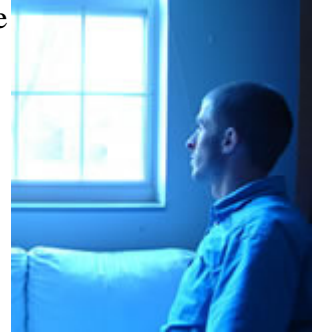


The Greatest Lover

By Bob Steinkamp

"What an ending! These last two minutes will go down in history!" The voice from the television screamed at Jesse Richardson, but he wasn't listening. Jesse was not really watching the television and those last minutes of the Super Bowl. He was staring aimlessly into the Michigan winter, at the snow-covered branches on a tree outside the warm family room where he sat.

Our friend Jesse thought that he had everything any man could want. For the past two years he had been the leading salesman for Beltone Casket Company. A new red Mustang, Jesse's Richardson's Christmas gift to himself, sat in the Tremonte garage. He had money in the bank, nice clothes, good health, and a woman who really cared about him.



Christine had arranged their own private Super Bowl Party. She had decorated the family room and had made sugar cookies, cut out with an empty can squeezed into a football-shape. She had even taken the phone off the hook for that Sunday afternoon. Everything seemed perfect, yet deep inside Jesse felt as dead as the tree that he was watching so intently. Something just wasn't right.

"Honey, if it is still tied at the end, will they have to play the game all over next week?" Christine asked.

"Stupid questions," Jesse thought, "all she can ask are stupid questions. If she hasn't learned football in her first forty years, she won't learn it now." Jesse mumbled an "unuh" answer, as he shifted his weight in the big brown recliner chair. He had never been comfortable sitting in that chair.

"Maybe this chair is why I'm so miserable," Jesse thought. "It just doesn't fit me right. I need to buy one this week that looks like it, but would be my own," he thought, as if sending an email to his memory.

The chair had been a fixture in that household long before Jesse came into the picture. Bud Tremonte, Christine's husband, had spent many an hour in that chair. Their twins, Allyson and Ashley, each had their favorite arm for daddy to hold them in that chair. Christine had her special way of bending over that chair to kiss Bud.

The Tremonte twins were teenagers now and Bud was gone. In recent months, that had become Jesse's chair. In fact, Jesse used to have a chair somewhere else, a chair that really did fit him. That chair was in the Richardson home. Although Christine attempted to make pleasant conversation about the Super Bowl, Jesse was not listening. He was thinking about his chair in his own home.

Jesse often thought about his own chair, his own home, his own kids, and yes, he thought about his own wife, Barbara. Although he assumed that no one knew, he thought about his family often. Reminders of Barbara raced into his mind at the strangest times, even during these last two minutes of an exciting Super Bowl.

Those thoughts about Barbara were not simply passing thoughts to Jesse. They often were overwhelming thoughts that were difficult to cast aside. They were always thoughts of good times as a

family. Even through all those thoughts about home, Jesse had trouble recalling exactly why he had left home last summer. The words used by his attorney in the divorce petition seemed strangely foreign to him. It did not seem that he was really describing Barbara.

As they were counting the seconds of the game down and screaming fans, Jesse thought about all that had happened to bring him here--to be sitting in Bud's chair. Jesse's mind fought hard to override the guilt that always accompanied this recollection.

Christine had been the secretary at Christian Funeral Home for several years. That firm was Jesse's largest Beltone account. He frequently took Jonathan Wellson, the owner of the Christian firm, out to lunch on his Beltone expense account. Last January or February, Jesse had called on the funeral home on a day when they had several services scheduled.

Jonathan had to decline lunch that day, but Christine had innocently commented to Jesse, "You never take me out to lunch." A few minutes later, they were sitting together in a nearby restaurant. Before that lunch, Jesse had never really talked to Christine, apart from friendly conversation. He knew from the family photo on her desk that she must be married and have twins.

Both were amazed that day at how much they had in common. They had even ordered the same lunch from the menu, roast beef. Although it was far from the truth for either of them, both Jesse and Christine had implied that their respective marriages were less than perfect. Somehow it seemed that a less than perfect marriage justified a private lunch with someone of the opposite sex.

"I shouldn't feel guilty. After all, this is a business lunch," both had thought at different times during their meal. Neither Jesse nor Christine realized that satan, the enemy of the family, will do everything possible to destroy homes. He had just made a major inroad into two more priceless families.

After an extended lunch, during the drive back to the funeral home with Christine, Jesse contemplated what he would put on his expense account.

"Jesse, thank you for the lunch. It was fun getting to know you," she remarked, giving his hand, resting on the seat between them, a small squeeze. He experienced that sudden rush, known only to teen age boys, the first time a girl shows an interest in them. That one innocent touch made Jesse feel like a fifteen-year-old.

He did not realize he was about to act like a hormone-driven teenager all over again. The remainder of that day, our super-salesman Jesse, thought that he was having a terrific afternoon. His customers all seemed pleased to have him call, and his orders for that day were the best in a month. "Guess some positive conversation at lunch must have been good for me," he told himself on the drive home that evening. "I made Beltone money today, so I don't mind one bit reporting that I took Jonathan Wellson to lunch." Satan must have been pleased to hear Jesse's next comment. "That lunch made two of us feel great and it didn't hurt a thing."

