

Batteries Not Included

By: Jim Hohnberger

Maria was educated, professional, and happily married to an up-and-coming physician, living in a three thousand square foot house. Maria had everything she needed in life to make her happy, or so she thought. She loved children and had given birth to four in the preceding six years, but life was beginning to fray around the edges.

"I struggled to keep my cool and not lose my temper with the little ones. I tried to patiently bear the noise and disorder in the home that seems inevitable with four children under the age of six. But I would finally blow up and speak harshly to them. It became a regular pattern. I'll never forget the evening when I got a good hard look at myself.

"It was late, and Edwin had gone to deliver a baby. The children seemed especially active and mischievous just before bedtime. I had put up with it until I couldn't stand it any longer and finally yelled at them to get their attention, to force some kind of obedience. Feeling miserable that I had blown it again, I continued ranting at them, justifying my loss of self-control, blaming their childish misbehavior for my actions. 'Don't you care about me?' I blurted out.

"With big tears in her eyes, my five-year-old daughter answered, 'I do care. I try to please you, but no matter how hard I try, I can't. I'll never be able to please you!'

"I was shocked to hear the words. They broke my heart. My anger turned to despair as I realized how I was hurting the very children that were so precious to me. I lay in my bed crying after I had tucked them in for the night. I had been a Christian for years, yet it didn't seem to make any difference. I cried out to God for deliverance, but I felt as though I was hopeless."

Maria's husband, Edwin was a success. As a family practice physician, he had risen at a young age to become the director of the residency program, but it had come at a terrible price. "With greater responsibilities had come greater challenges and greater demands on my time. I had to face a number of character weaknesses in my new position, and I could feel myself slowly separating from my wife and family. Even when I was home I was always on the phone. I had been religious my whole life. I was the son of a missionary, but by age thirty-nine I was just going through the motions. I had the best of everything, a beau-

tiful wife, great children, and a fantastic job. Almost everyone was affirming me too for the great job I was doing, but I was nearly dead inside, and no one-not even my wife knew how miserable I really was."

Miserable Christians? You had better believe it! For the last seventeen years, I have traveled the world, and these kinds of Christians are not exceptions but the rule. They are people who look great on the outside. Sometimes even their own families don't know it, but they know it; they're miserable inside!

And yet, it doesn't have to be that way-no matter what your past is like. No matter what situation you find yourself in, things can be different for you starting today! But before we can look at the solution, we need to take a good long look at ourselves. We have to understand the problem we are trying to resolve. So, come with me back through my life, for we are not that different, you and I, and every one of us has experienced the disappointment of finding out that the batteries are not included.

I can still recall the thrill of discovering as I examined a gaily-wrapped Christmas gift, wondering what was inside. Was it the new baseball mitt I wanted? A Canteen? The pair of PF Flyer tennis shoes, the ones I just knew would make me the fastest kid on the block?

My fingers shredded the paper and quickly revealed a replica jeep. I wish you could've seen me with that jeep. I had it out of the package in an instant, wasted no time on the label or instructions, and before you knew it, I was pushing it along. Vroom! Vroom! Beep! Beep! Splash! I made all the proper noises for the motor, the brakes, and of course all the imaginary obstacles I was climbing over or splashing through in four-wheel drive. What joy it brought to my little heart and to my brothers and sister as they watched and sometimes joined in my play. I probably would have stayed content with this self-directed level of play had it not been for someone wiser and more experienced than myself. He said, "Son, bring your new vehicle over here."

I was busy pushing my jeep through a

thick carpet jungle, but at the sound of his voice I gladly placed my jeep on my father's lap with all the pride of ownership I would feel when I owned a real car. I could see he had picked up the remains of the packaging, and he showed me two items he had rescued from the wrapping, a small control box and a label that read, "Batteries not included." I wasn't sure of the meaning of those words in relation to my prized jeep, but my father drew me close to explain. He said that the jeep wasn't like my other toys I played "truckie" with.

This toy was designed to run on a separate source of power. He showed me the instructions and explained the working of the control box. What a flutter of joy rose up in me as my budding intellect grasped hold of this concept, and I blurted out, "Why, I don't have to push it around anymore!"

"That's right son. You won't have to push it around."

Somehow as I grew up into manhood I never equated my battery-less toy experience with the life I was leading. But if we honestly stop and think about it, most of us are just like little Jimmy

Hohnberger-pushing ourselves around through life like battery-less toys. I'm not putting anybody down; I'm talking about me personally, and the life I've led.

I was raised to be a hard worker. I come from a stoic German family, good people, achievers, and a stubborn people. When we were told to do something, it was expected that we would jump to it, and if we didn't we would soon wish we had. I approached religion in the same manner. If this is what I am supposed to do, then I will do it. So I did do it, and I had a reputation as a good kid, but there was only one problem. I could go to church, attend classes, be accepted by my church, and yet be powerless to control the areas of my life that most often got me in trouble. I had an honest desire to serve God, and yet it was frustrating to fall on my face time and time again over the same obstacles. I had a powerless religion. At last I gave up trying because it just didn't seem to work for me.

Years later a client of mine opened the Bible to me, and out of what I had considered

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a book of fables and old stories came logic, order and answers to the questions I had always had about how we should conduct our lives. All my life I had wanted someone to show me how to be a Christian, how to have peace with God. Now through an understanding of the doctrines, I felt I was going to achieve that goal. I had the same old strong will that had been trained into me, and I set off whole-heartedly to do what the Bible taught. What I didn't understand was that doctrine, however correct it may be, along with strong human will power to implement lifestyle changes, is not Christianity. No, the Bible speaks of this experience as "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof." (2 Timothy 3:5).

Playing church is offensive to God and to man, and that's exactly what I was doing. I was playing church. I had a pretense of religion, a pulpit religion, as it is sometimes called. I looked pretty good on the outside, but the acid test of one's character is in private. It is how I treat my child, my wife, or my dog. It is in the thoughts I think and the emotions I cherished that determine if my religious practices are doing me any "saving" good. If I am pushing myself around with no real power, then the religion I practice isn't worthy of the name.

The disciples had power. They were just a handful of men, and yet they turned the world upside-down in less than a generation. Today there are millions upon millions of professed Christians and yet we seem powerless. Is it possible that we are not really what we claim to be? Please be honest with yourself. Is your temper consistently controlled? How about your feelings and emotions? Do you keep them surrendered to God? Do you ever get irritated at your spouse, your boss, or your children? Are your appetites and passions under the control of your intellect, or do they control you? What about your words? Do you filter every word through God before you utter it? Would you go to church if you knew that they would be showing a video of how you acted in your own home during the last week?

A minister came to speak to me during

a lunch break in a daylong seminar. He sat there at the table and said, "Jim, I'm a front and a fraud."

I turned to my wife, Sally, and said, in astonished disbelief, "What did he just say?"

"He said, he was a front and a fraud!" she responded much too loudly.

"Shh! I know what he said; I just don't believe he said it." I looked at this man who sat beside me. He was a leader in his denomination, not just the head of a local congregation. "What do you mean, you're a 'front and a fraud'?"

"Well, when I'm in a church, you know-up front, the denominational representative-everyone thinks I'm some kind of spiritual giant. I play the game, I put on a front, but at home with my wife, I'm a fraud." He was honest, friends. Are we? What would the video of our lives look like?

Power for Living

This excerpt was taken from the book *Empowered Living* by Jim Hohnberger. © Pacific Press Publishing Association.

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