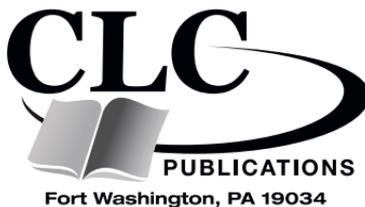


THE BROKEN CURSE

Gaining Freedom from Hurtful Words

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The Broken Curse

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Contents

Prologue	7
1 The Curse	9
2 “I’ve Got One!”	17
3 Believe in the Awesome Power of the Spoken Word.	25
4 Beware of the Awful Problem with the Spoken Word	35
5 The Curse That Is Already Broken	45
6 His Word.	51
7 His Name	57
8 His Blood.	63
9 Breaking the Curse of Words	69
10 My Appeal.	79
Epilogue	85

Prologue

THE ROOM WHERE I USUALLY WRITE has an expansive view across a lightly forested area that hosts the confluence of two creeks. All kinds of wildlife abound in that area, some feathered, some furry, and some with human skin. The local children, including my own grandchildren, love to play down by the water beneath the trees. Because of this, Jeannie and I have an assortment of shoes at our back entry, none of which fit us, but most of which are covered with mud that will have to be removed before they can be worn again.

It's difficult to walk in muddy shoes. I know from experience that it can be tiring, down right aggravating, in fact. Muddy shoes weigh you down and make progress slow and cumbersome.

Perhaps your life has become just as difficult. You are weighed down with the accumulated disappointments, failures and verbal clods of the past. Rather than your life being a heady adventure, you are just slogging it out. Isn't it time you removed the verbal debris that has accumulated on your soul?

The Broken Curse

Isn't it time you experienced what it means to run again, unhindered? I want to invite you on a personal journey into a life set free from the curse of hurtful, painful and destructive words. To be quite honest, I do not *think* the liberating truth in this small book will work for you. I *know* it will! I know this truth will set you free because God's Word assures us that it will. But I also know about this freedom through personal experience. You see, this book is the story of my personal deliverance.

1

The Curse

“Face it,” he snorted. The worn swivel chair behind his desk seemed to creak in affirmation as my friend leaned backwards toward a cluttered credenza. A smile traced across the older man’s wizened face as he nodded his head with an air of knowing confidence. “You’re just like me and everyone else I know. That’s why I can say with certainty that you will never succeed. I haven’t mastered that spiritual discipline and neither will you, so just get used to it.”

With a dismissive wave of his hand he turned his attention back to some papers on his desk, indicating that our discussion was over. Because I held this man in high esteem, I left his office with the assumption that his judgment of my spiritual passion must be correct. Worse yet, I walked away that day quietly resigned to a lifetime of frustration in an important area of my spiritual life. After all, as he had said, I was “just like him.”

THE SEAMS IN THE CONCRETE HIGHWAY beat a steady rhythm beneath the wheels of the small blue sedan as I drove eastward across Oklahoma toward the Arkansas state line. Behind me the setting sun was accompanying the highway's beat with an ever-changing kaleidoscope of color, viewed only in part by an occasional glance at the rearview mirror. The repetitive sound of the wheels on the highway was almost hypnotic, serving only to punctuate five phrases I sought to dismiss from my mind.

"You're just like me!"

"You will never . . ."

"If God ever takes His hand off a man, He never . . .!"

"What do you think you're doing?"

"It's too late for you!"

Somehow, the vibrations of the highway seemed to be jarring those long-forgotten statements loose from their hiding places, each one accompanied with its painful recollection of repeated failure.

I was perplexed. Why was it that, in spite of all the positive and encouraging statements I'd heard over the years, those five negative statements were so deeply and indelibly etched in my spirit? Though spoken years and miles away, they were as fresh in my mind as if uttered only minutes earlier. Was it because of my love and

respect for those who'd spoken those words to me? Was it the place, or time, when they were spoken? The look in the person's eyes? The tone of voice? The shock I'd felt when hearing them, almost as if I'd been hit with a physical blow? Was it because those statements were made at a moment when I was particularly vulnerable? Perhaps that had been the cause for the enduring impact of those words.

