

Love Covered My Shame

The scars on my face had become part of my identity. Even after they were healed, I still wanted to hide, but God would not let me.

When I was 12 years old, the mirror became my biggest critic.

It was then that a painful acne condition began to take over my face. Often I'd walk the halls wanting to hide behind a locker door, a book I was holding—anything to avoid being looked at. I was so ashamed, I wanted to hide.

Many kids have problems with acne, but mine was not a normal outbreak. What I had was called “cystic acne.” This inflammation cut far deeper into the skin tissue. In fact, the cysts are more like boils that penetrate through all five layers of skin.

The cystic acne made my skin painful to the touch, and my life was consumed with attempts to treat it. I had very few friends during those years and went through adolescence feeling very unattractive.

My condition worsened as I aged. I tried to keep my focus on Jesus and the singing talent He gave me, but it was hard. As a teenage girl, I wanted to feel and look pretty.

In college, I auditioned for a singing group, and after I graduated, I went on a job interview looking for work. It was no secret why I was not chosen for either position. The condition of my face had disqualified me.

Through the years, I had no hope that my condition would improve. I had grown up knowing that Jesus had forgiven my sins on the cross, but I didn't understand that He had also healed all my diseases.

Then one day hope came, and I began to have an expectation in

my heart for healing. It happened as I was listening to a preacher explain a Scripture I had never read before.

As soon as I arrived home, I got out my Bible and underlined the Scripture the Lord had given me: "By His stripes we are healed" (Is. 53:5, NKJV).

I read those words and cried out to God that I wanted to be healed. I didn't want to suffer any longer. I had been dealing with this problem for 13 years. It had been 13 years of visiting countless doctors; 13 years of trying home remedies; and 13 years of never feeling as good as everyone around me.

So I began to confess and sing this word over and over: "By His stripes I am healed!" My face still hurt and was still a mess of terrible sores. But I didn't stop confessing God's Word of promise to heal me. God was working, even though I couldn't see it with my physical eyes.

Days later a preacher on the radio seemed to speak directly to me as I drove down the road: "Do you really want to be healed?"

My first thought was, Of course I want to be healed! I wanted to be clean, my face beautiful. But suddenly the Holy Spirit gripped my heart. He showed me that, during the years, I had allowed my skin problems to become a part of me.

Like many people with a long-term illness, my identity was tied up in the disease. Because of my struggles with the skin condition, my mom would try to make it easier on me by being extra kind. Now I realized that part of me didn't want to give up the attention and sympathy I received from having this condition.

My heart was finally ready to receive God's healing power. I repented for holding on to self-pity. As I dressed for bed, I sang again: "By His stripes I am healed!"

For the next month, I didn't relent in my confession. Meanwhile, my confessing the Word was working on the inside of me just as it had in the prophet Jeremiah: "Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart" (Jer. 15:16).

I didn't know it, but the moment for my miracle was close at hand.

Before getting into bed one night, I once again claimed God's promise from Isaiah 53. I took one last look in the mirror before turning off the light. The acne seemed to mock me, but I didn't care. I knew God's Word was true and, in my heart, I already had my healing.

The next morning I awoke as if it were any other morning. I got up as I always did and looked in the mirror. There was not even one small blemish on my face! I grabbed my face and cried out, weeping: "I'm healed! My face is clear!"

I ran to the phone and called my mother. "My face is healed!" I started slapping my face—something I never could have done before. "Mother, listen! I'm slapping my face! It's healed!" I cried.

Jesus had applied His power to my entire physical system, and every horrible cyst was gone. My forehead was clear; my cheeks were clean; and my neck was completely healed. And all the swelling from the poison in the cysts had disappeared—so much so that, when my friends saw me that day, they thought I had lost 10 pounds!

FREEDOM FROM SHAME

Years passed, and the acne never returned. My singing career was replaced by something better. The Lord brought a wonderful man into my life, and we married in 1981.

Rick Renner was absolutely everything I had ever prayed for and dreamed of in a husband. He loved Jesus with his whole

heart and had dedicated his life to serving Him.

All I wanted was to be Rick's wife and the mother of his children and to help him in the ministry we were called to fulfill. But a problem developed as I grew older and the gravity of aging caused the scarring on my face to become more prominent. My husband and I were ministering on television by this time, and eventually we both agreed that something needed to be done about the scars.

