached four times that day and then stopped to see me on the way home. It was not that big a deal, but it felt big to me. His kindness spoke loudly to me. It said: *I love you, and I am here. You are not in this alone. Your disease hurts me, too.* It was just so comforting to know that, in some small way, he shared my pain.

When my pastor left, I felt the presence of the Lord all around me. The pillow became softer, the air became sweeter and, just for that night, it seemed as if my hospital room had become somewhere else. All worry, sorrow, and fear slipped away as I slept peacefully wrapped in the arms of the God who loved me...



Appreciating the gift of new life

To Touch The Untouchable

Do you see that it is *only* our love, honestly and simply expressed, that can open the hardest heart to God? Our greatest calling as Christians is to love those who consider themselves unlovable. To touch those the world deems untouchable.

People with AIDS are considered untouchable. Many people believe they can't encourage or care for a person with AIDS, but that is not true. It's simply a matter of understanding. We all understand the human desire to be loved, wanted, and cherished. We all know what it feels like to be rejected, or what it means to lose a friend or family member. And some of us even know what it feels like to have our dreams for the future destroyed in one swift and gut-wrenching twist of fate.

We need to understand that someone living with AIDS has suffered *incredible* loss. He's lost his hope for the future. He's often lost the support of friends and family. He's usually lost his job and must continually suffer the betrayal of his own body. To understand him, we must go deep within ourselves and touch our *own* pain, sorrow, and sense of loss. That is not an easy thing to do, yet only when we summon the comfort we have received from God will we be able to offer it to another. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." (2 Cor. 1:3,4)

How Can Christians Respond?

When I was growing up, the most important thing my father could give me wasn't money or toys or clothes – it was himself. I was the happiest when he would simply give me a moment of his time. When someone is suffering, the most important gift we can offer him is unconditional love wrapped in a chunk of our precious time.

That doesn't necessarily mean you have to give him answers or advice. Sometimes I just want to have someone *listen* to me as I share the things I struggle with. Although I long for my mother and father to hear and understand me, I can't seem to get them to sit in a room long enough to talk. So the Lord has given me dear friends willing to listen as I pour out the contents of my heart.

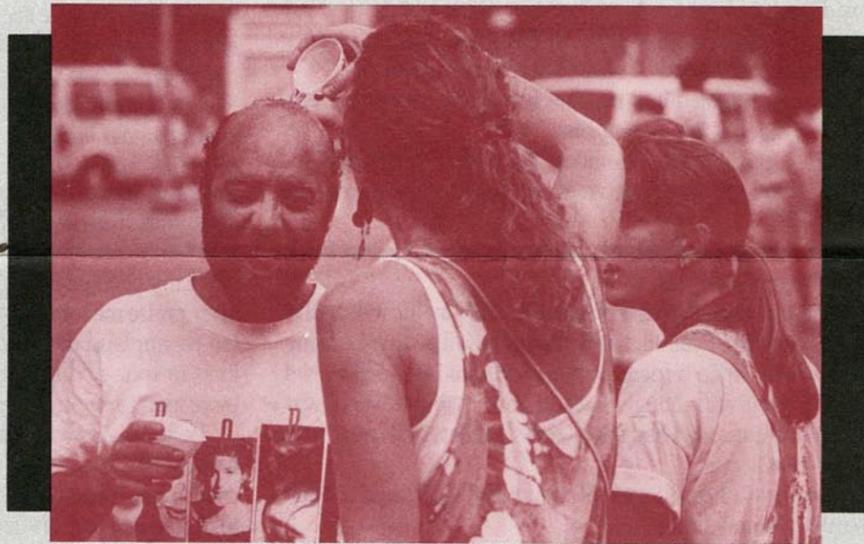
Remember, the giving of ourselves doesn't mean we need to prepare a three-point sermon on why the person with AIDS needs to repent. I can assure you – he already *knows* the desperateness of his situation. However, if you are compassionate (not pitying), merciful, kind, and slow to anger, then perhaps he will *ask* about the hope that lies within you. I know story after story of men dying with AIDS who came to Christ through the mercy of a caring Christian who stayed by their bedside.

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." (1 Pet. 3:15)

The Practical Love Of God

Here's a good piece of advice on how to reveal the love of Christ to someone with AIDS: *Get out of the spiritually abstract and move into the practical!*

For instance, I have a three-bedroom house that's hard for me to take care of. Although it's great when someone wants to take me out to dinner or to a movie, what I really *need* is someone to wash the kitchen floor. And then there's my garden. It's one of the great joys of my life, yet I'm usually too weak to work in it anymore. The



Cooling off with a friend on a hot Minnesota day

boundaries of iris and lilies would quickly turn to weeds without the help of my friends. They know what my garden means to me, so one mows and weeds the flower beds while the other rototills and weeds the vegetable garden.