But then I recalled that, on at least one occasion, I was simply listening in on a conversation among three men for whom I had great admiration. One of the men made a statement that I had subsequently drawn into my heart much the same as an unwitting victim inhales passive smoke. Now those words continued to silently infect my spirit with a deadly malignancy.

Here was the irony: I actually despised all five of those statements, or at least the picture of defeat and failure they painted on the walls of my heart. Yet, in spite of all my best efforts, they had become self-fulfilling prophecies. Those words were like a curse to me. It seemed the harder I tried *not* to fulfill them, the more they were becoming like an autopilot, subconsciously guiding my behavior unless I deliberately took control over them.

Reflecting back, I recalled that I was not alone in dealing with the pain and defeat brought on by the curse

of words. I remembered the distressed wife who asked how she should encourage her husband to experience the thrill of singing in worship. While still in elementary school, his teacher had asked him to refrain from singing with the choir at a rehearsal for the class's Christmas presentation. "I think you're singing off-key," the teacher had said, almost as an aside. "He clammed up," his wife now lamented, "and he inwardly resolved never to sing again." Now that man was fifty-five years of age and a successful businessman, but the memory of his teacher's words was robbing him of the joy of song.

And there was the seminary student who once confessed that, though he loved every aspect of ministry, he knew he would never be a successful pastor. "You're nothing but a big old dumb 'galoot,'" his father had repeatedly hissed in anger and disdain as he looked with disgust on his growing son's lanky frame. "And I've just always assumed he was right," the student had said to me with an air of resignation.

With sadness I recalled how, on more than one occasion, some bright, normally energetic, and relatively young mother would inform me that her husband and the father of her children was dissatisfied with their marriage. "I think he's infatuated with someone at the office, or down at the gym where he works out," she would say,

shoulders sagging with grief and resignation. Then she would tell how her husband would repeatedly mock her for the sags and stretch marks that always seemed to reappear with renewed vengeance with the arrival of each successive child.

“He tells me that I’ve just let myself go, and I guess he’s right. Anyway, pastor,” she would sigh, “I’ve got to go pick up the kids at school, get them to their lessons, prepare dinner, get the house straightened up and the kids to bed before he gets home from the gym. He likes things to be quiet when he comes home from a hard day at work.”

I could only imagine what verbal compass was now guiding that weary wife’s behavior. What picture of their future married life had been painted on the walls of her heart by the tongue of her spiritually immature and disgruntled husband?

With my destination only a few miles ahead, I wondered if there was any way for me to break free from what I later began to call the curse of words. James spoke of the reality of such a curse when writing about the importance of using our tongue properly. Pointing to the evil inconsistency inherent in our speech, he notes that with our tongue “we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we *curse* men, who have been made

in the likeness of God” (James 3:9). The wheels of my car crunched over the gravel-covered parking lot adjacent to the small church where I was to speak that evening. I was relieved to see people still walking from their vehicles toward the building that was now bathed in the yellow glow of a single large bulb positioned directly over the double-doored entrance. From the looks of the vehicles in the parking lot—mostly trucks—it appeared we’d have a great crowd.

Before opening my car door, I placed both hands on the steering wheel, took a deep breath and made a solemn resolution. Once my assignment was over and I was making the return trip home, I was going to prayerfully and fervently seek God’s answer for my dilemma. It was time for me to break the curse of those words that were so negatively impacting my life. By God’s grace, I was going to wrestle this problem to the ground.

A screeching symphony of cicadas greeted me as I opened the door of the car. Only recently set free from their interminable earthly imprisonment, they were now enjoying a noisy and unembarrassed courtship. Planting both feet on the ground, I filled my lungs with the hot, dry summer air. It was now time to turn my attention to the purpose for my visit. As we say in Oklahoma, this was “meetin’ time.”

Though I remember little of the meeting, I do recall the eagerness with which I anticipated the drive back home that evening. As soon as proper decorum permitted, I said my goodbyes to the friendly crowd and the local pastors, walked to my car, and drove off toward home.

“Father,” I prayed, “the desire of my heart is to gain victory over the curse of those words spoken years ago and miles away. Will You teach me tonight? Will You show me how to break free? Will You show me how to use the weapons of warfare that are not carnal but spiritual?” Those were the words on my lips as I eased my car out of the parking lot, drove through the small town, steered up an entry ramp and onto the interstate. For the next three hours, God had a captive audience.

