



THE CLIFF'S EDGE

10 Principles to Restore Hope and Rebuild Family!

by Dr. Earl R. Henslin

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Chapter One

John inched forward toward the cliff's edge. Without thought, he launched a volley of pebbles with his shoe. He leaned over, but only one was visible—a chance bounce off the cliff's face kept it in view. All the others were swallowed in chaos and churning below.

The angry power and pounding of the waves against the rocky shore was sobering. The tide surged in to drown the rocks, to silence them, to bury them. But in stupidity they reappeared only to be beaten again. “Why don't you stay down? Give in. Give up. The waves will wear you down. You can't win!” John shouted to the rocks; but even more, he spoke to himself.

John's heart climbed into his throat now as he focused on why he'd come. “You should have never looked over the cliff,” he said aloud. “You know what's down there. You should have never thought. You should have just driven...” John stopped short, and took a deep breath. It didn't matter that he'd looked or paused. He could still follow through. He had to. The craziness, the failure, the pain—it all had to end.

For weeks John's mind had been shrouded under a dark pall of depression. He could only see one answer to his problems. There was only one way to solve everything. A million dollars of life insurance could take care of the IRS problems. It could pay off all the debts. Debbie and the kids could survive for a good while on the remainder. “They need a fresh start,” he said to himself, “...without me.”

John stared at the empty sea and his mind imagined what would come. Like a slow motion movie, he saw the newspaper on the kitchen table. It was open to the obituaries. There was his picture and a long column under his name. Debbie stood wiping tears unable to move from her station by the table. His son and daughter stood by her side and hung on her for comfort, for support. It was hard to see the kids cry. Then he saw his friends. They were hurt and angry. “Why hadn't he told us just how bad it was,” he heard someone say.

The scene shifted to the church. He couldn't hear the pastor's words, but saw the people react. He knew the eulogy touched the hearts of everyone there. The pastor reminded everyone of John's commitment to the church—all the work, time, and money wasn't to be forgotten. Some whispered that maybe it was suicide. But most believed that he'd been driving too fast and lost control. Someone speculated, “The tires caught some gravel. The car must have spun. There was no time to correct it. The cliff's edge is too close to the road at that spot.”

John was sure now, calmer. It was what he had to do. It was the only way he could provide for his family and give them a future. His will was up to date and his best friend Eric would help Debbie manage the money. They could do it far better than he ever could. He was a failure with money. And a few people were just beginning to find that out

“Enough thinking. Do it!” he said. He opened the car door and slid into the sinfully fast toy. It had been his one luxury. John caressed the steering wheel and admired the instrument panel. “Debbie won’t miss this,” he said to himself. “She never drove it ... of course, I wouldn’t let her.” He smiled, but only for a moment before his face trembled and moistened. He thought of never holding Debbie again, never to feel the warmth of her body close to his. Then a rush of thoughts about Ross and Grace, to no longer hold or touch or talk to or play with them. It was too much to bear. These feeling could change his mind from what he needed to do.

John shook himself, started the engine, and found reverse. He made one final glance at the ocean. The tide was now in. He knew the rocks were buried. It was calmer now, peaceful, even inviting. The rocks called to him from their watery grave. They now admonished him to end his pain, calling him to surrender, to give up fighting the shame of his failures. He began to release the clutch, to back up....

“Hey! Watch out!” screamed the voice.

John shuttered at the sight in his rear-view mirror. A man, an old man, was right behind his car— inches from his bumper. John bolted from his car-- more angry than concerned. “You idiot! I almost killed you!”

The man stood unruffled. John intended to get in this old timer’s face, but when he saw him—all six feet and more of him—John froze. The snowy hair betrayed his age, but his razor straight posture and crystal blue eyes radiated an air of notability. John sensed that he knew this old timer. Then as he was struggling for something to say, it flashed in his mind that maybe this majestic old guy was some celebrity. “After all,” he thought, “I’m just north of Malibu.”

