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## Chapter

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# One

## DESPAIR

One morning back in 1974, I browsed through the March 19 issue of *Insight*, the Adventist youth magazine. The following paragraphs in the letters-to-the-editor section caught my attention:

Just what *is* the solution when one has asked for forgiveness and made his confession, is willing to forsake his sins, has prayed earnestly, and consecrated himself to God only to find himself falling right back into sin? . . .

Somewhere a vital link in the chain of becoming like Christ is missing for me—has anyone who has trod the road ahead found the answer—the really workable solution that results, at the close of the day, in triumphant, heartfelt praise to such a Friend who could do so much for you? What a change that would be! I'm all for "victory to victory," but HOW?

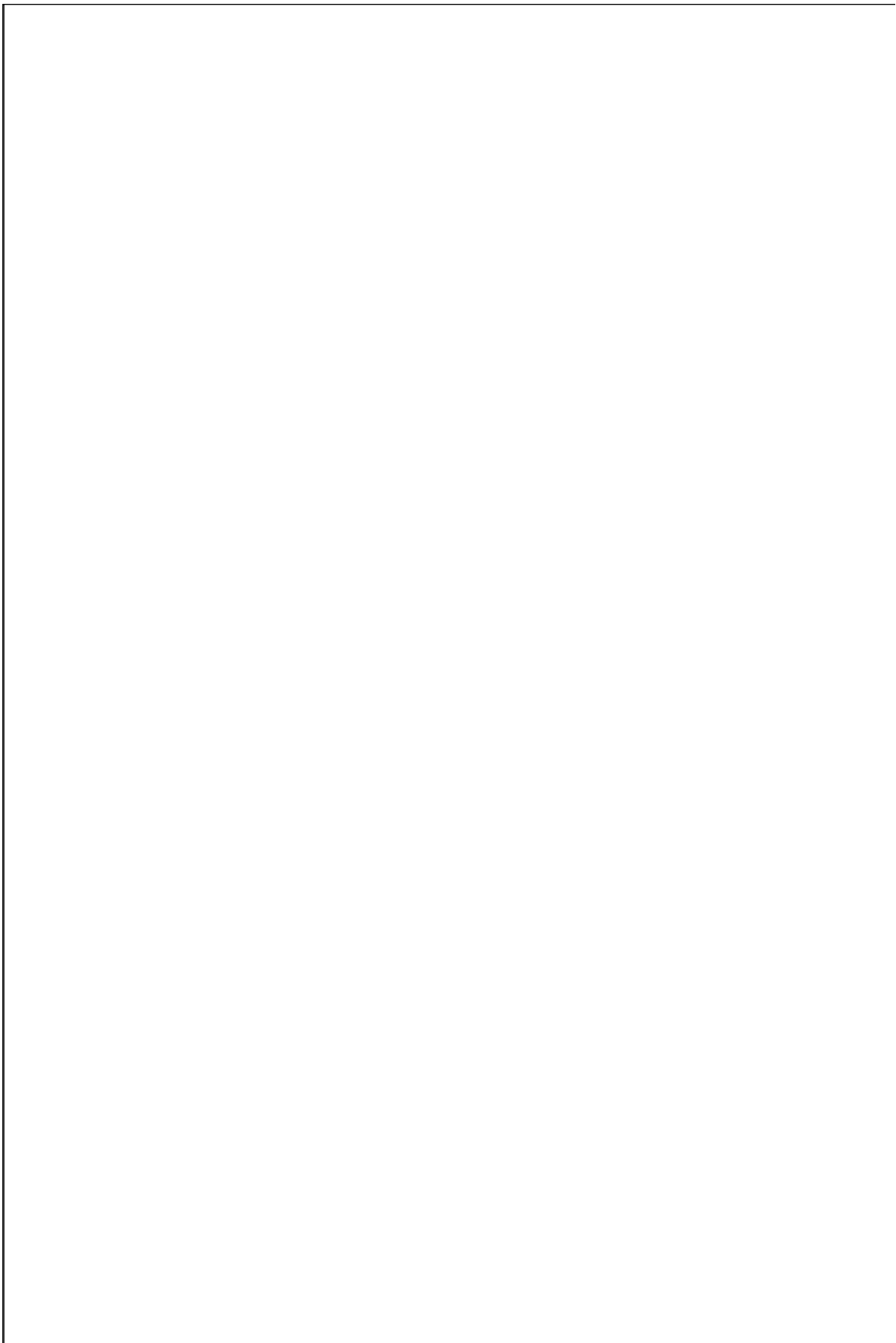
The author of that letter was listed as "name withheld," so you and I will never know who wrote it. But one thing is certain: Whoever it was felt desperate.

