

RUSS TAFF

I STILL BELIEVE



DISCUSSION GUIDE

I Still Believe Discussion Guide

Description

I Still Believe is a powerful movie that tells the story of singer / songwriter Russ Taff. Russ has won multiple Grammy and Dove awards. With all the fame, Russ struggled with alcoholism at the height of his career in Christian music. More importantly, the movie chronicles the love story between Russ and his wife, Tori, and the powerful restoration of their marriage

In this Discussion Guide, Dr. Kim Kimberling, Christian counselor and CEO of Awesome Marriage, uses quotes from the movie to introduce real-life stories of healing and restoration through the power of our amazing God.

Overview Questions

What did you connect with most from the movie?

What parts of your individual story could best explain that connection?

How does God's "big story" (that is, personal redemption through Jesus Christ for all who put their faith in Him) intersect with that area of your life?

Session 1: The Lies We Believe

"I remember just curling up in a fetal position against the wall. And her just kicking me and kicking me and screaming, 'You don't tell anybody what goes on in this family,' ...I had to wear long sleeve shirts...because Mom didn't want anybody to see the bruises." - Russ

Video Clip: <https://vimeo.com/293061300/1879c63a2e>

Bible Reference(s):

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. - 1 John 3:1-2

For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They encircle me with words of hate, and attack me without cause. In return for my love they accuse me, but I give myself to prayer. - Psalm 109:2-4

I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. - John 5:9

Questions:

How did the Enemy use the circumstances of Russ' childhood to distort his identity?

What were some of the lies Russ believed about himself because of this?

How has your identity been under assault through the details of your story?

Being completely honest with yourself, how do you think God feels about you? How well does this line up with Scripture?

Devotional Thought:

Janis was 37 when I first met her. This was her first counseling experience and she was very uncomfortable. I think for most people coming to counseling produces a variety of emotions. They want help. They want life to be better and they choose to come. Yet, the question of how they will get from hurting and broken to better and healthy is a big unknown.

As Janis began to share her story, tears streamed down her cheeks. She grew up in an abusive home. Her dad was an alcoholic. When he was drinking he became angry, lashing out verbally and physically. He told Janis that if she was not such a brat he would not have to drink. In one way or another, she was blamed for all the wrong things in his life and in their family. At 8 years old, Janis believed every word that her dad said to her. His words defined who she was and she wore those labels every day. The power of a parent's words can last a lifetime.

Years later Janis became a follower of Jesus. She had a husband that cherished her and a new baby girl she adored. She was determined to break the cycle from her childhood and firmly believed that God would help her do that. She just could not keep her dad's voice from playing over and over in her head.

As part of her healing, I asked her to go to the class in her church where 8-year-old girls were taught on Sunday. I said, “Look at those young girls and ask yourself if there is any way that any of them could be the cause of the downfall of a parent or a family.” When she came for counseling the next week, there were tears again but these were different. They were tears of healing. God used those 8-year-old little girls to break the power of the lies her father told her about herself so many years ago.

No one defines any of us but God. He created each one of us and knows us intimately. No matter what others say or our life experiences tell us, God sees you as His loved and cherished child. Don't believe the lies. Nothing you can do or say will make Him love you any less.

Today's Challenge:

Spend time in prayer asking God to reveal anything you believe about yourself that is not from Him.



Session 2: Where is God?

"This lovely woman is Mama June...she was my senior high teacher," - Russ

Video: <https://vimeo.com/293061473/b726282218>

Bible Reference(s):

"For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus." - Ephesians 2:6

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. - Joshua 1:9

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. - Isaiah 41:10

Questions:

Where do you think God was during Russ' abusive childhood?

How did Mama June exhibit the presence of God in Russ' life?

When you are going through difficult challenges in life, how do you experience God?

Who has God put in your life that has helped you "see" and know God more deeply?

Devotional Thought:

The Bible tells us that God will never leave us or forsake us. Those are powerful words but there are times in our lives when that truth seems to be out of our reach. Thomas was 10 when his dad died. A few weeks later his mother brought him to me for counseling. His dad's death was not a heart attack or cancer. Thomas's dad took his own life.