John finally pulled himself together, put his shoulders back, stood erect, and prepared to face this guy. *Ancient or feeble or famous or not*, he thought, *this guy is stupid and deserves to be....* But mid-flow, John’s jaw dropped. He now got the full picture of the old man and of the scene just behind his car. Dressed in jeans, an Islands sport shirt, and leather boots, the old man towered over the moment. One hand holstered in his Levi’s and the other resting on the handle bar of his old Harley.

“I never heard you... I mean I didn’t notice when you... Gosh, how could I not hear a Harley-Davidson three inches from my bumper!” John asked the sky. “What? Did you push the bike there?” Then John thought how stupid that sounded pushing a six-ton bike in loose gravel. “Hey, I’m sorry. I guess I wasn’t paying attention.” Then John’s mind rushed back to his purpose for being there. “I’ve got a lot on mind right now.”

The old man, who had seemed so statue-like, came to life and began to move toward John. His hand left the handlebar and reached for John’s shoulder. John didn’t pull away or feel uncomfortable. He was hungry for contact with anyone. The man’s large hand covered John’s shoulder in warmth, and his eyes searched John’s face.

John wanted to look away, but the energy and kindness in the old man’s face lifted John’s gaze. He couldn’t help but notice that his eyes seemed to smile. The little crow’s feet wrinkles at the corner of his eyes tilted up. The hand now patted John two or three times with a friendly sort of comfort, and then the old man turned to ocean. “So powerful the waves of God’s ocean. At times soothing, and at other times frightening. It’s hard to tell what is below the surface isn’t it?”

John listened and watched. He wondered if the old man was some kind of a nut. Then he realized that the old timer was probably the only sane one standing there. John answered, “It’s hard to know what the water covers up. Everything looks so good on the surface. Maybe we don’t want to know what’s down there.”

“Who knows, maybe there’s shiny red car like yours under the water down there,” the old man said as he took two steps toward the cliff. “Can’t imagine what would bring a man to do that.” He paused for a moment, turned back to John and said, “Can you?”

John was a shaken by the old timer’s question. He felt undressed—like the guy had x-ray vision or something. “I don’t know,” he answered. “Sometimes a man can get pretty desperate. Sometimes life doesn’t leave you any choices.”

“You sound like the voice of experience,” the old man said.

The old man opened John’s heart. He was free to talk. Now he felt safe. Something about his eyes caused him to feel warmth and welcome. This man had the look of someone who had been there, and survived. He had depth and character. And like all old timers, John knew he had a story. Maybe it was just what he

needed to hear. Or maybe the old timer would just listen. John was desperate for someone to listen, to care. Success had stolen that from him. There was no time for talk now, no time to share, to feel. There was no family—just strangers sharing a house. There was no warmth—only biting and criticism and suspicion. He couldn't remember the last time that he'd played with Ross and Grace, or made love to his wife. Success displaced the life he'd known and brought him a different collection of fears, worries, and problems.

“What do you think would bring a man to sink a pretty car and himself?” the old timer pondered aloud. “Debts? A woman?” He stepped closer to John again. His words prodded, “Huh? Can you figure?”

“Shut up!” John barked.

“Just a friendly conversation,” the old man said as he came close enough to touch John again. “No reason to get upset now. Or is there, John?”

“I don't know who you are, but if you get your thrill with this stuff, you're sick. Leave me alone!”

“No thrills. I'm just an old timer with a little time left. I thought I'd pass a little of it with you. Never intended any offense,” he patted John once more and started to walk to his Harley.

“I'm sorry,” said John. “It's just that...well...I'd be down there right now if you hadn't come by.”

The old timer came back and rested his hand back on John shoulder. “I'm real sorry.”

John hadn't felt this kind of closeness and acceptance with a person in many years. He couldn't hold back the sobbing now. He hadn't really cried for years, but now he couldn't it turn off. “It's bad ... I've blown it ... I've gone too far ... I'll lose everything ... I can't stand it anymore.”

