

My Extreme Makeover

Like many American Christians, I needed to lose a lot of weight. Here's how I shed 100 pounds—and lost a ton of unhealthy religious baggage in the process.

I used to be really, really fat.

Curiously, I didn't see my problem. When I stood in front of a mirror, the buttons on my size 52 coat looked as if they might pop off. But I was in denial—even though I had the food-storage capacity of an oceangoing barge.

Ultimately it was a family photo of my son's wedding that got my attention. When I looked at that image I got physically ill.

I was huge! I was ashamed of my appearance. I realized what an embarrassment I was to my family.

That day I finally admitted that stuffing myself with food produced a pleasure that I valued more than I did my health, my family's feelings and my Christian testimony. So I decided to pursue an extreme makeover. I changed my eating habits, started exercising and eventually lost 100 pounds.

Today I feel great about my appearance, and I even run marathons. But what excites me most about my recent journey is not my weight loss but the spiritual changes that have happened in my life as a result. As I shed pounds I also discarded a lot of religious attitudes that kept me as boring as stale bread.

I want to share my story in hopes that you might be stirred to make some life-enhancing, even lifesaving changes. I believe there are some obvious parallels between weight loss and spiritual transformation. I recommend taking these steps:

1. Face the mirror. Watching your waist is no problem, especially when it has a circumference of 4 feet like mine had! It was difficult for me to get that past the mirror when I was so large. “Seeing” your flabby spirit, however, requires reflection of another kind.

Many believers have allowed mindless religion to replace a vibrant relationship with God—and they are in denial about their spiritual condition. Others have become burdened by compromise, doubt, fear, lust, addiction, unforgiveness or complacency. What do you look like in your spiritual mirror?

Whether we are talking about weight loss or the weights of sin that so easily beset us, change begins with taking a first step. You have to step on the scales and get a grasp on the scope of your problem.

Perhaps you have been weighed in the balance and found whopping! You had better do something now! It is a life-and-death issue.

You probably know the risks of obesity: heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and many others. These things can kill you. Have you considered that your spiritual health also affects your life and the lives around you?

I take that first step every morning. I weigh every day. Obsessed? No, I’m thin. Getting thin and staying thin required

me to first admit that I was fat—not simply “big boned” or “suffering from glandular issues.”

Certainly some people have medical conditions that affect their metabolism. But take my advice: If you have to iron your pants in the driveway, you are large.

I had a problem. And my first step to freedom was to admit it.

2. Let your heart be broken. After you face your problem you must ask some difficult questions. The first deals directly with what you have discovered about yourself.

Does your condition grieve you? You won't change if it doesn't.

This is especially true of your spiritual life. If an encounter with God through worship, crisis or His Word reveals your need for a supernatural makeover, then you had better get on your face.

Like Isaiah the prophet, all of us need periodic encounters with God's refining presence. Repentance should be a regular habit.

How long has it been since your last “woe is me” moment? Is God waiting for you to become “undone” so that He might do something fresh in you and something magnificent through you?

My periodic spiritual makeovers can be traced back to a prayer I prayed 30 years ago. I gave up a scholarship and a spot in Bill Gaither's band to become a youth and music minister. I traded the glitz and glamour of the stage for \$75 a week, a

bed in the Sunday school annex and all the janitorial responsibilities a minister could want.

Believe it or not, I was more excited about the lowly associate's position than I had been about playing at 10,000-seat venues. As I occupied my office-closet for the first time, I put my forehead on the old school teacher's desk and said, "Lord, break my heart with what breaks Yours."

What was I thinking? I had no idea how profoundly and how often my Father would answer that prayer, renewing me completely with passion and compassion.

How long has it been since you prayed that prayer?

3. Assess where you're going. Serious soul-searching and brutal honesty are required to answer another painful question: Am I moving forward with God? If the scenery around you hasn't changed in a while, you may be stuck in a spiritual rut.

Ezekiel's vision of the life-giving river of God has become a popular text for many of us. The prophet described a river that began with a trickle, and then it rose to the ankles, then to the waist and then to the knees. Finally it became a river that was so deep it could not be navigated (see Ezek. 47).

We must ask: Are we going into deeper water with God, or are we staying in the same murky shallows year after year? Have you let go of the safety of the shore to get into the deeper flow of what God is doing today? The telltale sign that we are being carried downstream by God's river is that we are

constantly looking at a changing landscape.

Tragically, many people who have floated into the shallow water, or never left the wading pool, have grown comfortable with the familiar landmarks on the opposite shore. Why? It's because they've grown too comfortable in that safe place.

God wants us to experience adventure! But that will never happen if you are in the same place you were last year.

Speaking of stagnation, what decade are you living in? I am amazed at the number of people who can't seem to break free from religious movements of the past.

When I was a kid we would mock traditional Pentecostals who wore beehive hairdos, orthopedic shoes and no makeup or jewelry. Those of us who were enlightened regarded them as hopelessly old-fashioned.

We arrogantly satirized those precious people and distanced ourselves from them. Now look at us.