Have you ever felt that way?

I have.

Preachers used to tell me that victory over sin would surely come if I'd just turn my will over to Jesus. "Make His will your will," they'd say. "Come to the foot of the cross." "Fall on the Rock and be broken."

Nice words. Cheerful words. Even encouraging words—or so it seemed at first glance. But the reality was usually far different. When I went home, I discovered that I was living the same old



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life—trying to overcome my temptations but failing about as often as I succeeded.

God knows how hard I tried turning my will over to Jesus! But it seemed that the harder I tried, the further away the “foot of the cross” got. And as for “falling on the Rock,” Jesus said it, but for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out how to do it.

Maybe the Bible will help, I’d say to myself. Didn’t Paul promise that “I can do all things through Christ, who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13)?

Great idea!

I hope it worked for someone else out there, because back then it sure wasn’t working for me. I felt a whole lot more like Paul’s man in Romans 7: “What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (verse 15). I was losing far more encounters with the dragon than I was winning!

I have bad news for you. The person who wrote that letter to *Insight* was not alone. Millions of Christians, including thousands of Adventist Christians, understand the feeling all too well. They don’t need the Bible to tell them their special sin is destroying their happiness and maybe their sanity. Quite apart from any biblical pronouncement, they know they ought to quit for their own good. The Bible just adds a moral perspective that makes each failure a reason for whipping themselves a little harder.

Most of us find that it works part of the time. “God, help me not to do it!” we say under our breath. Then we clench our fists and grit our teeth, and sure enough, we don’t do it. We’re clean! Accepted! Back in a right relationship with God. Saved at last. After all, didn’t God just prove it by giving us the victory? Un-saved people don’t gain those kinds of victories, do they?

Here’s more bad news: People who start out like that will almost invariably fall into the old temptation again. Maybe not for a week. Maybe not for a month or a year. But sooner or later . . . Sometime . . . Almost certainly . . . The dragon will win.

I wonder, is that what *Insight*’s correspondent was talking about? Is that how he felt—on the mountain one day, in hell the next? A hell she got sucked into in spite of her best intentions and hardest efforts? A hell from which it seemed there was no escape, from which apparently God Himself was powerless to extract him?

Yes, for some Christians it’s been perpetual hell for years. They



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put up a good front. They keep the masks on their faces. Every week they're in church, smiling and telling everyone how wonderful it is to be a Christian. They may even bury the past down in the basement of their psyches for a while. But one day the temptation becomes too overwhelming, and they're down in hell again.

The world mustn't know, though, least of all, the church! There's an image to maintain, a reputation to protect. They go back to church the next Sabbath with the familiar smile pasted on their faces.

Other Christians are more honest. When it doesn't work, they take off the mask. They quit the church. Some even quit God. I suspect that many of those so-called "backsliders" would still be with us, had they been able to make the Christian life work for them. It's not that they wouldn't *like* to be in the church. Quitting is just easier, and far less frustrating, than trying and failing time after time.

That's the bad news.

Fortunately, I have good news for you as well. God *has* provided a way out. It's called "the plan of salvation." I will not go into any detail about it here, though, since that's what the rest of this book is about. It describes how you can experience victory over temptation. It explains how you can conquer that besetting sin you thought would be with you the rest of your life.

I wrote this book to share with you two kinds of hope that God has given me: hope that victory over sin *is* possible for you and hope that God will stick by you during the process. I hope that by the time you come to the Epilogue, you will realize that you, too, can conquer the dragon of sin that lurks inside of you.