The warm lights of the Richardson home greeted Jesse as he pulled into his driveway. He knew that Barbara would have both a warm kiss and warm dinner ready for him. Barbara had been a school teacher. Last year, Jesse and Barbara had decided that since he was doing so well in his sales career, she could quit and be a full-time wife and mom to their children, Rachel and Robbie, ages twelve and nine.

Until that day, Jesse had been thrilled to have Barbara at home. Suddenly, for some strange reason, he felt suffocated at the thought of coming home to her. "Maybe she has another of her church deals tonight and will get out of my hair," he thought.

Before becoming a full-time mom, Barbara's church work had been limited, due to her time. She and Jesse had attended church most Sundays. A family Bible lay on their coffee table, but was seldom read. Church had seemed ritualistic and boring to the Richardsons, especially to Jesse. He had always insisted on Rachel and Robbie being in Sunday School every week, but often some task at the Beltone warehouse needed Jesse's attention on Sunday mornings.

Since her "early retirement," as Jesse called it, Barbara had become excited about her involvement at church. She had tried to explain it to Jesse several times, but in his salesman-like way, he always managed to change the subject skillfully. Deep inside, Jesse wondered what his wife had found that brought her such peace and happiness.

"The woman has no life. She gave up her career to stay at home, yet she is happier than I am," he once confided to a golfing buddy. "If I had the joy that she has, I could make a million. I wonder what she found?"

The "what" that Barbara had discovered was really someone, and His name was Jesus. To her, Bible stories about Jesus had always been historical accounts with happy endings. She knew Jesus only to be a "good man" whose example Christians should follow.

Shortly after giving up teaching, Barbara began to attend a woman's Bible study. For some unexplainable reason, she was drawn to the women she met with each week. They all seemed to have a peace that had always escaped her. To them, the Bible was something more than a book on the coffee table. She was amazed how specific verses of scripture came alive to that small group. Everything taught or discussed at those meetings went right back to the scriptures.

On Barbara's fourth week of attendance, Julie, the teacher in whose home they met, asked Barbara if she had time to stay and help her straighten up. Anxious to discover what made those women seem different, Barbara quickly agreed.

While they were putting away folding chairs and coffee cups, the two women chatted. Barbara had never sensed acceptance in any other group the way she did each Monday morning at Bible study.

"Barbara," Julie began, "each of us is thrilled that you have joined us. How did you find out about our Bible study?"

"I saw a note in the church bulletin. I was searching for some kind of women's group and I was strangely attracted to that notice. To be honest, though, I was skeptical because it said Bible study. The idea of fellowship with other women sounded great. I was certain that someone was going to call on me to read from Second Exodus or something, and that everyone would laugh when I couldn't find it."

"No," Julie laughed, "you won't have to find Second Exodus. You will find a group of ladies who can love you through anything that the enemy tries to bring into your life. Say, did you know that some of the girls have been praying for you since the first time you were here?"

Barbara did not know exactly how to respond. She had heard other ladies in the group pray, and wished that she knew how. She admired each woman, who prayed to God just as if they were speaking to a close friend.

"Thanks, that's-that's nice," Barbara finally stuttered. She was uncomfortable talking about things like prayer, and realized, when the words left her mouth, that she had just said so.

Julie, sensing her uneasiness, changed the subject. "What kind of work does your husband do, Barbara?"

"He is a salesman," came the reply. Barbara had long ago given up saying exactly what Jesse sold, unless asked.

"What does he sell?"

"He works for Beltone Casket Company."

"He probably knows Jon Wellson. His wife, Bev, is the short brunette who prayed first today.

If Barbara had any hesitancy about being part of that group, it had just been erased. The wife of her husband's largest customer was the woman whose prayers she most admired. "I had no idea that was Jonathan Wellson's wife," she exclaimed.

"The Lord has certainly blessed that family and their funeral home," Julie continued. "God has used Jon and Bev and that business to lead countless scores of people to the Lord."

"What do you mean, 'lead to the Lord'?" Barbara asked, her confidence suddenly boosted by discovering that she was in Mrs. Jonathan Wellson's Bible study.

That question had given Julie the opportunity she had been silently asking the Lord to give her. "Let me ask you," Julie began, "if you were to die today, do you know for certain where you would spend eternity?"

"Well, no one can know that for certain, but I suppose it would be in heaven, I hope. Especially since I am attending your Bible study every week," she chuckled.

"Barbara, I have the best news for you that you have ever heard. You can be as sure of spending eternity in heaven with the Lord as if you were already there. May I tell you how?"

The Lord used Julie to carefully explain, from her Bible, that all are sinners, no matter how good they might appear to be. She showed Barbara how God sent His son, Jesus, to die on the cross to pay the sin debt that no man can afford to pay. By the time Julie explained that heaven is a free gift, not earned or deserved, tears had welled up in Barbara's eyes. She was finding the peace and reason for living that she had long sought.

That morning, in a kitchen cluttered with coffee cups and leftover Danish, Barbara Richardson prayed aloud for the first time in her life. She confessed her sin to the Lord, and invited Him into her life to be her Lord and Savior.