The first time he came in we were shooting baskets on the downsized basketball goal in my office. I just wanted to connect with him at some level. After about 20 minutes of shooting hoops, Thomas held the ball, looked me in the eye and said, "Did you know that my dad killed himself?" I love kids and their ability to get to the heart to the matter quickly. I said, "Yes, I know." Thomas began telling me stories about his dad and how much he loved him and how he cried himself to sleep each night because he was so sad. Thomas said, "My dad always took us to church. Dad baptised me when I was just 7. I don't want to go to church anymore because I really am mad at God for this. I don't know where God is anymore." There were so many wrong things that I could have said at that point but instead I just sat there with him as he cried. Finally as our session was ending, I said, "Sometimes when I have been hurting, I couldn't find God either but then later on I realized He had been there the whole time. I just couldn't see Him."

It was a rough two years for Thomas and his mom. There was so much to deal with. Death is never easy and suicide adds another huge layer. I was privileged to stay in Thomas's life all the way through high school. I wish I could tell you there was some great miraculous thing that happened in his life, but it didn't. Instead God provided a never-ending series of small events that shaped and molded him into an amazing young man. God did not bring just one man into Thomas's life to mentor him; God brought five. Five amazing men, each with different gifts and abilities. Then there were teachers, coaches and neighbors that poured into him. When Thomas turned 16 he said these words to me, "You know when you told me that God is always there even when we don't see Him? I know what you mean now. I don't think He ever left me."

Today's Challenge:

Think of a time in your life when you thought God left you that looking back now, you can see He was there.



Session 3: Wearing the Mask

"I would put this mask...up of what people wanted to see...But behind that mask was an Auschwitz survivor, that was skin and bones that nobody loved, because nobody knew him. so I lived holding this image up, and dying on the inside...it was like, if I could just do this, then I'll be happy...I would come home off the road or whatever, from an awards show, I'm still empty." -Russ

Video Clip: <https://vimeo.com/293061711/e9e8140e55>

Bible Reference(s):

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. - Psalm 139:14

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. - Genesis 1:27

Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. - Luke 12:7

Questions:

How does Russ describe the mask he wore? What were some of the causes for portraying an exterior life that was so different from his inner life?

What did it take for Russ to come out of his hiding?

What makes being as authentic and vulnerable as Russ and Tori are in this film so difficult?

What are some of the masks you've worn in your life? How did those masks serve you? How did they keep you from intimacy with God and others?

Devotional Thought:

When I was in high school, our youth group did a skit called "Masks" that had a profound impact on me. The story was about four teens struggling with their identity. Each teen talked about who they wanted others to think they were, then who they really were behind the mask they were wearing. My role was a teenage boy who wanted everyone to like him. He could put on a different mask for different people. If he was at church, he wore one mask and if he was out with friends, he wore another. Behind the mask was an insecure boy that was afraid for anyone to know the real him.

It impacted me because in so many ways, I was that boy. I hid a lot because I didn't know how people would react to the real me. Sure, there were times that I let the mask down and let some of the real me out but the mask was always within reach. I remember thinking that when I was an adult I would not have to wear a mask anymore. Adults don't have to deal with that! My reality later in life was that adults have their assortment of masks too.

When I went back to graduate school at 35, my goal was to be the best Christian counselor ever. When we started Awesome Marriage in 2011, I wanted to be a great leader and challenge people to have the marriage God designed for them. It was not like those were bad goals at all. My problem was that I could lose my focus. I could take my eyes off Jesus and His plan and look at myself and what I was doing. Then the attacks came. "You are not a good counselor." "You are not really helping people." "No one wants to hear what you have to say about marriage." "You are never going to make a difference."

It amazes me that I can counsel people, help them to focus on Jesus in their lives and to renew their minds and see themselves through His eyes but can totally lose sight of that truth myself. The answer to all the attacks, lies and reasons to put on a mask is Jesus. I am perfect in His eyes and He is always there with the answers that I do not have. The same is true for you. Let's put down the masks and embrace the unique person that He created you to be.

Today's Challenge:

Think about any masks that you are putting on. Why do you wear that mask? Thank God that you are fearfully and wonderfully made and embrace that truth today.



Session 4: He's That Kind Of God

"... now I began to hate me. I hated what I became. I hated that I couldn't quit. I would try. I would go maybe two weeks, but the draw was too great." - Russ

Video Clip: <https://vimeo.com/293061955/c50e6c96db>

Bible Reference(s):

For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. - Isaiah 41:13

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. - Romans 5: 3-5

I can do all this through him who gives me strength. - Philippians 4:13

Questions:

What was it about himself that Russ hated so much?

