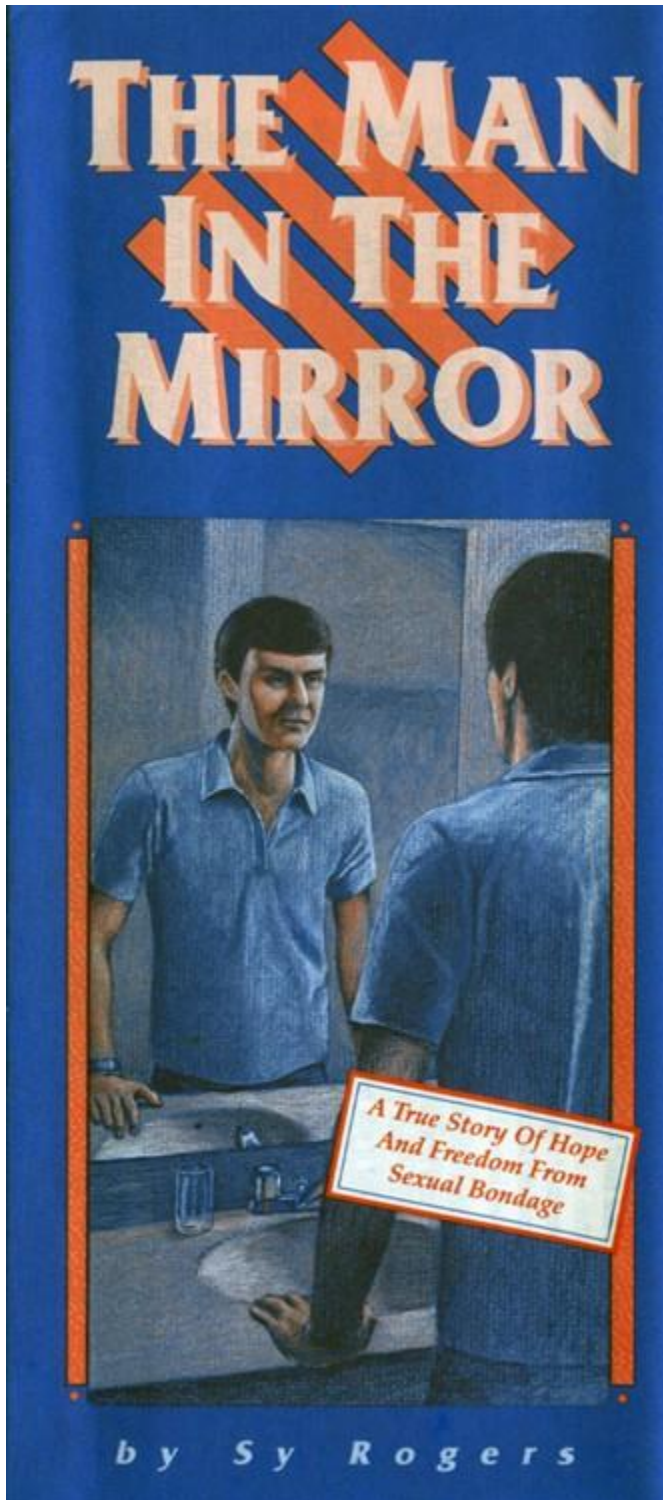


The Man In the Mirror

by Sy Rogers



Imagine - *me* married! A day of rejoicing and celebration, of sharing love between family and friends. At my side was my wife, the woman I loved. But special as it was, our wedding held a much deeper significance.

There was a time when I would never have believed such fulfillment was possible for me. Only three years earlier, I was lost in pursuit of my identity, desperately seeking love and acceptance. I was transsexual - or at least that's what my psychiatrist called it. Although physically a man, I felt "trapped" in the wrong body. I was obsessed with the desire to change my outward gender and conform my body to what I *believed* I really was - both mentally and emotionally. I convinced myself, and worked hard to convince others, that sex-change surgery was necessary for me if I was ever to lead a fulfilled life.

Unlike many transsexuals, however, I was also very homosexually active prior to my sex-change efforts. I began having homosexual encounters before I was ten years old. I was aware of an intense desire to be intimate with men, and I wanted men to desire me too.