During the weeks that followed, Barbara began to grow as a Christian. It wasn't long before she prayed aloud at her weekly Bible study, asking God to touch Jesse. How she wished that he could experience all the joy of being a Christian that she had discovered. Jesse continued to brush aside her every effort as a new Christian, to share her faith with the man she loved most in the world.

"Jesse will be brought to Christ by your prayers, not by your words," Julie had reminded her more than once. "You need to keep praying and to be a godly Christian wife."

One week the group studied the paths that different people in the Bible had taken to reconcile with God. "Sometimes a person falls on their face, before they see the need to get on their knees," Julie had wisely instructed.

"Not Jesse," Barbara thought. "He is doing too well for anything to touch him. I just know that any day now he will be asking me what has changed about me. Then I can share all about my personal relationship with Christ."

Jesse's new interest was not in his wife's faith, but in the obituaries. Somehow, he always showed up at Christian Funeral Home to invite Jonathan Wellson to lunch on the days that he was tied up with an 11:00 A.M. funeral. Jesse thought that no one noticed how often Christine had lunch compliments of Beltone. Everyone at Christian's, including Jonathan Wellson, noticed. Jesse and Christine's lunches had started so innocently, but soon became anything but innocent. Satan had pulled out all the stops to rob, kill, and destroy two of the Lord's precious families.

Almost from the time Jesse had pulled into the Richardson's driveway that evening after his first innocent lunch with Christine, things had been different at home. He thought that Barbara had changed, but from that day until Jesse left home only a few months later, he was the one who changed.

That evening, instead of sitting in his recliner chair, chatting with Barbara, watching television with one eye, and working on sales reports with the other, Jesse worked on his computer. Actually, he had been searching for TREMONTE CHRISTINE, curious to see if she were even online. Somehow, in his clouded mind, he had expected to find Christine and to spend an exciting evening chatting with her. While he searched every list that could be found, the beach scene of a man and woman running toward each other, music playing, and hair flowing, ran like a ticker through his mind.

The Tremonte's did not even own a computer. Satan had planted the seed for his beach scene, after just one lunch and a hand squeeze from another man's wife.

Jesse fell far short of the man running on the beach. Too many Beltone lunches had taken their toll on his waist. His hair line was receding and a bald spot could be seen if he did not comb it exactly the right way. In fact, he would have had trouble running to meet anyone on a beach, because of a bum knee and weak back from helping to lift the products he sold.

Although attractive in a plain way, neither did Christine Tremonte look like the blonde on the beach. Birthing and raising two twin girls, while working full-time, had taken its toll on Christine. She wore minimal cosmetics to work at Christian's, and rotated the same few dresses.

On the other hand, since retiring from teaching, Barbara Richardson had begun to glow. No, not because she no longer had to face 32 fifth graders each day, but because of an "affair" that she was

having. Ever since that day in Julie's kitchen, Barbara had developed an ever-deepening personal relationship with her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The obstacles that once put Barbara into a frenzy, were now only matters for prayer.

Barbara had also fulfilled her dream of making her own clothing. She had been taking classes at the Civic Center. Jesse had even ordered his wife a personalized license tag for her car, SEW MUCH. Several months before the Christine lunch incident, Jesse had arrived home to find Barbara wearing a beautiful dress that she had made herself.

It is doubtful that the same Jesse, who sat staring out into the frozen Michigan winter, missing the end of the Super Bowl, could recall what he had told Barbara that evening: "Honey, I'm glad that we are married. A herd of wild horses could not pull me to another woman."

A herd of wild horses could not pull him away from his wife? Probably true, but it only took one of the enemy's well-placed thoughts, that Jesse did not know how to resist spiritually, for him to begin to have fantasies about a woman that he barely knew. You see, that thought went unchecked from Jesse's head to his heart to his hand.

At first, Jesse became withdrawn and irritable. In his mind, he compared everything that Barbara did with how he imagined life with Christine would be, and what she would be doing, given the same circumstances. Jesse did not allow the fact that Christine was another man's wife to impede his thoughts.

Barbara could readily see the change in her husband, but did not know what to do, except to pray that the Lord would touch Jesse. She had even masterminded a clever mini vacation away alone with Jesse. Barbara had arranged with Beltone's Sales Department for Jesse to fly to Florida for what he thought was to be a weekend sales conference. A couple at home had planned a fun weekend for Rachel and Robbie.

When Jesse arrived at the Fort Lauderdale hotel, he discovered that there was no conference. Barbara was already there, with an exciting long weekend planned just for the two of them.

Jesse was furious. "You tricked me," he screamed at his wife. "You are pretty slick at being tricky. How do I know that you're not arranging weekends with other men, since you are an expert at being so secretive?"

Barbara was devastated. The thought of ever having any interest in anyone, except Jesse, was far removed from her mind. The only "arrangement" that she had ever envisioned was for Jesse and herself, and Rachel and Robbie, to all be loving and serving the Lord Jesus together. Yes, she had scenes that played in her mind repeatedly. One was of the Richardson's hosting a home Bible study for couples. Then there was the scene of Jesse leading others to the Lord.

