

Cheryl Bloemendaal

I was ten years old when the doctor told my mother that I needed to go on a diet. My mother immediately put me on carrots and celery, only for desserts. From that time on, I saw myself as the fat girl. I always felt out of place, like I just didn't fit in anywhere. My father told me all I had to do was push myself away from the table; if only it had been that easy. I had many friends in junior high, and I was even in the 'popular' girls club in high school, but I still felt out of place. I always saw myself as the fattest girl in the group. My sister used to call me Cheryl Barrel, so I felt as though that is what I must look like.

When I was fourteen years old, I met a wonderful man and we married when I was sixteen years old. I weighed 135 pounds the day of our wedding and I felt so fat. My father continued to inform me that I was fat, and no matter how hard I tried it never seemed to be enough. I left high school after my sophomore year, and my new husband and I moved to San Diego where he was stationed in the Navy. When I was 19 years old, our first child was born, a beautiful baby boy. A year and a half

later, our first, precious girl was born, and then two years later our third sweet child was born, another little girl. With each pregnancy I gained more and more weight.

I went on every diet known to man, and every time I lost weight I ended up gaining back what I had lost plus more. I had some successes through the years, reaching my goal two times. Those goals were short-lived, as I continued to eat and pile on the pounds once again. Discouraged and self-loathing, I started to believe that I was just meant to be fat. After all, my mother was overweight, my grandmother was overweight, so I guessed it was just in my genes. In 2010, I weighed 283 pounds. My

husband and I were away on a business trip for three months and I began a weight loss journey. I started working out at Curves and I put myself on a very strict 700 calorie a day diet. Well, of course I lost some weight. I got down to 263 but when we returned home, I began the vicious cycle of eating and gaining again. Being a Christian, I always felt shame and guilt that I know He never wanted me to have, but I knew that I was walking in complete disobedience to Him. The Lord had freed me from so much of my sinful lifestyle, but why was I still in the bondage of overeating. For about four year, I felt that the Lord was coaxing me to find other women and begin a weight-loss journey. Finally, in 2015 I shared these thoughts with our women's ministry leader, Nancy Parker. She encouraged me to go online and see what was out there. I saw several programs that looked pretty promising, but I just didn't feel that any of these were what 'I' needed. Then up popped First Place 4 Health. I honestly got butterflies in my stomach as I read what this Bible study was about. I met with Nancy again and she immediately ordered the leader's package for me. Wow! I guess this was going to happen.

In the early part of 2016, we started our first group of First Place 4 Health in Lancaster, California. Twelve weeks later, we started a group in Tehachapi. Our first Bible study was *Seek God First*. This study changed my life. Suddenly, this wasn't all about losing weight. The Lord showed me where I had gone wrong. He wanted to be first in my life. He wanted me to walk in obedience with Him, and stop making food my god. I have learned to enjoy Him, and have fun with Him. I have learned to love Him more and more every day. As a result, I have lost 120 pounds. Praising my Savior! In 2017, I had the privilege of attending the Wellness Week in Round Top, Texas. What an amazing time this was for me. I had the opportunity to meet so many of the amazing women who lead First Place 4 Health. The testimonies and stories, they shared, have encouraged and blessed my life beyond what I ever imagined. I

have new friends who have stories very much like my own. I am so thankful to the Lord that I am learning daily to walk in freedom from the bondage of overeating. Do I still struggle at times? Yes, but because He is first place in my life, I can turn to that old enemy and say, "Get behind me." I am so thankful to be a part of First Place 4 Health.

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