Amy Grant mentioned, "There are a lot of reasons [for a person] not to show light on their festering wound."

Why do you think Russ felt compelled to keep his depression and struggle with alcohol a secret?

What wounds do you have that are difficult for you to shine a light on?

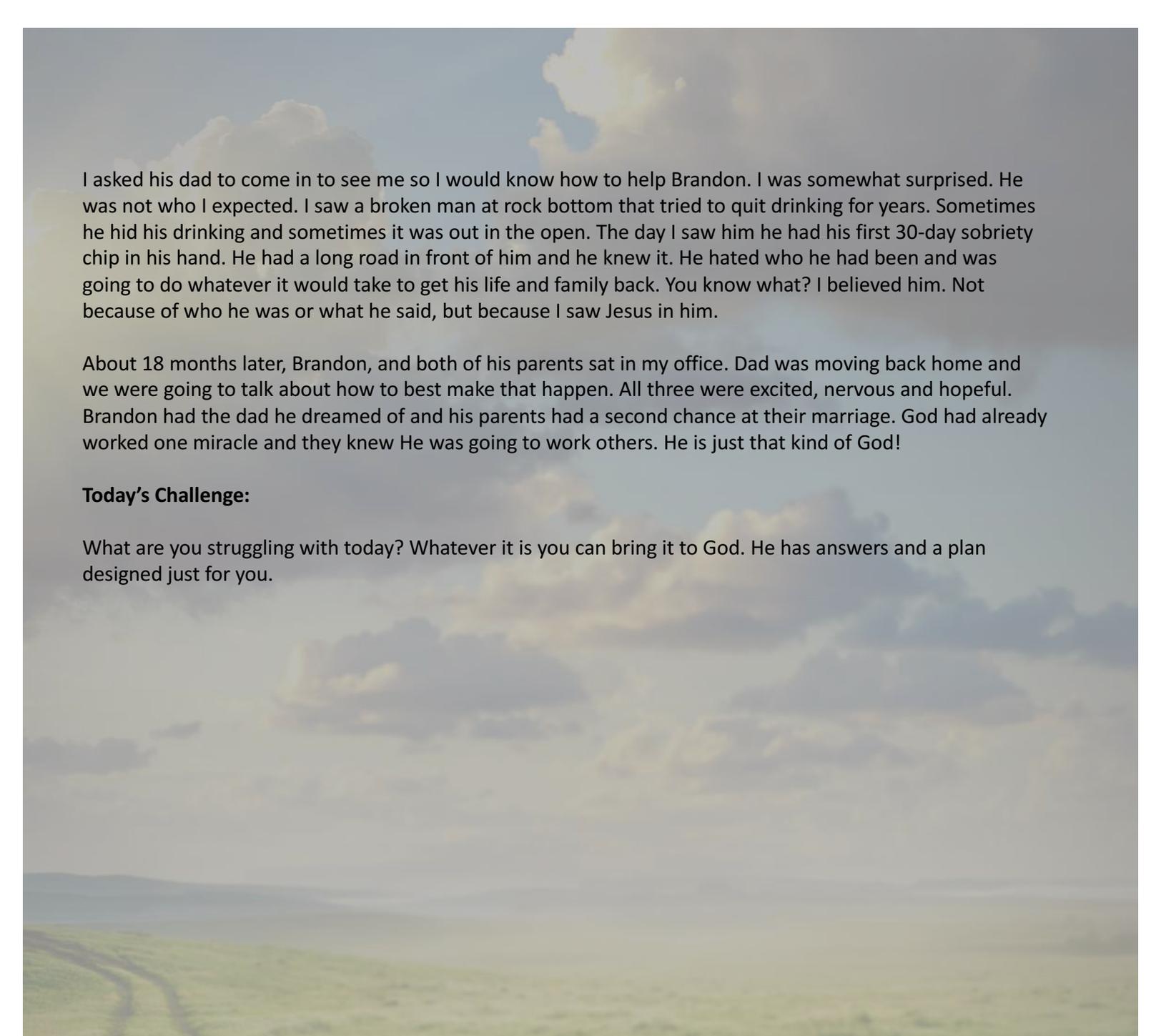
Who would be one person you feel you could trust to open up about this?

