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# RING & ROBE

THE KENTUCKY EDITION



# Paul's Story

I never thought that prison would be part of my story or that I would be sentenced to death row. I grew up in a big city and my parents made sure I had a good education.<sup>1</sup> My family had a business where we made and sold handcrafted tents—our biggest contract often being the military. I grew up learning the business and eventually started my own contracting business with tent making and leather goods.<sup>2</sup> I grew up with strict, religious parents and I knew the Old Testament and had memorized most of it.<sup>3</sup> I believed that God would someday send a Savior who would overcome the power of evil in the world, but I did not believe Jesus was this Savior. I was convinced that what Christians were saying about Jesus wasn't true, that it was interfering with God's plan, and that I should do everything possible to prevent their movement and message from growing.<sup>4</sup>

I became a violent man in my pursuit to oppose Christianity. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in other cities.<sup>5</sup> I watched in approval, guarding the coats of my friends, as they murdered a Christian.<sup>6</sup> I went from house to house, breathing out murderous threats and dragging men and women who claimed Christianity out of their homes and throwing them in prison.<sup>7</sup>

But something happened that radically changed my life. One day I was traveling to another city to arrest more Christians, when a blinding light flashed all around me, knocking me and those traveling with me to the ground. As I was laying on the ground, I heard a voice say, "Why are you persecuting me?"<sup>8</sup>

I didn't know who was talking to me. All I could do was call out, "Who are you?" And that same voice answered back, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Get up because I have a job for you. I'm sending you to open the eyes of people and turn them from the darkness to the light and from the power of Satan to God, so that through their faith in me they will have their sins forgiven and receive their place among God's chosen people."<sup>9</sup>

The men who were traveling with me were shocked. They could hear the sound but couldn't see anyone. As I got up from the ground, I realized that I was unable to see anything, and then it hit me that I was completely blind! They had to take me by the hand and help me the rest of the trip. We made it to our destination city, but I was still blind for three days. My original purpose for traveling to this city was to arrest Christians, but

after that encounter with Jesus, I knew my assignment had to change. I waited for help, for confirmation of what to do next. Finally, a man came to see me. He told me that the same voice that came to me also came to him with instructions to come to the very house where I was staying and pray for me. This man told me that I would be a witness to all people of what I had seen and heard, which confirmed everything that the voice of Jesus said to me. It was the confirmation I had been waiting for. As soon as this man prayed for me, something like scales fell from my eyes and I could see again.<sup>10</sup> It was a wild experience.

After this, I got baptized and became a Christian. Everything in my life changed. I had come to know the truth about Jesus and I began telling everyone who would listen that Jesus had been sent by God to overcome the power of sin and evil in the world, to make a way for everyone to be made right with God and be forever forgiven and accepted into God's family. For years, I traveled from city to city preaching about this.<sup>11</sup> But there were still many people who hated Christians, and many times people attempted to kill me. The tables had turned, and instead of me dragging people to prison, I was thrown in prison myself. More than once I was severely beaten. One time stones were thrown at me until I was unconscious and left for dead.<sup>12</sup>

My fellow prisoners, I know what it's like to be hated by people. I know what it's like to go hungry, to suffer physically, to have my feet in cuffs and chains, to be locked away to die in prison. I have been crushed and overwhelmed beyond what I felt I could endure.<sup>13</sup> I have been a miserable person... wanting to do what is right but inevitably doing wrong. There has been a power within me that has been at war with my mind making me a slave to sin. But thank God, the power of God's Spirit lives within me and I have been freed from the power of sin.<sup>14</sup> And this freedom is available to you too. Whatever your sin, forgiveness is available to you. Whatever your prison – shame, guilt, fear, anger, bitterness, pride – true freedom is available to you.<sup>15</sup>



**Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.**

Matthew 11:28

My friends, I am absolutely convinced that nothing – nothing alive or dead, angelic or demonic, fears of today or worries about tomorrow, not even the powers of hell – can get between us and God's love.<sup>16</sup> So, be encouraged. Forget the past and look forward to what lies ahead.<sup>17</sup> Remember that even if you are knocked down and pressed on every side by trouble, you are never abandoned by God.<sup>18</sup> ■

*This story is adapted from the Bible about the life of the Apostle Paul. Paul lived 2,000 years ago and is the author of nearly half of the New Testament of the Bible.*