That summer night, I discovered the secret that sets us free from what I have come to call the “curse of words”—the lingering, hurtful consequences of statements that, even now, continue to negatively impact our lives. With God’s answer, and the freedom I now enjoy, there has come the requirement that I share this secret with you. Good stewardship of the truth demands it!

On the following pages you will read about God’s secret for breaking the curse of words. My use of the word secret is not a reference to something heretofore

restricted from view and only now revealed. Generally speaking, what's true is not new. Instead, I am using the term secret to speak of God's clearly defined answer, His key that opens the door and sets you free from the curse of words. What you will discover in these pages is that God has a strategy for successfully confronting the effect of any words that are shaping your life in a manner contrary to His wonderful plan.

For some who read this, it will come as a welcome surprise to discover that the curse has already been broken, and all that remains is for you to employ the simple strategy and powerful tools that have been placed at your disposal. That was true in my case and may be true in yours as well.

But first, you are invited to our home on the night following my remarkable discovery. Come sit with me at our dinner table and listen to a sobering conversation.

2

“I’ve Got One!”

“It happened when we were living in Africa,” my youngest daughter explained. “You had spent the better part of the day attempting to connect by phone with someone in the States. Coming home from school on my bicycle, I rolled over a cobra snake in our driveway and rushed in to tell you about it. You kept placing your finger over your mouth, attempting to hear the person on the phone. But the more you tried to shush me and calm me down, the more animated I became. When your conversation was ended, you hung up the phone in disgust, turned toward me, blurted out my name and said, “I could just shoot you!””

MUCH SOONER THAN EXPECTED, I was easing the car up our driveway and into the dimly lit garage. I was eager to share with my wife, Jeannie, the details of what was, quite plainly, a meeting with God. Out on the highway, the Lord had unfolded to me His strategy for

breaking the curse of words. I had called to mind passages of Scripture that I had frequently studied over the years, passages that had become like old friends to me. God began speaking to me by His Spirit and through His Word, the Bible. He revealed His plan, step by step, until it was clear what I must do. But after every piece of the plan had finally fallen in place, it seemed that God had grown silent.

A friend of mine was accustomed to saying, “When God is silent, that means it’s your move!” I knew God was waiting for me to apply this newly discovered strategy to the five statements that had become like a curse to me. With a trembling heart and voice, I began. Carefully following the plan God had so clearly shown me in His Word, I brought each statement before the Lord.

It would be difficult for me to describe the personal sense of revival, freedom and joy in the Lord that I experienced that evening as the car, seemingly self-guided, rolled through the night toward home. At first I began worshiping the Lord, virtually shouting His praises as the tears rolled down my cheeks. Then I began to sing—first some songs I remembered, and then some new songs from remembered verses of Scripture that seemed to flow up from deep within my heart, spilling over with joy and laughter. God had indeed broken the

curse of those words in my life, and by the time I arrived home my voice was literally hoarse from shouting and singing praises to the Lord.

“You will never believe what God has shown me,” I said to Jeannie while settling into bed beside her. Though it was well past midnight, I was energized by my newly discovered truth and wanted to talk.

Looking back, I suppose that I fully expected Jeannie to sit straight up in bed, eyes wide open with excitement, take pen and notebook in hand and begin recording my insights.

That’s not the way it happened! Weary from the previous day’s activities, and having been now awakened from a deep sleep, Jeannie turned toward me with half-closed eyes and mumbled, “I’m not sure I can concentrate, so do you think it can wait until breakfast?”

“I guess it’ll have to,” I replied, putting my hands behind my head and gazing up at the ceiling with a smile. “Boy!” I thought to myself, “Will that ever be an interesting discussion!”

The short night, coupled with the need to get the younger children to school on time, didn’t provide the kind of setting I wanted in order to share my thoughts. So I quickly came up with an alternate plan that, in the end, proved to be even better than imagined.

“Tonight,” I said to the family, now seated at the breakfast table, “I will have some very important news to share at dinner. Everybody needs to be at the table on time. No exceptions!”