Devotional Thought:

I learned early in my career as a counselor that I was not good at helping people with alcohol and drug addictions. I did not "get it" and there were great counselors that God called to work in those areas. So if someone called about a alcohol/drug addiction, I referred them to someone else who could help. Yet, over the years, I have worked with some children who were facing life with a parent that was addicted.

Brandon was 9 when his mother brought him to see me. His mother told me that her husband (Brandon's father) was an alcoholic. She spent years covering for him with his work and with her family, including Brandon. She was done. She could not cover for him any longer. A week before we talked, there was a blowup in front of Brandon and she asked her husband to leave. She drew some hard, but much-needed, lines in the sand. He had to get help and stay sober for at least a year before she would ever consider him coming back home.

Brandon was a bright kid, full of energy, but his life was now turned upside down. He was angry at his mom for making his dad leave and angry at his dad for drinking. His grades were dropping and for the first time ever he was acting out at school. Towards the end of our first meeting he asked me this question, "Why does my dad love his drinking more than he loves me?" I have an answer for most questions but this time I did not. I said, "I don't know." Helping a 9-year-old boy know that what his dad does is about his dad, not him, is tough. Helping Brandon see himself as God sees him was even tougher.



I asked his dad to come in to see me so I would know how to help Brandon. I was somewhat surprised. He was not who I expected. I saw a broken man at rock bottom that tried to quit drinking for years. Sometimes he hid his drinking and sometimes it was out in the open. The day I saw him he had his first 30-day sobriety chip in his hand. He had a long road in front of him and he knew it. He hated who he had been and was going to do whatever it would take to get his life and family back. You know what? I believed him. Not because of who he was or what he said, but because I saw Jesus in him.

About 18 months later, Brandon, and both of his parents sat in my office. Dad was moving back home and we were going to talk about how to best make that happen. All three were excited, nervous and hopeful. Brandon had the dad he dreamed of and his parents had a second chance at their marriage. God had already worked one miracle and they knew He was going to work others. He is just that kind of God!

Today's Challenge:

What are you struggling with today? Whatever it is you can bring it to God. He has answers and a plan designed just for you.



Session 5: Grace is a Verb

"I never saw a body protect another human being like they did him... Nobody was trying to cover up anything. They just simply said, 'This guy's hurt. We need to protect him until he gets well.' Isn't that beautiful? ... I think it's a good example of amazing grace." - Bill Gaither

Video Clip: <https://vimeo.com/293062199/84bea5d9c7>

Bible Reference(s):

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? - Romans 8:31

For nothing will be impossible with God. - Luke 1:37

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. - Isaiah 40:29

When you go through deep waters, He will be with you. - Isaiah 43:2

Questions:

What was the difference between protecting Russ and covering up his alcoholism in this instance?

How would it make you feel to have people willing to come around you and love you like that in the midst of your brokenness?

In what ways did the actions of these people launch Russ on a journey to recovery?