Although the illness was long gone, the stigma from it was not. The scars were still on my face and on my heart. When I prayed, I found myself always covering my face, yet I didn't know why.

One day the beginning of my breakthrough came. I was listening to a minister preach about Jesus' suffering. The minister stressed that when Jesus was dying on the cross, He took our shame and gave us His glory.

As I listened, the Holy Spirit took me back in my memory to an earlier time. I was 11, and the acne had not yet attacked my face.

I looked back in my mind's eye and saw myself walking through my home, singing with all my strength, my face clear and beautiful. That little girl was me, but she was singing without reservation.

Instead of feeling restricted by unattractiveness, she felt pretty. Everything about that little girl was different from me. She was bold, on fire, afraid of nothing.

As that little girl, I felt good about myself. This memory put hope in my heart. How long had it been since I had felt that free and uninhibited?

I started to weep as God spoke to me that He wanted to take me back to that place, back to feeling confident and free. He

wanted to move my soul from shame to glory. God wanted to take my humiliation and replace it with splendor.

I didn't know how I could ever go from shame to glory; the two are so far apart. How could I ever feel as confident as that 11-year-old girl?

But God is a God of miracles, and I knew I had to take a step toward that healing. With my husband's help, I decided to go through surgeries to repair the underlying damage to my face.

I was so excited, thrilled at the prospect that with the physical change, my heart would be healed along with my face. But it wasn't.

After surgery, when the bandages were removed, I looked in the mirror with despair. On top of the surgery-induced, red, puffy skin, there were bumps covering my entire face!

It was like taking three steps forward and then having Satan knock me three and a half steps back again.

I was crushed. I had trusted God, prayed and endured the surgery. Yet ugliness was all over my face again. Nevertheless, I refused to stop trusting Jesus.

Although I wasn't presentable, I accepted a dinner invitation at the home of some friends. After dinner, I asked my friends to pray for me.

As they prayed, the power of God hit me and I crumpled to the floor. For more than an hour, I stayed there, unable to move, as Jesus took me back through my life.

I saw myself as Jesus saw me. He walked me, clear-faced, through middle school and high school.

He walked me through college and my early career without a mark on my skin, letting me experience those years without the stigma of the disease. My face was without marring or even a

trace of acne.

As Jesus walked me through my life, the Holy Spirit restored me. He replenished me. He re-established me. He renewed me. He opened my eyes, and I was overwhelmed by the goodness of God.

When I got up off that floor, I saw myself differently. I knew I didn't have to carry that humiliation any longer. It was gone from me forever. My shame had been replaced with glory!

Revelation 12:11 says that we overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony. This is why I share my testimony with others. I believe it has the power to overcome the enemy's work to hold people back through the horrible bondage of shame.

FROM DISGRACE TO GOD'S GRACE

I know that many women deal with shame in their lives. Often it comes through an event or circumstance that is completely out of a person's control, like my acne or a trauma such as sexual abuse.

For others, shame is the result of a secret sin such as abortion or a wrong relationship. The devil uses many different avenues to bring us under the bondage of shame.

But I am here to declare that Jesus wants to release us from shame forever, no matter what its cause or source.

Shame and guilt can hold you back from seeing or expecting what God has in store for you. You might feel as if you don't deserve love or the chance to be successful in life. You might feel as if you don't deserve a sexually fulfilling marriage if an out-of-place sexual relationship was what caused the problem of shame in the first place.

You might feel ashamed of your body. You might shrink from the thought of coming boldly into the presence of your heavenly Father. There are so many ways shame can affect you.

If you have any shame in your life—if you hide your face from the God who made you in His image and who loves you—you need to come out from under that disgrace into His grace. Christ Himself was despised and rejected so He could deliver you from any shame or rejection that would try to define your life.

“He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care” (Is. 53:3, NLT).

Jesus understands your shame. He was humiliated as well.

Nothing you do and nothing that ever happens to you could ever disqualify you from receiving His love and deliverance. Bring your sadness and your feelings of unworthiness, and give them to the One who understands.

You can be made new. Humble yourself before the mighty hand of God, and let Him lift you to your feet. Stand as the free and confident child of God He created you to be. Then walk away from shame forever as you bathe in the love that is waiting for you.

Read a companion devotional.

Denise Renner and her husband, Rick, have planted churches in places such as Latvia, Russia and Ukraine. **Mary Hutchinson** also contributed to this article.