Watching movies as a child, I noticed that the girl was always the object of the hero's attention and affection. My heart would ache as I thought, "I wish I were wanted like that." Years later, I would live out my childhood fantasy and become "like a woman" in the hope of being truly loved at last.

It wasn't that my parents didn't love me, but a series of tragic circumstances deprived me of a normal childhood. I was born the only child of a disintegrating middle-class couple. Due to my mother's alcoholism, she was often incapable of nurturing and protecting me. As a result, I was sexually molested at age three by a man who was a "friend" of the family. Although the molestation didn't make me a homosexual, it left me deeply confused, fearful of men, and imprinted with a powerful, perverted knowledge of sexuality.

About a year later, my mother was killed in an auto accident. I was sent to live with relatives for several months while my father pieced together a new life for himself. At only five years old, the two most important ingredients in forming a healthy and secure identity, my mother and father, were both traumatically gone from my life.

Later I returned to live with my dad and grand-mother in our small hometown. My father earnestly attempted to rebuild our relationship, but he was mystified by my refusal to bond with him. I perceived that my dad had abandoned me after the loss of my mom. I was angry and hurt, and I vowed never to be hurt again - especially by my father.

My dad remarried when I was 11. My parents and I had a stable relationship until my adolescence when my now damaged sexuality began to awaken. Seeing my problems mounting, my parents made great efforts to instill a more confident and masculine identity in me, but the damage was already done.

My parents felt helpless. What could they do? Where could they go for help? There were few resources (if any) available to them in those days. My effeminate mannerisms and attempts at wearing makeup were only surface symptoms of my deep-rooted gender identity confusion.

Meanwhile, I lived a typical double life: active in church, school, and Boy Scouts. I even attained the rank of Eagle Scout. I played football and went out for track and the swim team. I even had a couple of motorcycles, but all this failed to make me "man enough."

In spite of my efforts to conform, I was often tormented by many of my classmates. Feeling a complete failure as a male, and seeing no hope for improvement, I begged God to change me into a woman. My life at home and in school was miserable.

A break from this tension came when I went to Brazil as an exchange student. During my summer experience there, I felt acceptance from Brazilian

people. They seemed more tolerant of homosexuality than Americans. Also, my host's parents were actors in the theater, so they worked with many open and unashamed homosexuals.

I had never seen anything like this before! In the place where I grew up being homosexual, or even being *accused* of homosexuality, was one of the most shameful stigmas possible. Yet these Brazilian homosexuals appeared fulfilled, successful, and free to be themselves. I thought maybe there was a chance I could be happy - *and* homosexual.

It was at this time that I embraced my inner desires. But it wasn't exactly a choice - I certainly didn't choose my feelings. Rather, I simply concluded that I had been born homosexual.

"After all," I told myself, "I'm attracted to other guys, and everyone else seems so certain that I'm gay. So I guess that's what I really am."

Shortly after my return to the U.S., I joined the military. Though I feared torment similar to that of high school, I did quite well in my initial adjustment to military life. I wasn't rejected for being feminine, though some men did avoid me. Yet others sought me out for secret encounters. In spite of the perverseness, sex became my only means for being wanted or for feeling valued. This temporary security made all the risks worth taking.

I was eventually stationed in Hawaii. There I totally pursued darkness, immersing myself in Honolulu's gay scene. Many homosexuals are mature and responsible but I, like many others, was not. I got involved in minor prostitution, drug abuse, and the sometimes dangerous life of the street.

But I also began to grow weary of the gay lifestyle I was involved in. Behind the facade of acceptance and the promise of love, I saw many unhappy, cynical, and desperate people. They were all searching for that elusive "perfect match" that would fulfill them. Couples who claimed to be in love were often objects of envy and doubt. "*How long will it last this time?... Could this be all there is to life?*" I asked myself. Most of my gay friends said we were born gay - we couldn't change. Some even believed God had created them to be homosexual.