Jesse was withdrawn for that entire weekend. He spent much of his time on the lobby pay phone, checking on his customers, especially Christian Funeral Home. Naturally, the enemy had it all arranged so that this was Christine's weekend to work. Each time he called, she answered, and heard a report of a deceitful and cunning wife.

Each time Jesse left the hotel room to head for the pay phone, Barbara pulled out her well-marked Bible that she had packed into the suitcase. The Lord led her to verse after verse that spoke to her heart and to the circumstances of that weekend. She suspected that all Jesse's trips to the pay phone were not as they should be, and she prayed for whomever was talking with her husband.

The following Monday at Bible study, Barbara shared about the disastrous weekend. She knew that Bev, leader of the Bible study group, was cautious about allowing time to be wasted on circumstances. So on the plane trip home Sunday evening, Barbara had thought through what she would share. She knew that any comments that discredited Jesse would be politely interrupted.

During the group's closing prayer circle, several other women had prayed specifically for Jesse and Barbara. She was most moved by the prayer of Bev Wellson, the funeral director's wife.

After they dismissed, Bev spoke privately to Barbara. "Barbara, Jon and I think the world of you and Jesse. I know that you are hurting and I would like to ask if I might become your personal prayer partner. Do you have anyone praying one-on-one with you now?"

"No, no I don't, except the other women here," she replied. Deep inside, Barbara was thrilled. She had been asking the Lord to bring her a friend, a real burden bearer, with whom she could share and pray. Now He had sent the woman, whose prayers she respected most of all, to be her prayer partner.

"To be honest with you," Bev continued, "Jon and I will both be your prayer partners. I will be the one communicating with you, but Jon wants you to be assured of his prayers as well as mine. He thought that it might be best for you not to disclose to Jesse that we are praying for you guys, you know, for business reasons."

Bev Wellson did not tell all that she knew. She knew that Barbara did not need to hear what Jonathan had shared with her about his suspicions of something being very wrong with the friendship between Jesse and Christine.

"Barbara doesn't need to know," Jonathan had cautioned his wife. "God needs to be hearing all about it from us, but Jesse's wife does not."

Barbara and Bev became close friends and they found opportunities to pray together several times each week. Barbara felt unqualified to hear the struggles in the Wellson marriage that Bev shared with her. Every time Bev gave God praise for helping them resolve their conflicts, Barbara was envious that she did not have a Christian husband who would pray with her.

Even without disclosing anything that she and Jonathan suspected, Bev's prayers were always focused on Jesse.

Early in the summer, the bomb that satan had planted, intending to destroy the Tremonte family, went off. Jesse told Barbara that he thought it best that he move out of their home for a while to find himself. "I must be having some kind of mid-life crisis," he justified.

Barbara was shocked, but not surprised. She had sensed, in an unexplainable way while praying, that something like this was about to happen. Barbara had also sensed that if Jesse were to leave, that her Lord Jesus would be her husband for a season.

"What are you going to tell the kids?" she asked between her sobs.

"They'll understand. It's not like we are getting divorced or anything. Besides, kids are resilient. They get over things like this quicker than anyone gives them credit for," Jesse replied.

"Then you be a man and tell them yourself right now. They are both in their rooms."

"No problem."

Judging from the crying, screaming and sobbing that Barbara soon heard coming from the other end of the Richardson home, there was a problem - a big problem.

"Daddy," Rachel shrieked, "I may only be a twelve-year-old girl, but I am not stupid. I know what you are doing to mom and us. I heard you talking to somebody on the phone. I heard you telling her that you loved her, and mom was in the kitchen, not on the phone. I'm glad that you are leaving because you're not my dad anymore," she screamed in Jesse's face. "I will never get married and I will never trust any man again, especially you, you big jerk!" With that, she ran into her room sobbing, and slammed the door.

Robbie had sat on the floor, silently watching this exchange. After Rachel had stormed out of the room, and with a pleading face, he looked up at Jesse. "Daddy, what did I do wrong? Please tell me and I will change so that you won't have to leave us?" Tears, that seemed so large that they could not even fall from little Robbie's face, flooded his eyes. "Daddy, please, please. I will do anything you tell me. I will do more chores. I won't yell at Rachel. Please, daddy, tell me what I did wrong?"

Those exchanges with his priceless children almost tore Jesse's heart out. For just a second, he was tempted to confess everything to Barbara, tell his two kids that he had made a mistake and to stop seeing Christine. His fantasies tempered his hurt, and he said nothing.

For the next hour, Barbara comforted her two children in Rachel's bedroom. All three cried so much, while holding on to each other, that no one even bothered to wipe away the tears that fell.

As prepared as Barbara was for what had happened, she was frightened. Most of all, she was frightened that right now she was unable even to call on her Lord. In fact, she was angry that God had allowed this to happen.

Late that night, after she had prayed with two very wounded children and tucked them into bed, Barbara called Bev Wellson. When she began to speak, Barbara broke down.