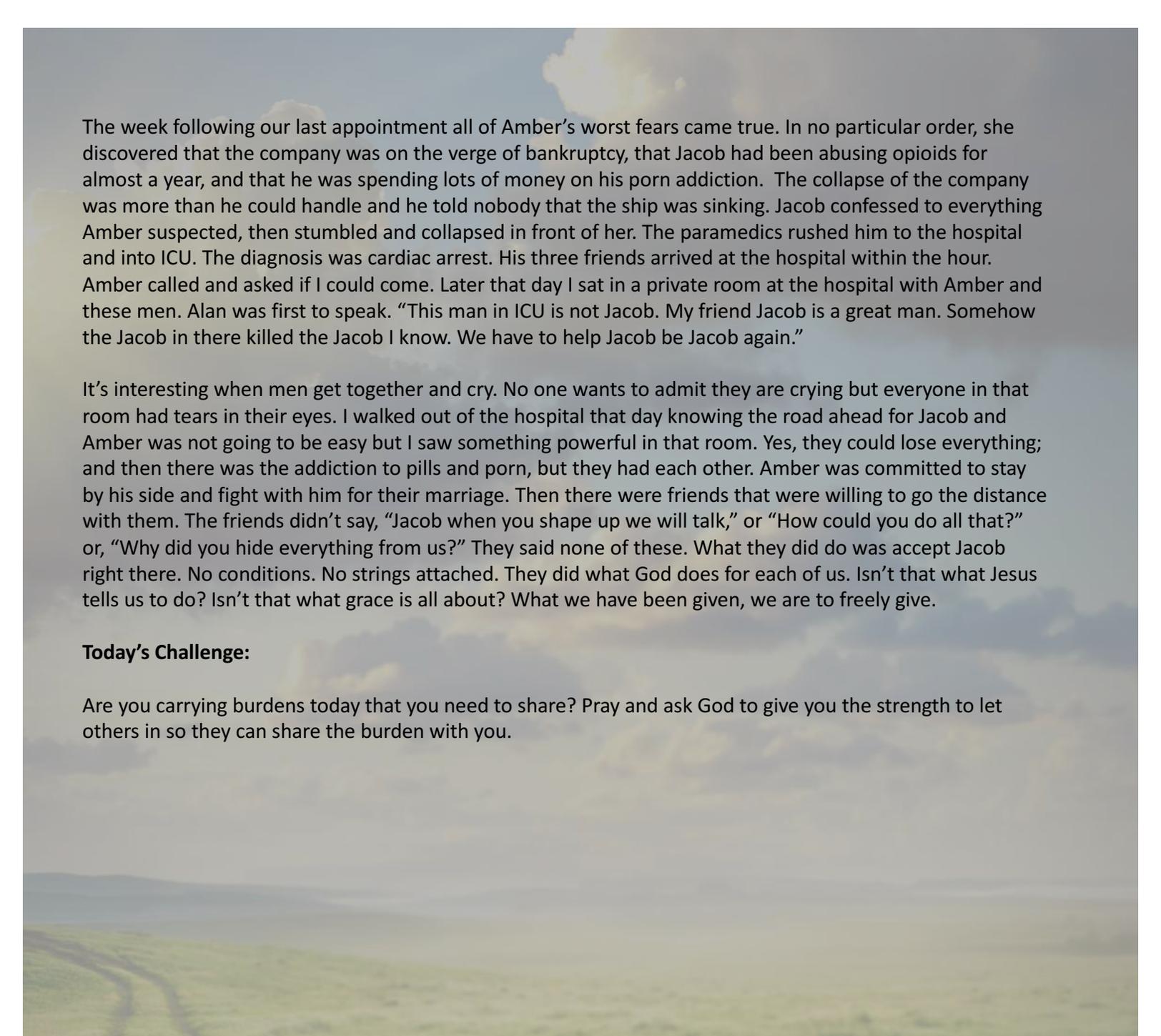
Is there someone in your life that needs to be loved like this? Do you?

Devotional Thought:

Jacob was in self-destruct mode and his life was spinning out of control at a hundred miles an hour. He was the CEO of a big company that he built from the ground up. He was respected by everybody that knew him. He married Amber right after they both graduated from college. She knew he was driven but also loved him very much and they were committed to each other and to having a Christian marriage.

Over the next five years their family grew by three. It was a struggle financially and emotionally. The company was in its infant days and was experiencing one struggle after another. Jacob worked long hours but made enough for Amber to be a stay-at-home mom. He kept saying things would improve financially and over time they did, but it took a toll on him.

Amber came to see me for counseling. She wanted Jacob to come with her but he was too busy that day. They were approaching 18 years of marriage and the kids were all now in their teens. Amber was worried about Jacob. She said that he was different. He was distant and seemed to just be going through the motions of life and marriage each day. The catalyst to counseling came after three of Jacob's friends talked to her about their concerns for him. Alan had known Jacob since grade school and told her that he thought Jacob was on the verge of a breakdown. When trying to talk to Jacob, Alan also felt shut out. Amber and I met for a few weeks. Each time Jacob was just too busy to come.



The week following our last appointment all of Amber's worst fears came true. In no particular order, she discovered that the company was on the verge of bankruptcy, that Jacob had been abusing opioids for almost a year, and that he was spending lots of money on his porn addiction. The collapse of the company was more than he could handle and he told nobody that the ship was sinking. Jacob confessed to everything Amber suspected, then stumbled and collapsed in front of her. The paramedics rushed him to the hospital and into ICU. The diagnosis was cardiac arrest. His three friends arrived at the hospital within the hour. Amber called and asked if I could come. Later that day I sat in a private room at the hospital with Amber and these men. Alan was first to speak. "This man in ICU is not Jacob. My friend Jacob is a great man. Somehow the Jacob in there killed the Jacob I know. We have to help Jacob be Jacob again."

