

Message: Beginning the journey

Let me tell you a story about two houses.

“The two houses were only a couple of miles apart, but the distance between them couldn’t have been greater.”¹ Those are Debra’s words. One house was her downfall, the site of her spiritual abandonment. The other was her redemption, the light needed to overcome a dark place, her saving grace.

Debra tells this tale.

“The old brownstone on Ferry Street was supposed to be a fresh start for Debra and her husband, Perc. She’d just gotten out of rehab. Perc had kicked his crack habit too. They quit running hustles for money and settled down in legit jobs. They moved into the brownstone’s top-floor apartment in September and were turning it into a real home - nice furniture, silk curtains, antiques her Momma gave her.

But addiction is a demon that doesn’t relinquish its hold without a fight. All it took was one setback to send them both back. Debra talked Perc into it, just like she’d turned him on to crack in the first place. “We need an escape,” she said. “Just for one night.” She should’ve known better, known how easily one small slip spirals into full-blown relapse, considering her Dad was a heroin addict who OD’ed, and she’d been in and out of rehab 16 times.

One night turned into days, weeks, months. Perc and Debra lost their jobs. They sold off their prized possessions to feed their addiction. The only thing that mattered was the next high - until she saw what rock bottom looked like one December morning two years later.

“**Where am I?**” Debra woke up, eyes glazed, with a nasty taste in her mouth from the previous night’s binge. Perc snored loudly beside her. She winced. It was like she was seeing their bedroom for the first time. Stained walls. Rodent droppings. No furniture except their filthy mattress, the floor around it littered with soda cans and tire gauges they’d used for pipes. The place looked the way she felt.

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/miracles/gods-grace/tale-of-two-houses>

Seedy. Debased. Stripped bare.

“If I stay here, I’m going to die,” Debra thought. Panic rose and became hysteria. *“I can’t live like this anymore!”* she cried, shaking Perc awake. *“You’ve got to get me out of here!”* Even lost in his own addiction, he would do anything for her. Perc remembered a place he’d passed once. Serenity House, a shelter for women. He called them up for her. They had one bed left.

And one condition - no drug use allowed.

Debra went there that same day. The house was beautiful, a well-kept two-story home. She knocked on the door. A brightness came from inside, warm and welcoming.

Yet Debra hesitated thinking, *“Am I ready to leave Perc? Can I kick my habit? I’ve failed 16 times. Why would this time be any different?”*

The door opened. Before she could take a step, she felt a force tugging her over the threshold, gentle yet irresistible. A voice - one she sensed rather than heard aloud - said, *“This is where you’re supposed to be.”*

And it was. For the first time, Debra really listened to her counselors and to the other women rebuilding their lives. She talked too - about how she’d been molested as a child and raped as a teenager, how surviving made her hard on the outside but left her hollow inside, how she turned to drugs to fill, or at least escape, the void inside her.

They heard it all, and they didn’t judge her. They loved Debra, and they told her that God loved her even more. She wanted to believe it, wanted to believe that this was the voice she’d heard.

But after two months of living drug-free, Debra felt the stirrings of an old craving. For Perc. He loved her too, enough to let her go. She had to see him, hold him, ease her guilt for getting him hooked on crack. So Debra went back to the place they’d tried so hard to turn into a home, the old brownstone on Ferry Street. She climbed the stairs. The door to the apartment was hanging off its hinges. *“Perc?”*

He wasn’t home. Disappointed, Debra wandered from room to room. She eyed the empty spaces, the bare closets. Perc’s leather couch, the antique turntable Momma had given her, the silk drapery, dishes and

silverware - all of it gone. She scanned the bedroom. Makeshift pipes - broken glass tubes used to hold fake roses - were scattered on the floor.

She heard footsteps on the stairs - Perc! Debra peered around the bedroom door, saw him go into the kitchen. Just as she was about to call out to him, he pulled a rock from his pocket. Then came the familiar click of a lighter, the suck of breath against a filter.