Bev immediately began to pray: "Lord I know how much Barbara is hurting right now. Father, we do not understand all that happens, but we will always trust in you. I pray Your comfort tonight for Barbara, for Rachel, and for Robbie. Lord, right now I pray a hedge of thorns around Jesse. Despite where he might be, I pray that You will protect him. Father, I pray for Christine and that any involvement she might have with Jesse would be broken, in the mighty name of Jesus. I pray for her husband, Bud, and for their twins. Father, thank you for hearing our prayer. I ask that you give me the words to comfort Barbara and in the name of Jesus, Amen."

Christine? Christine Tremonte! This was the first time that she had heard that name associated with her husband. The lights suddenly came on for Barbara. She instantly recalled phone calls at home from "Christine at Christian's" and Jesse's chatter about her. Suddenly, she felt betrayed by her own prayer partner.

"Bev, you knew? You knew about Christine and Jesse and you did not even tell me! How could you? Now my marriage is ruined, all because you did not tell me!" Barbara's voice had broken into a cry.

"Barbara," Bev began slowly, "foremost your marriage is not ruined unless you allow it to be ruined. Do you recall that refrigerator magnet that I gave you for your birthday? It read, 'For This I Have Jesus'. Yes, you have a big problem, but for this big problem you have your bigger Lord. He is the One who created marriage and He is the only one who really restores and heals hurting marriages all across the land."

"Your Jesse," she continued, "has been taken captive by satan 'to do his will', the Bible tells us. That was satan who moved your husband out tonight, not Jesse himself. Now you have a choice. You can get mad, and then get even, and then try to get over it, but you never will. Your kids will grow up in a damaged world of divorce and step-parents," Barbara continued in rapid-fire succession, "but there is a better way to handle things when a marriage crumbles. You can take a stand with God for your marriage, asking him to rebuild your home on the solid rock of Jesus Christ. When you do that, you refuse to allow satan to take any more ground. If you don't, the enemy will continue to attack your family, through the generational curse of divorce, through financial problems and through health problems. Can't you see that he wants to take away everything that you have?"

"Now, about Christine," Bev defended, "you had no reason to know what Jon and I only suspected until tonight. Believe you me, we have prayed and asked the Lord if we should tell you anything and have sensed no freedom to do so."

"Now that this has happened, we need to be praying for Christine and her family as much as we will be praying for Jesse."

"You've got to be kidding?" Barbara screamed. "Pray for her? No way. Can't you see that she is my enemy? She stole my husband!"

"No, Barbara, satan is your enemy, not Christine. She, like Jesse, is a victim of satan. We can do nothing but pray tonight, but here is what I want you to do. Take your Bible and turn everything else off. Ask the Lord what He would have you do. Tell God that you need to hear from Him tonight, and ask Him to lead you to a specific verse that will show you His will, without any question, for your family."

"Bev, how do you know so much about what God can do for a marriage that has just fallen apart?"

"Someday, I will let you in on a secret."

Late that same evening, Jesse Richardson drove past his home. Once again, he considered pulling into the drive and asking Barbara to take him back. "No," he mused, "the kids' lights are off, so they

must be all right. I can see the silhouette of Barbara sitting in her chair, talking on the phone, probably gossiping about me. Guess I will just go and get a motel room. After all, I deserve to be happy."

The confused and deceived Jesse had no idea that just as he was slowly driving by his home, considering what he should do, his wife was on the phone with Bev, who was right then praying, "I pray Your protection around Jesse. Father, bring him to his senses, bring him to You, Lord, and bring him home to his family."

Jesse did go to a motel that night. The following day, he rented a small efficiency. He also called Christian's to tell Christine the "good news" that he had made the break.

She was stunned. You see, Christine had fallen into a trap that she had not seen. She fell deeper and deeper, until now her own marriage was being threatened. Falling into that trap had been so easy, but stopping the descent, and climbing out was more difficult. In fact, it would be almost impossible without the Lord's help.

Bud and Christine Tremonte attended church only at Christmas and Easter. She knew many pastors from her job at the funeral home, but she did not know the Lord whom those pastors served.

On his days off from the state police, Bud escorted funerals for Christian's. One afternoon, two weeks after Jesse left home, Bud and a part-time limousine driver were waiting for a service to conclude.

Bernie said, "I am really sorry to hear about your wife running off with Jesse, the casket salesman. Guess those things happen, though. Let me know if I can do anything." He had already done more than enough.

The events of the next 48 hours are too unpleasant and messy to relate. There were heated exchanges between Bud and Christine, and a violent exchange between Bud and Jesse, who had never met before that incident. It all ended with Bud taking the twins and moving out of the Tremonte home.

Christine continued to work at Christian's. Jesse continued to sell them many of their caskets. During office hours, this affair between two married people was never discussed. Jesse did not take Christine, or Jonathan, to lunch any longer, and soon stopped calling on the firm.

After hours, things were different. Jesse and Christine were together most evenings. Within a few weeks, they were living in the Tremonte home together.

Each evening, long after the lights at Christian Funeral Home had been turned out, in their apartment upstairs, Jonathan and Bev prayed for everyone involved in that mess. They prayed especially that Jesse and Christine would be released from the trap of satan, who had taken them captive to do his evil work of destroying two families.

"Those two are both prisoners of war, of the enemy's evil war," he had once told Barbara. "It is our job to pray they both will come to Christ and be released. That will be a great day of victory."