Then the old man pulled away his hand and covered his mouth. John wondered if he were crying too. The man groaned. He leaned forward. John wondered if he were sick. Then with bent knees the old man exploded. He ignited a charge of laughter that shattered the moment and lifted dirt from the ground. John was knocked back by the offensive insult.

“How dare you mock me!” snarled John.

In between gasps for breath the old timer coughed up words, “Son ... I’m sorry ... I wasn’t laughing at you.”

“I’ve destroyed my family, my life. I can’t go on, and you are laughing! I thought you cared!”

“Whoa! Oh boy,” the old man stood erect again. He wiped tears and laughter from eyes that flashed with the fun he’d imagined. “I’m sorry son. I was laughing at myself. My mind took me back to a time when I was in just about the same spot. I was contemplating just about what you were.”

“What, in God’s name, was so funny about it then?” John spit back.

“Well, God’s name had little to do with it. And it really wasn’t funny—it was insane. Well ... I mean ... I was insane,” the old timer said turning to face John. “I was crazy to think about dying over stuff. Or dying over stuff. Or dying ‘cause of any of the problems I created. Makes sense though, don’t it?”

“What makes sense?” John shot back. “You don’t make sense. That’s for sure.”

“I didn’t then. I figured it was easier to die, to give it all up rather than face my life. I remember those moments all too well.” The old timer reached out to touch John again but John pulled back. “Listen, John, I do care. I understand more than you’ll ever know. And I know that I can help you. If you’ll let me.” With that the old man extended his hand to John.

John hesitated. He wondered if he should take it, or just walk away now. But the pull this old man had, the genuine concern John felt, was more than John could resist. He grabbed the hand, but the old man pulled John close and wrapped his arms around him. John began to weep. No laughter followed—only comfort and strength. “It’s gonna be fine, John. You’ll see.” John needed his words, his assurance. For a few moments John was a little boy, and this man was the kind father John always wanted—the father he needed.

In just those moments, old wounds and buried pains seemed to surface and fly off. The old man just held him quietly. Nothing was spoken. When John stopped and pulled back, the old man said, “We’ll meet once a week for ten weeks, same time, same place. We’ll talk. We’ll share. Your part is to risk what I share with you for one week. Bring a notebook and pen. I’ll give you ten principles that will change your life. Do you want to take the chance?” The old timer paused and searched John’s face for the answer. Then he took a deep breath, the kind you take before you start a big job, and he said, “I promise, you will not be the same after ten weeks!”

John shook his hand and countered, “I don’t have time to do that. I’ve got a business to run and a family.”

“John,” the old man whispered as if someone might overhear, he spoke slowly and measured each word, “if I had not been sent here to stop you today, you would have all eternity to wish you had the time.”

John’s face was flush with the shock of what he’d almost done. It came to him now ... just how close he’d come to the edge, to the end. Just moments ago he had been willing to rob them of forever, to never hold Debbie again, to never play with Grace and Ross, to miss their growing up, and take away their father. “I see what you mean,” John said. “I’ll be back. Next Wednesday right?”

“Right here at 2:00 p.m.” The old man smiled, shook John’s hand, and walked to the old Harley. He swung his leg over the seat, and in one smooth movement kicked down the starter. The engine rumbled to life and the old timer was on his way. But John stood frozen—captured by the site of the old timer, his bike, and the ribbon of road along the coast.

About the Author



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Dr. Earl R. Henslin is a licensed marriage, family, and child therapist. His Brea, California practice through Henslin and Associates focuses on marriage, family, and child counseling, and he conducts training sessions and seminars for professionals such as pastors, physicians, and therapists who work in these areas. He holds the doctor of clinical psychology degree from Rosemead Graduate School of Biola University, where he is a part-time instructor. He is a member of the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists and the Christian Association of Psychological Studies. Dr. Henslin is one of the founders of Overcomers Outreach, a nonprofit ministry that assists local churches in establishing twelve-step support groups. Dr. Henslin networks closely with the Amen Clinic of Behavioral Medicine. He and his staff do assessments and evaluations for SPECT Brain Imaging Scans and follow-up care.

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