Returning to Hawaii after being on tour in the Orient for several months, I learned that my two

closest gay friends were now attending a "gay church" - the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of Honolulu. Founded in Los Angeles in 1968, MCC openly welcomes homosexuals and interprets the Bible to portray a God who blesses monogamous homosexual relationships.

I wasn't really interested in God at the time, but I did like the idea of a religion that approved of my sexuality. Up to this point religious people, though often sincere, seemed only to offer me a message of condemnation. I thought that God only loved heterosexuals. Eventually my two gay friends became the first male couple to be "married" in the state of Hawaii. I was one of the best men at their wedding.

In the spring of 1977, I completed my tour of active military duty and returned to my hometown. A few months later, I received a letter from my gay friends - the "married couple" in Hawaii. They told me that their marriage was over, and that they had turned away from the homosexual lifestyle and identity. They were now Christians. They said that the teachings of the gay church were not true, but that I could find the truth for myself in the Bible. They hoped I would understand, and closed by saying they were praying for me. I had *never* heard anything like this before.

"What traitors!" I thought.

About this same time I began attending a small college near my home. While I had been "free to be me" in Hawaii's gay subculture, I now became the focal point of intense prejudice on this conservative campus. I was denied a roommate because I was "too controversial." A petition was circulated to have me removed from campus housing. I was told that extra security measures had to be employed for my protection because I was being routinely threatened and verbally abused.

Though there were some Christians on campus who tried to reach out to me, most seemed to think I was beyond reaching. Those who would speak to me usually talked "at" me about sin. Apart from their efforts to convince me how bad and wrong I was, they had little else to say. The overall rejection I experienced during this time was almost more than I could bear. Extremely depressed, I left college after enduring two tortuous semesters.

Following this crisis point in my life, I concluded that my only chance at finding love, acceptance, and an end to my inner pain would be to shed my failed male identity.

"If I'm a failure as a man, maybe I can be successful as a woman. Maybe I was always *meant* to be a woman!" I thought to myself. This logic seemed to explain everything. I finally confronted my parents and confirmed their worst fear: I was unhappy living as a male and I wanted a sex-change operation. Yes, *that* was my answer! Now I could hope for a new and better life.

In January of 1978, I began a psychiatric evaluation process. A battery of tests, including a chromosome test, proved that my gender identity confusion was not the result of some genetic or hormonal "mistake." My therapist officially diagnosed me as a transsexual eligible for sex "reassignment" surgery.

After sending me to a specialist for a second opinion, I was referred to the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Md. - a hospital well known at that time for sex-change surgery. I found that I would have to undergo continued therapy and live as a female for at least two years before such drastic surgery would even be possible. Still, I was considered a good "reassignment candidate."

My parents, pushed beyond their ability to cope with my decision, resigned themselves to losing me. But I didn't really care about their opinions. I was willing to sacrifice everything to achieve my goal. With my bags packed and my bottle of prescribed female hormones in hand, I was on my way at last!

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end leads to death..." (Prov. 14:12)

Staring into the mirror through a drug-induced haze, I saw what I had really become: not just a liar, but the embodiment of a lie. Outwardly, I had been living as a woman for a year and a half, doing clerical work for a contracting firm near Washington, DC. Achieving much-desired acceptance in my role as a woman, I was considered attractive and even popular in gay circles.

Yet in spite of my "success," I was increasingly unhappy with the way things were going. As a result of certain events, I wasn't able to continue my therapy, and that further delayed the surgery. The longer I waited, the more I realized the operation wasn't going to solve life's every problem as I had once believed. Surgery could only change my "packaging" - it wouldn't change me.

It took great effort to maintain my role as a woman 24 hours a day, and I lived in constant fear that my true gender would be discovered. Increased drug consumption provided some relief from reality, but I could never quite numb my mind to forget the haunting question, "Is this all worth it?"

As my health suffered from drug abuse, chest pains and labored breathing compounded my fears and made sleeping difficult. I began meditating on pleasant things to help myself unwind. One evening in the midst of this effort, the song "Jesus Loves Me" unexpectedly flooded my mind. Sunday school from childhood floated back through my mind. I could only weep as I lay there yearning to scrap the mess my life had now become. I wanted to start over and to stop lying. I wanted to feel clean again.