I refused to cave in to the pleas of either my wife or children to at least give them some hint regarding the secret, so by dinner everyone was eager to hear the news. Our eldest daughter, only recently engaged, had encouraged her fiancé to join us for the meal. (Actually, I was beginning to realize that, when it came to excuses for the two of them to be together, he didn’t need much encouragement at all!) I let the suspense continue to build through the mealtime. Finally, when dinner was over, I said, “I want to tell you a story.”

Slowly, but with obvious excitement, I shared with my family the events of the previous evening. The most difficult part of the story was my confession regarding the negative impact of those five statements on my life. I wasn’t certain that anyone would understand or identify with the impact of those statements, especially our children, three of whom were still in their teens.

My fears were confirmed when I finished my story. Each member of my family seemed deep in thought, looking first at me and then down at the table in what I interpreted as embarrassed silence. “They don’t get

it,” I thought to myself. “Maybe this is just one of those truths God wants me to hide in my heart.”

“I’ve got one.” The silence was broken by one of my daughters. All eyes turned her way. “Do you remember our family reunion a couple of years ago, and when I accidentally kicked the coffee table, causing a porcelain figurine to fall and shatter? Well, someone, I really don’t recall who, blurted out that I was ‘the clumsiest person in the world.’ Those words really hurt my feelings at the moment. I was so embarrassed. And then those words just seemed to stick in my mind. Now, when I’m around other people I just constantly worry that I’ll do something clumsy.”

I was astounded at my daughter’s admission, especially since that very year she had been elected as homecoming queen in high school! But my daughter’s openness prompted the others around the table, including my future son-in-law, to do the same. Negative and hurtful statements that for some reason had found a permanent home in their hearts came tumbling out in an unexpected manner.

“You only have friends because you’re the pastor’s daughter.” My eldest daughter spoke up, identifying a statement made by a grade school friend. She explained how from that point onward, she had tried hard to make

certain that her friends were not just “church friends,” sometimes with really hurtful consequences.

“‘You will never amount to anything.’ My father would often repeat those words to me when he was angry and frustrated over something I had done, or done poorly,” said my wife tearfully. “For a while I just tried to ignore those words and forgive my daddy, but over time I developed a very poor and unhealthy self-image.”

“The good times start when you show up.” My son shared how these words, often repeated by his friends, had actually put an unbearable burden on his shoulders. “I know that, in order to live up to those words, I have done some things that would not meet your approval—or God’s.”

Every person around the table opened up their hearts that evening, sharing statements that had also become like a curse to them. My daughter’s fiancé even told of some words that had left him feeling inferior among his peers. The atmosphere was relaxed enough that we actually teased each other a bit, knowing all the while that, underneath everything, we were still dealing with a life-changing issue.

But it was my youngest daughter’s openness about that day in Africa that caught me by surprise and provided a living illustration of the negative manner

in which we often use our tongue. I will never forget what my daughter said because, in this instance, I was unquestionably the offending party. My irritation over her insistent behavior, coupled with the words, “I could just shoot you,” had left an indelible picture in her heart. I could only hang my head in shocked embarrassment at the memory of that moment.

“Daddy,” my daughter said, seeing I was on the verge of tears, “I know that’s just something people say and that you really didn’t mean it. And I’ve tried to erase that moment from my mind. But I have thought of it so often, and at the strangest times.”

By now I was in obvious grief over my callous statement and urged my daughter to forgive me. Sensing the impact her admission had on me, my daughter lovingly assured me that she had “dealt” with the issue, though admittedly she often wondered why it was that she could still so clearly recall those hurtful words.

If you had been physically present around our family’s dinner table that evening, you would have heard me carefully explain to my family what God was teaching me about the “curse of words.” We would have gladly included you in our circle of prayer as we joined hands and employed the strategy God had shown me the night before. You would have sensed, without question, the

air of victory and celebration that followed our time of prayer. And, like the members of my family, you could look back on that moment as the time when God set you free from the curse of words.

But you weren't there. And that's why, in the following pages, I'm inviting you to explore God's secret for breaking the curse of words. You can be set free!

On the next few pages, I'm going to ask you to believe in something, to beware of something, and finally, to break something.