And women from my church often bring food when the sores in my mouth make eating a painful and exhausting task, or when I'm just too sick to cook for myself. I'm so greatly encouraged by their kindness – they reveal the love of God in very practical ways.

Even a stay in the hospital can be transformed from a frightening experience into an exercise of God's grace. Recently I had to go into the hospital for three days, but during that time twenty-seven people visited me and the phone rang off the hook! By the time I left every nurse on that station knew who I was, why I was there, and what church I went to. It was a real blessing for me – and a great witness to the hospital staff. It was as though there was a huge neon sign blinking over my hospital door saying: **THIS IS WHAT CHRISTIANITY IS ALL ABOUT!**

You can minister to people with AIDS. We all can. Be sensitive to their needs, and their very limited energy. Listen to them, and get rid of any sense of superiority you might have. Remind yourself that we are *all* sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:23)

Remember that homosexuality is a study in rejection. Most homosexuals have been rejected by family, friends, co-workers, and the church. Ultimately they believe they have been rejected by God. They don't need to be judged – they need to be loved. It is entirely possible to hate the sin, but love the sinner. Unconditionally.

"Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4 NASB)

I was once heavily involved in the gay lifestyle, and the only reason I'm not there today is because someone ministered the love of Christ to me. I believe there is a place to speak of the judgment of God, but it's not at the bedside of a dying sinner.

I echo the words of Mary Slessor of Calabar: "Nothing, I believe, will ever touch or raise fallen ones except sympathy. They shrink from self-righteousness which would stoop to them, and they hate patronage and pity. Of sympathy and patience they stand in need."

Make no mistake – your kindness may be the last thing a person experiences before he enters eternity. Without a doubt, the love you share with him is vitally important.

"And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another..." (Col. 3:12,13)

God's Refining Fire

This path I walk is very painful. I desperately need the love and support of the Body of Christ.

Often I need to cry out in my confusion. Sometimes my pain is like a river overflowing its banks and I can't handle it. I long for God. I long to feel the safety of His arms around me. My prayer is like the prayer of David: "You are God, my stronghold. Why have You rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? Send forth Your light and Your truth, let them guide me, let them bring me to Your holy mountain, to the place where You dwell. Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise You with the harp, O God, my God. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Saviour and my God." (Ps. 43:2-5)

I don't understand why I have to struggle so. My head occasionally comprehends, but I think my heart never will. I know it has to do with God's glory and my eternal character and the long journey toward holiness – but sometimes that's too hard for me to grasp. There are moments when I'm tempted to leave it all behind – but where could I go? Only Jesus has the Words of eternal life.

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (2 Cor. 4:16-18)

A Man Of Sorrows

By worldly standards, I am of all men most hopeless. Although my sexual sin ended seven years ago, I still struggle emotionally with homosexuality. I have AIDS. I have relatives that will not see me because of my disease. I have old friends that will not talk to me because I have left the gay lifestyle. I live on a limited income due to the disabling influence of AIDS. Physically I am in almost constant pain. At times everything threatens to fall apart. My head and joints ache. My stomach hurts. My skin flakes and peels. I have

infections on my skin. Tomorrow I could have parasites in my brain. In a week I could be dead.

I always feel the pain of being under construction. Whole sections of my heart must come down so that God can make room for the new creation within me. It hurts, and quite frankly I don't always like being under repair.

I wish God would have it out and be done with it! I think of how fortunate Eustace was in C.S. Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawn-treader*. Aslan the lion stripped off the dragon's hide in one quick painful slash of his great claws. Oh, that God would rip this sinful nature clean out of me so that I would never have to deal with it again!

God never said that I wouldn't experience pain, sorrow, and loss as I went on this journey towards Him – but He did promise that He would go through it *with* me. All I can do is sink to my knees in the midst of my frustration and say, "Oh God, I repent of my rebellion and my failure to believe the truth. You are worthy to be praised and exalted."

In the past few years I have come to realize that, for me, AIDS is not a punishment – it is a refinement. This disease has been an opportunity for God to lavishly pour His grace upon me. And I know He offers that same opportunity to every man, woman, and child suffering with AIDS.

God has not abandoned me. Instead He has filled my life with something I never thought possible. He has given me Himself. People look at me and know there's a difference – even if they can't explain what it is. Well, that difference is God.

I'm on this road and there's no turning back. It's not always a pleasant road to travel – sometimes there are ruts and detours.



Praying with fellow church members

My vision is limited, and often I have no patience. Yet at rare moments, God cuts through all of this with the truth of His deep love for me.

The Brilliance of Autumn

As I write these words, I can look out my window and see the leaves starting to fall from the trees. It's late September, and the deep greens of summer are being transformed into the brilliant reds and golds of autumn. I need to remind myself it is only the harsh touch of frost that brings forth such rich and beautiful color.