Things were good and things were bad for Barbara. She returned to substitute teaching to supplement the small checks that Jesse mailed her each month. Bev had introduced her to a group of

men and women who faced similar circumstances. Each had taken a stand with God for the restoration of their family.

Barbara had always thought that her morning Bible study was the best that she would ever find. But the love, support, encouragement, and teaching she received at those weekly stander's Bible studies could not be described. Barbara, rejected by a husband, found solace, not in the arms of another man, but in the arms of Jesus. She began to grow even more in the Lord.

Barbara was placed in touch with a ministry in Florida who provided her with books and tapes from a couple with a restored marriage themselves. The Word of God began to speak to her, almost as if it had been written for her alone.

Barbara confessed to the group one evening that, "When I am up, I am very up, but when I am down, I am very down." She was surprised to discovered that every stander there that evening could relate.

Although Barbara attempted to include Rachel and Robbie in her stand for a healed home, their hurts were being acted out in other ways. Rachel had acquired an entirely new set of friends. Barbara caught her more than once sneaking out late at night. Robbie's grades fell, and he was caught stealing from a neighbor who, fortunately, was understanding of the family's circumstances.

Following each incident involving their children, Barbara always called Jesse, who played the blame game. "If you had raised them right, this stuff would not be happening," he screamed at Barbara during one call. "It is not my fault and there is nothing I can do."

Wrong, Jesse. Wrong on both counts. It is your fault and there is something that you can do to help your children; Go home.

One real test of Barbara's stand came the day that she substituted in her daughter's classroom. From the time that the bell rang, Rachel pushed all the wrong buttons. By lunch, the entire class was laughing at the exchange between the two. The final straw was Rachel's mumbling at her teacher/mother, "If you had been a good wife, my dad would not have left us for another woman." Barbara's grabbing Rachel by the hair resulted in school officials and a child abuse worker becoming involved.

"That's it," she sobbed to Bev, "I've had it! God does not want me to hurt this way. My kids need a dad, and I am sure the Lord has someone even better than Jesse for me. I love him, but I just can't stand any longer."

As she had often done during these months that seemed like years, Bev comforted her from the Word of God, and helped set her perspective straight. "I know when you are undergoing a big attack, there must be a victory in the making."

Barbara was once again amazed at Bev's insight into her problem. How could someone with a good marriage relate to her circumstances so well?

One more person in that mess seemed to have changed a lot. Christine-- or so Jesse thought. The vine-covered cottage that he had envisioned for the two of them had not materialized. If he was not on

the phone with Barbara, hearing about mis-behaving kids, she was on the phone screaming at Bud. After either of those type of calls, Jesse and Christine screamed at each other. Living with Christine never brought the excitement that the enemy had promised. There was never enough money, and someone was always gearing up to go to court.

Almost daily, Jesse thought about how to get out of that mess. Christine had begun to talk about their "marriage" after both were divorced. Jesse's immediate thought had been, "How can I marry her when I am married to Barbara? How long will it take for me not to feel married to my wife, er, I mean Barbara?"

One Saturday morning, at 3:11 AM, according to the digital clock by Christine's bed, Jesse awoke. He was wide awake and could not get back to sleep. He shifted from his left side to his right side, but could not go back to sleep. He thought about the secretary at Murphy Funeral Home, who had told him a slightly off-color joke yesterday that made both of them laugh. "She makes me feel young again," he thought, forgetting that only months ago he had thought the same thing about the woman who now lay sleeping in bed next to him.

Jesse got up. Getting a drink of water, he stared at the kitchen counter. "If I was going home," he thought, "that is where I would leave Christine a note. I may leave here some day, but I am never going back home."

For a moment, Jesse even contemplated suicide. "I thought I was going to be so happy," Jesse thought, "and here I am thinking about killing myself. Where have I missed it?"

Looking around that home, Jesse saw evidence of Bud everywhere. The bruised ribs that he had been nursing for months, ever since that physical confrontation with Bud, seemed to ache more each time he look at the portrait of the Tremonte family that hung on the wall of their home. "They are smiling," Jesse mumbled aloud to himself, "How could that guy be so happy being married to Christine?"

Jesse, my friend, the Lord is about to show you what brings true happiness to a marriage.

Jesse hated the way Christine cooked. He hated that house. He hated Bud's things that Christine almost seemed to put in his path intentionally. He hated the thought of having to be in the presence of Christine for all that weekend. He hated Christine's voice. He hated her friends. He hated Christine, for what he thought she had done to him. He hated life. Shortly before dawn, Jesse fell asleep in Bud's chair.

In a hurting home across town, an abandoned wife was also having trouble sleeping. Barbara Richardson had gone to bed early Friday evening and had slept soundly until near midnight. She then entered the tossing, turning, praying, worrying, sleeping phase and then started again that process that is known to every person who has ever stood with God for marriage restoration.

Finally, she got up, put on her robe, picked up her Bible and headed for the living room to spend time with her Lord. As she sat down, the grandfather clock across the room chimed out 3 AM .



"Lord," Barbara began to pray, "I can't stand any longer. This is just too much. I see no sign that Jesse is coming back, or that anything will ever change. Please forgive me, Father, but I have to get on with my life."