We are drowning in a postmodern culture that is challenging Christian faith to its core, and we respond by parking in a revival experience that evokes warm memories. We even pray that God will "do it again" rather than praying for a "new thing."

Spiritual nostalgia has become a subtle mask to cover our religiosity. Have you gotten stuck in a previous era? Some of us are stuck in the 1970s, when the Jesus movement moved through our high schools and "One Way" patches covered the

holes in our bell-bottom jeans.

Some of us are stuck in the early 1980s, when the charismatic movement swept through the nation like wildfire. We learned to raise our hands in worship, engage in spiritual warfare and embrace personal prophecy.

Then came the jolting revival movements of the 1990s: Toronto, Pensacola and Smithton. I experienced a major makeover in that era because of the Pensacola Outpouring. What happened to me there changed my life forever. I jumped into the deep part of the river and lived to tell about it.

Unfortunately, many of us can't cope with the reality that the season of that wonderful visitation has passed. Are you stuck there? Do you seek meetings and experiences that trigger the same emotions you felt in Toronto or Pensacola?

You need to move on. You are missing so much, and you may have grown useless while waiting for a dose of déjà vu.

If we live in the past we will become empty, religious shells. We must move with the cloud of God's presence.

It's scary to stay in step with God. We can respond in two ways: We can give up and dog-paddle toward the shallow end of the river, or we can allow God to change us completely. Our willingness to do that represents the hope for this confused culture.

4. Engage the culture. Jesus insists that we make a difference in the world we live in. If you allow Him to strip you of your

religiosity, and you choose to join His adventure, your faith will inevitably influence the world around you.

My three children have helped me make this cultural transition. They have confronted me with unsettling books by young Christian leaders—books such as *Blue Like Jazz* by Donald Miller.

My two sons are rock musicians who have contracts with both Christian and secular record labels. This has stretched my faith—and caused me to realize that I must listen to them, even when the dialogue is troubling and uncomfortable.

My sons are maintaining their spiritual heritage and moral integrity while boldly engaging their culture. They have convinced me to break out of my Christian bubble and talk to a different group of people besides those whose input is predictable.

We cannot afford to dismiss the cynics and critics of our faith. We don't have to agree with them, but we do have to be aware of their perspectives. They are holding up a mirror that reflects what they see in us.

We may indeed shoulder much of the blame for our culture's rejection of all we hold sacred. I will risk whatever an extreme makeover costs to avoid their blood being on my hands.

Yes, I was bound and 4-foot round; I was blind but now I see. I don't want to go back to the days of being overweight and religious.

So I weigh every day and seriously monitor what I eat. Likewise, I ask myself the painful questions that reveal my need for a fresh, powerful experience with a mystical and wonderful Savior.

He has satisfied my deepest hunger. And He has transformed me—in the most extreme way—to become the man He created me to be.

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Weight Loss Is Spiritual

Christian doctor Kara Davis says intimacy with God is the best way to shed pounds.

Many Christians are overweight because of spiritual, not physical, cravings, says Dr. Kara E. Davis, a staff physician with Christian Community Health Center in Chicago.

Davis' answers to the root causes of weight gain are included in her book *Spiritual Secrets of Weight Loss* (Charisma House). She believes the key to successfully losing weight is in cultivating the ninefold fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Love. “Miracle diets” tell us we can eat whatever we want, whenever we want it and still lose weight. But the Bible says genuine love requires sacrifice. Those who wish to lose weight

must be willing to sacrifice unhealthy foods and a sedentary lifestyle.

Joy. A high percentage of obese people suffer from depression. The only way to find true victory over morbid weight gain is to find emotional freedom.

Peace. Anxiety is a major factor in chronic weight gain. “Stress eaters” use food like a drug to cope with the ups and downs of their lives. Also, many people gain weight because they constantly eat fast-foods on the go to save time.

Patience. Healthy weight loss does not happen overnight. It takes time to break the grip of food obsession—which is often at the root of the problem.

Kindness. Those who struggle with obesity must never fall into the trap of self-pity. You will never find true breakthrough as long as you are saying, “Why me?” Develop an outward focus.

Goodness. God has given us a wide variety of foods to enjoy. Davis believes it is unhealthy when self-righteous people label certain foods as “bad.”

Faithfulness. Many people stop eating healthily because their attempts at dieting failed. They say: “Oh well, I doubt I will ever be able to lose weight and keep it off.” Davis insists that it takes faith to lose weight.

Gentleness. People go to extremes to lose weight, and some of the most popular fad diets and weight-loss strategies can be harmful to the body. Davis believes the best approach is a

gentle one that involves healthy eating and exercise. She is critical of starvation diets, high-protein diets, diet medications and certain weight-loss surgeries.

Self-control. Many people deceive themselves about how much food they actually eat. “Empty calories” are a major factor in weight gain—snack foods, chips, sodas. Victory involves admitting your dishonesty about what you eat.

To read an excerpt from Dr. Davis’ book *Spiritual Secrets to Weight Loss*, log on at