It's interesting when men get together and cry. No one wants to admit they are crying but everyone in that room had tears in their eyes. I walked out of the hospital that day knowing the road ahead for Jacob and Amber was not going to be easy but I saw something powerful in that room. Yes, they could lose everything; and then there was the addiction to pills and porn, but they had each other. Amber was committed to stay by his side and fight with him for their marriage. Then there were friends that were willing to go the distance with them. The friends didn't say, "Jacob when you shape up we will talk," or "How could you do all that?" or, "Why did you hide everything from us?" They said none of these. What they did do was accept Jacob right there. No conditions. No strings attached. They did what God does for each of us. Isn't that what Jesus tells us to do? Isn't that what grace is all about? What we have been given, we are to freely give.

Today's Challenge:

Are you carrying burdens today that you need to share? Pray and ask God to give you the strength to let others in so they can share the burden with you.



Session 6: Learning to Trust God

"You receive Jesus as your Savior. That's the easy part. Then He starts trying to change your character. He starts trying to make you honest. And it's work...you got His nature and your nature butting heads...And then after a while, you begin to trust Him." - Russ

Video Clip: <https://vimeo.com/293062386/454223367a>

Bible Reference(s):

For the Word of the Lord is right and true; He is faithful in all He does. - Psalm 33:4

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. - Proverbs 3:5

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. - Genesis 28:15

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. - 2 Corinthians 4:18

Questions:

Russ said, "You receive Jesus as your Savior. That's the easy part. Then He starts trying to change your character and make you honest. That's work." What does he mean?

What causes a person to move from obeying God because of fear to obeying because of a deep love for Him?

If you were to look at a continuum of obeying God with fear on one side and love on the other, where would you say you are right now? Explain.

How has God proven Himself trustworthy to you over and over again? Why is it still difficult to completely trust Him?

Devotional Thought:

I was 12 when I knew God called me to ministry. I was ecstatic. I talked to my pastor and he shared in my excitement. I was going to be a preacher. Then somehow over the next few years, I lost that passion. I didn't want to be a pastor anymore. Instead, I would go to college, get a business degree, and be the best Christian businessman ever. I thought God would absolutely be thrilled with my plan. The problem was that the conversation concerning my new plan was one-sided. I never really got around to asking God about it because I was afraid of His answer. So I went off to college, met Nancy, graduated college, asked her to marry me, and started my business career.

The interesting thing as I look back at my first years in business was that I didn't hate what I was doing -- probably because there were some great perks. Yet, there was also this hole deep inside me that never was filled because I was still running from God. I began an annual ritual of bargaining with God. It was the same old "I'll be the best Christian businessman" deal. As I walked away from those encounters each year, the hole just kept getting bigger until the "I'm not miserable in my job" part was no longer true. Finally at age 35, I said, "I give. I'll do whatever you want."

My first step was to tell Nancy what I told God. When she said, "I'm all in," I knew we were good. Besides, God was not going to lay something on my heart that He did not also lay on hers. She then suggested that I talk to a longtime friend who was in ministry as a Christian counselor. As we had lunch one day, he looked at me and said, "Have you ever thought about becoming a Christian counselor?" My answer was no. I thought to myself, "How could I consider that when I am running from God and not to Him?" Christian counseling. That sounded good to me and God seemed to be fine with it.

He began to teach me a lot about trusting Him. I thought I trusted God in the past but realized it was pretty conditional. It was easy to trust when things were going my way. When I began a new path for my life and my family, trusting Him at that level was a brand-new experience. First, I was not sure I could even get into grad school. My undergraduate grades were awful. But somehow I got in, although on probation. Our income dropped more than half over the next couple of years, but God always provided. We lost some friends who thought I was crazy to go into ministry, but God brought new amazing friendships into our lives. Learning to trust God was the hardest but most rewarding thing I had ever done in my relationship with Him. God and I became really good friends. I realized how much He really loved me and that His plan for my life, marriage, and family was far better than I could have ever dreamed of. For a time, I did beat myself up over running from God for so long, but do you know what God did? He showed me how He was going to use all those experiences for good. I guess the bottom line for me is that by really trusting God, He went from being something out there that I was not really sure of to being a Father that I cherish.

Today's Challenge:

If anything is keeping you from trusting God, why not bring that before Him today?

