

Jim Bakker's Powerful Story Embodies God's Redemptive and Merciful Love

I have known Jim Bakker since the heydays of PTL in the late 1970s. I wrote a *Charisma* cover story about him in May 1983 after traveling to the relatively new Heritage USA to get a behind-the-scenes look at what was then an increasingly controversial ministry.

Readers might remember that things spun out of control only four years later for PTL and Jim Bakker. This downward spiral came after allegations of financial wrongdoing—mostly “overselling” so-called timeshares—and after his denomination defrocked him when a short-lived extra-marital affair hit the newspapers.

If that wasn't bad enough, PTL eventually went bankrupt and Jim's wife, Tammy Faye, divorced him and married his best friend. Jim went to prison for five years.

In short, Jim Bakker lost everything.

But unlike many high-profile people who become caught up in a public scandal or spend time incarcerated, Jim found humility. His famous book about his ordeal sums up his journey in its three-word title: *I Was Wrong*. While in prison, the job of the man who had met with U.S. presidents and had run one of the largest non-profit ministries in the nation was to clean toilets. But, he used whatever spare time he had to diligently study the Word. That's what really changed him.

The miracle is that, after all this, Jim Bakker has rebounded. I saw this firsthand when I visited him at his new facilities near Branson, Missouri this week.

As a Christian journalist, I have covered Jim Bakker for many years. I knew many people from his PTL ministry. I knew Tammy Faye—who has since passed away—and her new husband. Even so, I could never be counted among his inner circle of friends. However, I did consider him a friend.

After his release from prison, Jim and I went to dinner once when he visited Orlando. It was my way of reaching out to a broken man. His fortunes were so low that the dinner invitation took him by surprise.

He slowly began to put his life back together. He lived in a one-room apartment at the Pastor Tommy Barnett-founded L.A. Dream Center. I visited the Dream Center in the early days and wrote about it. I remember meeting Bakker there and meeting his lovely new wife, Lori Graham Bakker. We did a story on her life where she admitted to having five abortions and about how God had healed her and used her testimony for good.

Jim has now built a new ministry near Branson called Morningside. It has a hotel and condominiums, campgrounds, a media school, television studios and many other amenities. Everything is done with excellence and Bakker has assembled a top-notch team.

I couldn't help but draw parallels to what Bakker did at PTL. Only this time, everything is paid for. And while everything is nice, no one can call what he's done opulent (a word often used to describe things at PTL).

For me, however, the amazing thing is that Jim Bakker has rebounded. He is now 75 and he works 16-hour days. He seems to have more energy than men half his age. Most people who experience the enormous loss Jim Bakker has experienced would have given up and rotted away somewhere out of sight. Not Jim Bakker. He learned whatever lesson he needed to learn, and believed God that he could dream again.

Historians will spend decades dissecting the life of Jim

Bakker. He is a very complex man, yet he's also a great man. Maybe he went too far at PTL. Maybe he wasn't accountable. Obviously, he made some big mistakes. Yet in my opinion he did no more wrong (and a whole lot less) than hundreds of other leaders who either didn't get caught or had only a minor setback. However, Jim Bakker lost everything.

To some, his name still exemplifies the worst in flamboyant Pentecostal preachers. He has been criticized for his focus on end-time prophecy and encouraging people to prepare for hard times by storing food or having backup generators. He's not a perfect man and he's the first to admit it (but then who among us is perfect?).

But he's not a quitter. He has come back after he lost everything except his life. And that should be an encouragement to everyone who reads this or who watches him on TV. That's because all of us will face loss of some sort—even loved ones. Some might face an unhappy marriage or deal with wayward children. Some might lose a job, struggle through a bankruptcy or face serious illness like cancer.

While your loss might not be as bad as Jim Bakker's, it probably will hurt as much as his loss did him! At your lowest point, take comfort that God can give back your dream and help you rebuild your life as he did with Jim Bakker.

We recorded a couple of television programs while I visited Morningside. The first is scheduled to air Monday, October 19. I hope you will watch.

At the end of the program, Jim Bakker stood and looked at the camera and said something that's not cliché—it's something he knows from the depth of his soul: "God loves you—He really does!"