As the words to these simple songs played in my mind, I remembered being taught as a child that Jesus *knew* me and *loved* me. But that was before I was a homosexual. That was before I had failed as a man. That was before I was defiled and rejected. But what about now? Could He possibly love me now? Oddly, His love began to matter very much to me. Through tears I earnestly prayed, "God, please show me what to do. I'm so confused. If You don't want me to pursue this sex change, then show me. I'll do what you want."

"You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all of your heart." (Jer. 29:13)

Three days later, I heard a report on the morning news that would change my life: Johns Hopkins Hospital announced they would no longer be performing sex "reassignment" surgery. They were closing their program, suspending the waiting list of patients seeking the operation, and saying this surgical treatment wasn't the answer for the vast majority of transsexuals.

Three days after I had prayed to God, I received my answer! But I was still confused. If God didn't want me to be a woman - He must want me to be a man!

"But how?" I complained to God. "I don't know if I can!"

I was afraid - afraid of giving up what I thought would secure happiness. Afraid of giving up the only kind of life and love I had ever known. Afraid of an unknown future - as a man? But in spite of my fears, I felt irresistibly drawn to God. It was as if I had been asleep a long time and now awoke *hungry* for the Lord.

During a move that fall, I came across an old, neglected Bible and began "sneak reading" it. Before long, I began sharing Scripture with anyone who would listen. My friends became concerned about my growing religious slant. Though I was still living as a woman, the Holy Spirit was making inroads into my life. I squirmed under His conviction. Knowing that I was approaching crossroad in my life, I threw away my female hormones and stopped buying women's clothes. As Christmas approached, I began packing away all my dresses. Then with my Christmas bonus I purchased a few items of men's clothing.

Finally one night I dropped to the floor clutching my chest. I couldn't breathe right and was beginning to black out. Terrified, I cried out to God, begging Him to spare me.

"Please don't take me like this!" I pleaded with Him. "Let me live to know You first."

The crushing pain in my chest began to subside. Shaken, I saw my desperate need to get right with God. But how? I turned to the Bible, knowing I'd find the answer there.

"Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword. Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Isaiah 1:18-20)

As I read this scripture, I broke. Bitterness, guilt, and shame for the lost years of my life poured out as I wept at the foot of my bed. I admitted my failure and guilt before God as I cried out to Him, "God, I cannot change what I am, but I'm willing to be changed. I know you have the power. Make me the man you want me to be!"

To be pleasing to God, to be loved and not rejected by Him - that was all I wanted. As I played my life into His hands, trusting Him, the "old man" died and the "new man" was born! There was immediate evidence of my spiritual regeneration - the power of immorality and drug dependence was broken! I wasn't driven. I could resist, and even *wanted* to resist compulsions that had always enslaved me. What had happened to me? I wasn't sure, but I felt good. Peaceful. Clean. Forgiven. And confident that God would be with me now to help me begin living a decidedly different life.

But there were some rough times following my conversion. Seeking to establish myself in fellowship, I attended different churches and found that some

people had a hard time relating to me. Though I dressed in men's clothing and had short hair, the residue of my old life - effeminate mannerisms, high voice, and all the results of female hormones - caused many people to mistake me for a girl. At first I was crushed with humiliation, but I was determined to live for God.

I also experienced times of heavy sexual temptation. At first I was alarmed and frustrated.

"After all," I thought, "if I'm still having sexual urges and temptations, then I'm really not free. Nothing has changed." My mistaken and unrealistic expectation was that God would just "zap" me into instant heterosexuality. Then I would never again have to face another urge coming from my former me. However, in reading the Bible I learned that temptation was to be expected as part of life - but my identity wasn't defined by my struggle.

Equally important, temptation wasn't greater than my will. Nobody could cause me to "give in" but me. Resisting wasn't familiar to me - indulgence was. It was like being a drug addict and going through a terrible withdrawal. My drug had been sex. Still, I learned that anything you continue feeding will live. And (wonderfully) anything you refuse to feed will grow weaker and ultimately die!