Just to hear another voice in the room, Barbara pushed the play button on the cassette player sitting next to her chair, not remembering what tape she had last heard. The voice of the teacher from that marriage ministry came on; "...and just when you are ready to give up, when the enemy brings the biggest attack, is just when your miracle is about to happen. DON'T GIVE UP!" the teacher seemed to be screaming right at her.

Barbara began to pray for Jesse as she had never prayed for him before. She asked the Lord to forgive her doubt, and prayed specifically. For the first time since the evening that Jesse had walked out months before, Barbara was able to pray for Christine, asking the Lord to restore her marriage to Bud. A strange peace came over Barbara. In some unexplainable way, she knew that her miracle was on the way. Barbara glanced at the clock. It was 3:11 AM. An hour later Barbara went back to bed and slept like a baby.

"I can't believe what just happened! Friends, you have just witnessed the greatest event that has ever happened in football history." "What happened?" Jesse asked aloud, "What event?"

The announcer's scream brought him back to the present. Jesse shifted his weight in Bud's chair and wondered what he had just missed.

During the final two minutes of the Super Bowl, he had replayed the last two years of his life. Jesse had been intent on remembering details of that game to use as a conversation topic, well, really a conversation blocker, during a sales call that he faced the next day. Jonathan Wellson, the owner of Christian Funeral Home, had called Beltone Casket Company and reported that he desired to chat with his sales representative about becoming a Basically Beltone firm.

Basically Beltone was the dream of every Beltone salesman. It meant that Beltone would set up the firm's entire selection room, and that the firm would purchase caskets only from Beltone. In his wildest dreams, Jesse had never imagined this would ever happen at Christian's, much less that Jonathan would be suggesting the arrangement.

Jesse's great concern was that he would be meeting Jonathan, a man who loved the Lord, face to face for the first time since he moved in with Jonathan's married secretary.

"Oh well," Jesse told himself, "the guy can beat up on me for an hour, and I will tell him how much I regret what I did, but afterward I'll be making thousands of dollars a year in extra commissions." Jesse's thoughts raced for a second and then he concluded, "If only the guy knew how sorry I am, but I can't go back now."

Monday morning at 10 AM, wearing his sharpest suit and having exercised his sharpest positive-thinking tips, Jesse Richardson drove that bright red Mustang into the snow-covered lot of Christian Funeral Home.

The reception he received was not what he had expected. He was met at the office door, not by Christine, but by Jonathan himself.

"Jesse, man it's good to see you again," Jonathan greeted with a cheerful voice while giving Jesse such a hug that his sore ribs hurt. They went into Jonathan's office, where he sat down, not behind his desk as he usually did, but in a chair near Jesse.

Jesse did not have time to recite any of his well-rehearsed Super Bowl highlights learned from the eleven o'clock news before Jonathan began.

"Jesse, I think that before we get down to business, we need to clear the air about Christine."

"Yes sir, I know that topic is uncomfortable for both of us," Jesse replied in his most salesman-like voice.

"No," Jonathan paused, "that's not at all an uncomfortable topic for me. Let me tell you where I am coming from. I have not spoken to you at all since you left home, and have not mentioned a thing to Christine. I did bring it up early on in a staff meeting, and told my employees, without Christine present, that her problems were not to be discussed by anyone on this property. Our business is serving families, not tearing down fellow employees and our suppliers."

If Jesse had been taken aback by Jonathan's warm greeting, he was now floored by this reaction. "Sure am glad I re-read my Winning Salesman book last night," Jesse smirked to himself. "I have him eating out of the palm of my hand. Bank, here I come!"

"Jesse, I must tell you that I have been talking to one man and have been talking to him a lot about everything that is going on in your two families," Jonathan continued.

"He's been talking to my sales manager. I am sunk! Next time I see this guy I will be delivering caskets to him, not selling them," Jesse thought to himself.

"Jesse, the man I have been talking to about you is my best friend. His name is Jesus. For the past year, my wife, Bev, and your wife have been prayer partners. Bev and I have been praying and fasting, asking God to restore two marriages. In addition, I know exactly what you are going through."

"The guy I sell to goes without meals for me?" Jesse inquired. "This is too much." By now his sales material had been dropped next to the chair. Even the once carefully concealed Basically Beltone agreement was now in plain view. "But you have no idea what I am going through. No idea at all."

For the next several minutes, Jonathan Wellson carried the entire conversation. "If we are going to be a Basically Beltone firm, I want to give you some history about Christian's. Bev and I dated during much of high school. I just knew from my junior year on that someday we would be married. We did get married, just after I graduated from mortuary science college. I went to work for a funeral home across the state to serve the three-year apprenticeship that was required back then.

"Those were the 'good old days' when funeral homes provided ambulance service. Every funeral home had a dormitory where the crews stayed. I don't think the dorm of the firm where I was employed was much different than most. They displayed all the morals of an army barracks. Four or six men,

sitting around, waiting for calls, was fertile ground for foul talk and boasts of sexual conquests. As a young married man, I grew up thinking that was the way all married men behaved. It still amazes me how men, with so much filth on the inside, could put on a suit and be so nice and compassionate to grieving families.