Debra stood frozen, watching Perc inhale what made them believe they could fly straight to the moon together. Her wanting for it wet her mouth. Debra’s throat and lungs seized up, the demon of addiction suffocating her. She closed her eyes, tilted her head back. “*Call out to Perc, tell him you’re here*” filled her mind.

“Help me, God,” escaped from her lips instead.

Slowly Debra opened her eyes. She couldn’t see the kitchen anymore. Or Perc. Darkness shrouded her, as if she’d entered a tunnel. The pitch black blinded her to everything but the light at the end. The front door, hanging open.

Debra felt that same irresistible force that tugged her over the threshold of Serenity House, only this time with more intensity.

It carried her out the door, down the stairs, out of the brownstone, like some kind of divine gravity. When her feet finally touched the ground, she was standing on the corner. She looked back, hoping to see Perc.

He wasn’t there. Someone else was, though.

The only force more powerful than her addiction, the only love greater than the one Debra was leaving behind. Someone she could release her guilt to, and put her trust in completely. That day Debra walked away from her past and through the doors of Serenity House again, toward the light of her future. Praise God!

There’s good news. Since then, this has become a story of three houses. Debra went on to earn degrees in social work and community organization and public policy administration. In 2012, she founded Exodus House, a nonprofit faith-based women’s shelter, modeled after the program that saved her. Perc got clean not long after Debra did.

They’ve been drug-free for more than 15 years, and are raising four children and running Exodus House together.”²

Few of us have had crack addictions, but all of us can relate to the story. We all have dark places inside of us, places that are unhealthy for us to go. We all have a void inside of us.

How do you fill the need?

The famous theologian Dallas Willard said, “*The most important thing in your life is not what you do. It’s who you become. That’s what you will take into eternity.*”³ He goes on to say, “*Your soul is not just something that lives on after your body dies. It’s the most important thing about you. It is your life.*”⁴

Today we’re beginning a new series. I’m inviting you into a private world. We’re going to pull back the curtain and take a glimpse into a deeper world. It’s normally unseen, unknown, hidden. Paul wrote, “*the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don’t know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans*” (Romans 8:26). We’re talking about meaning that goes beyond language. Our soul doesn’t seek recognition or applause. It can be chaotic, dark and disordered, yet no one would know. At the same time, it’s a place where we can meet the divine, where we can hear “*You who enter here, enter holy ground.*”

This is important. It makes all the difference between a life lived in darkness and a life lived with hope. The woman searches for the lost coin in the same way we would search for a lost wedding ring today. It means everything to her. It’s a sign of good in her life. In the same way, God doesn’t give up on us – ever. God’s Spirit is always searching, prompting, guiding, teaching and leading us toward the light that gives life, fills our soul.

I invite you to join me on a spiritual journey. Invite your friends and family. We’re going to spend time getting to know about the soul. We

² *Ibid*

³ *John Ortberg, Soulkeeping, Zondervan, 2014, p. 23*

⁴ *Ibid*

aren't just learning about *any* soul. We're going to learn about *our* soul. I want you to know that your soul is not alone. I want you to know that a face is turned toward it. When we embrace our soul, we find God present and waiting for us. Join me as we explore the private, hidden world within each of us. That's a journey worth taking together.

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for the way you have made us, your children. You have given us heart, minds, bodies and souls so that we can experience life to the fullest. We praise you and give you thanks, O gracious God. Fill us with your love so that we may, in turn, love and care for others as you love and care for us. To you be the glory and honor. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Genesis 2:5-6 (The Message)

At the time GOD made Earth and Heaven, before any grasses or shrubs had sprouted from the ground - GOD hadn't yet sent rain on Earth, nor was there anyone around to work the ground (the whole Earth was watered by underground springs) - GOD formed Man out of dirt from the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. The Man came alive - a living soul!

Luke 15:8-10 (The Message)

“Or imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she'll call her friends and neighbors: 'Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!' Count on it - that's the kind of party God's angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God.”