Perhaps my greatest discovery at this time was that I didn't have to "pretend" to be free and straight, and I didn't have to fight my weaknesses by myself. I could be honest and cry out, "I am weak - help me Lord!" And He did. By His grace I withstood those difficult months of transition.

Eventually past relationships and associations were severed. It was time to move on. During the summer of 1980 I began working with a Christian ministry and joined a church where I was warmly accepted. It was especially significant that men in the church "loved me." Until now my belief was that men either wanted to sexually use me - or reject me. Now, perhaps for the first time, I was accepted and valued as a man. And the miracle was that I was valued by other men *apart* from sex.

It was awkward, uncomfortable, and sometimes exhilarating to relearn appropriate and pure ways of relating to men. But as healthy relationships with men were established in my life, residual homosexual yearnings began dissolving. I didn't need homosexuality anymore. I could get what I wanted and needed without it.

I felt freedom for the first time in my life. I also noted a marked decrease in temptation. After all, temptation is simply the exploitation of a real need. And my real needs were finally being met without impurity and within a caring, supportive community that offered me acceptance and accountability.

Growing beyond my fixation on men (and my own needs my own needs) enabled me to comfortably grow toward heterosexuality. I was behind schedule - but not too late! During this time of working in ministry, I met my future wife Karen. We were friends and co-workers, but that was all. Still I was very much attracted to her remarkable character, integrity, and love for God. Karen encouraged me to pursue God with all my heart.

During a time of praying together, God's Spirit revealed to Karen that she would become my wife. Wisely never saying a word to me concerning this, she waited on Him to bring it to pass. During the wait, Karen had her own concerns to work through. If indeed she was to someday marry an ex-homosexual - could I be trusted? Would I ever return to homosexuality? What would her family and friends think?

One year later I, too, became aware of God's direction for our lives. At first I balked at the idea of marriage as inner fears and deep-rooted feelings of inadequacy surfaced. But as Karen and I developed a transparent friendship in the two years prior to our marriage, God brought much healing to these crippled areas of my life.

From the beginning of our relationship, God has helped us to see the need for honest, open communication with Him and with each other. We've discovered many weaknesses - and strengths - as we've let ourselves be known for who we are. Our marriage is *not* proof of my recovery from perversion and compulsion - rather it is one of the most beautiful evidences of a human life made whole through the transforming love of Christ.

In addition to being a husband, I also have the joy of being a father - one more blessing that proves nothing is impossible with God. What other god is like our God? He cares about rejected, broken people, and He calls them to Himself. He mends them, fulfills them, and then gives them a life worth living.

My relationship with my parents has been restored as well. I had written to them as a new Christian, but soon realized that my zeal could not erase all those years of hurt, shame, and distrust they had experienced in their relationship with me. Still they were willing to take one more risk. Even though they had not seen me in five years, my parents came to my wedding. That day we were able to rejoice in the reconciliation God had so lovingly made possible for us.

Now I have parents again - and they have their son back!

Being my own toughest critic, I sometimes have difficulty seeing the changes God has brought about in my life. I may never live up to society's unrealistic standard of manliness. But then I live by a different set of values now - I look to Jesus. He is my example, my ultimate goal, and the object of my desire.

In over a decade of living this challenging yet satisfying new life, I've had a unique opportunity to travel the world and minister to the sexually broken. I have met many hundreds (if not thousands) of men and women who have overcome various sexual disorders. Many more are "in process of recovery" - a phrase I believe accurately describes God's ongoing triumph in the lives of those reconciled to Him. As has often been said, "God gets glory out of the *process* - not just the end *result*." Becoming a Christian is just the beginning!

One evening while I was preparing for bed, the Lord spoke to my heart saying, "Look in the mirror - tell Me what you see." I looked for a moment and said, "I see a new creation!"

He said, "Yes, but look again."

So I did, and then said, "I see a child of the King - a servant of Jesus - and beauty from the ashes of my old life." Yet I knew these weren't the answers He was looking for. What was the Lord trying to show me?

I looked in the mirror again.

"What do you see, My son?"

At last I understood. "I see that the man, the man in the mirror - is *me*."

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