"Obviously, we had a lot of contact with nurses. I met one and fell in 'lust' with her. When Bev discovered my affair, she kicked me out. That is what I thought I wanted, so I lived in the dorm at the funeral home until that nurse allowed me to move in with her. I was planning to divorce Bev and marry the nurse.

"I woke up one day and realized how foolish and how miserable I really was. I did not know how to get out of that mess and how to go home, until a wise, old casket salesman took me to lunch. Years before, he had been in a similar situation, and someone had shown him how to get out.

"It is strange," Jesse interrupted, perhaps just to show his interest, "that a casket salesman told you how to straighten out, and now you are helping a casket salesman straighten out." This is almost like pyramid sales. By now every salesman shield that Jesse ever used had fallen. "So, what did you do?"

"I turned my mess of a life over to the Lord," Jonathan continued. "I was led to receive Jesus Christ as my personal Savior, trusting His death on the cross to pay the sin bill that I could not pay."

"Jesse, let's assume you sold me a dozen caskets a day, for, oh say 75 years, and then I said that I couldn't pay for a one? What would happen?"

"I can't imagine. Someone would shut you down."

"That's exactly the way it is with sin. If I sin only a dozen times a day for 75 years I would be a horrible guy, but I can't afford to pay for even one sin. When Jesus died, He paid for every sin that you and I will ever commit. It is all a matter of accepting His free gift of eternal life and turning to Him."

"Nothing is free in this world. How could that be?" an inquiring Jesse asked.

Jonathan picked up his Bible and showed Jesse verse after verse that affirmed all that he had said. Soon, there was a casket salesman kneeling next to his forgotten paperwork, inviting Christ into his life. Tears of happiness, relief, and joy flowed as he arose a new man, ready to follow the Lord.



"Jesse," Jonathan said, "you and I thought that we were the world's greatest lovers, pursuing our own selfish pleasures, but you have just been introduced to The Greatest Lover of all time. He loved you and I so much that he died for each of us."

"I never dreamed that I would ever own a funeral home," Jonathan explained. "That door opened after our marriage was restored. Bev and I prayed about what to name this firm. I could not wait to see WELLSON FUNERAL HOME on the sign.

"We both wanted our business to be a witness for the Lord, so we named it after Him. Most people in town assume that the Christians must have owned this place before us. Actually Christ owns it today.

"Have you ever noticed what appears to be a register book in the foyer? It is a register of people who have prayed to receive Christ in this building."

"Upstairs in the apartment, where Bev and I live, both of our wives are praying right now that God would give me the right words to minister to you. Let's go join them. But first we need to swing through the foyer so that you can sign The Register."

Much like those 48 hours after Bud found out about his wife and Jesse, the next 48 hours are too complicated and too personal to relate in detail. Jonathan and Bev spent most of that day praying and working with Jesse and Barbara. The agreement that Jesse treasured so much was also signed, not in an office, but at the Wellson's dining room table. No, those were not melted snowflakes, but tears of joy that smeared the ink.

That afternoon, at the appropriate time, Jonathan dropped a bombshell into the emotional conversation of the two couples. "I feel led to share that I have also been praying with Bud. Jesse, several weeks ago, he made that same decision for Christ that you made this morning, and is now praying and standing for Christine to come home to Christ and to her family."

Jesse never saw Christine again. He moved out that afternoon while she was still at work.

Later that day, Bev invited Christine to come upstairs for a cup of coffee. She explained what had happened. Christine was not surprised. She was open to hearing the Gospel story, and that afternoon "Christian" Funeral Home claimed its second soul that day for the kingdom of heaven. During those same 48 hours, Bud and the girls moved back home with Christine. Within two weeks, God intervened, and a prior request for Bud's transfer with the state police came through, and the Tremonte family moved away.

Jesse and Barbara, as well as two excited and happy children, were in church with the Wellson's the next Sunday. It wasn't many weeks until the entire family was involved with several church activities.

The greatest thrill of Jesse's life came not when Jonathan signed that agreement, but one evening several weeks later, when Rachel slid down on the floor beside his chair. "Daddy, Jesus has told me that I need to say I'm sorry for all that I said when you moved out. You aren't a jerk and you will always be my daddy. Someday I want to marry a man just like you.

"I love you, daddy." The Beltone office had another set of paperwork coming from Jesse Richardson with signatures stained with tears.

The Wellsons and the Richardsons quickly became the closest of friends. Soon Jesse and Barbara completed a series of home small group classes on marriage, through a ministry in Littleton, Colorado. These classes which had been taken by the Wellson's years before, helped them through the often-difficult days of marriage restoration.

A highlight of their relationship was the evening the two couples began to teach the classes to help other couples strengthen their marriages. Only in heaven will we know how many couples were helped by that teaching team.

The Wellsons stayed in touch by letter with the Tremontes, who had located a church home they loved in their new community. Before long, Bud had been promoted to sergeant and Christine was able to stay home with the twins.

"Jesse, any regrets about coming home?"

"Only that the Lord did not allow it to happen sooner. There will always be a scar as a reminder for us not to make the same mistake all over again. Barbara and I will proudly display our scar to encourage others that God heals hurting families."

Praise His name.