## References

1. Acts 26:4
2. Acts 18:3
3. Philippians 3:5
4. Philippians 3:6
5. Acts 26:11
6. Acts 7:58-8:1
7. Acts 8:3
8. Acts 26:12-14
9. Acts 26:18
10. Acts 9:7-18
11. Acts 13:1-28:31
12. 2 Corinthians 11:25
13. 2 Corinthians 1:8-9
14. Romans 7:21-25
15. Romans 8:1-2
16. Romans 8:38-39
17. Philippians 3:13
18. 2 Corinthians 4:8-9



# MATTHEW 18:12-13

My grandparents raised me until I was six years old. They were very godly people. We went to church regularly and they taught me great values. When I was six years old my mom got married and I went to live with her and my stepdad, who adopted me. My stepdad and I fought a lot, mostly because I was disrespectful. When I was 16 we got into a fight and he threw me out of the house. I ran the streets and began using drugs.

By age 17, I was trafficking drugs and had my first felony by age 18. I went to jail but my parents bonded me out in two days. In the next couple of years, I started cocaine. By age 20, I had six counts of felony receiving stolen property. I went to prison and started reading the Bible. I was interested but not committed. After I got out of prison, I violated my parole with alcohol and cocaine and spent six more months in prison. This happened four times with the same result...each time I went back to prison. So, between 2000–2004, my life was spent in and out of prison. While I was out of prison, I went to college and completed courses. Finally, I successfully completed parole and graduated college with a degree in social work and a 3.36 GPA.

Instead of using my social work degree, I bought three nightclubs with the money I inherited when my mom died. One was a rave club. The clubs produced a massive amount of money. I went into drug dealing, selling Ecstasy in the rave club. I was flying in and out of Miami and Vegas to get drugs. I bought restaurants and opened a real estate company. But then things started crashing down around me. My best friend overdosed. My business partner committed suicide. Then a soldier got a drug in one of my nightclubs that killed him, and a girl at one of my clubs got a drug that caused her to go into a coma. The police arrested a dealer in Miami and eventually that led the police to me. I was sentenced to 12 years in a federal prison. But even when I went to federal prison, I was still thinking about how I could develop my drug business to be even bigger and better when I got out.

While in prison, I got into an argument with a guard, which got me thrown into the “hole” – basically prison within prison. There on my bunk was a small Gideon New Testament Bible. I started reading it, and by Matthew 16 I started crying. I said, “I am checking out of this. If you’re real, God, show me.” The hole is very loud, with prisoners making all kinds noise, but within minutes after saying this, everything went quiet. Everything stood still. A warm sensation wrapped me up and held me. It literally felt like someone holding me. In my head I heard, “You’re forgiven.”

Then I said, “Yes Lord, but what about this...?”

“You are forgiven.”

And again I asked, “But what about this...?”

“You are forgiven.”

Back and forth this went on until I finally believed I was forgiven. Then I sat and cried. I still felt that warmth, like I was being held. Then from my toes to the top of my head, the presence just swept through my body. It was like I had just taken my first breath. The hair on my arms stood up. Everything in the prison cell was beautiful. Even the stainless-steel toilet was gleaming. I felt such joy. From that moment on everything in my life changed. I started reading my Bible again and soon a young man was brought to

At the end of my prison sentence, the prison chaplain told me he felt God calling him to help me. Three days before I was released from prison, the chaplain told me to call a men’s ministry and recovery program. I interviewed there and connected with the director. I spent the next six years working there, preaching, teaching, cooking, counseling, volunteer coordinating, and renovating their building. Because I had a social work degree, I was eligible to become a certified alcohol and drug counselor. A counselor I had met when I was released was the counselor for

**If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the 99 on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the 99 that did not wander off.**

Matthew 18:12-13

share the hole with me. We became great friends; we prayed together and became brothers in Christ. Later, when we were both out of the hole, he invited me to a Bible study and I started to go. I told the prison chaplain about my story and my experience with God, and he began discipling me into the faith.

I prayed, “Lord, I want to know the truth. Show me what is true and what is not.” The Lord sent people and books to show me the truth. God sent me books on theology and apologetics, defense of the Christian faith. And God opened my eyes to truth through the scriptures. I hungered so much for God’s Word and spent six hours each day studying the Bible and memorizing verses.

I began to see how God was blessing me after I got out of the hole. Usually when you go to the hole, all your personal possessions are destroyed or thrown away. When I got out of the hole, all of my possessions were returned to me in perfect shape. Everything was stacked neatly in a bag. Even my underwear was folded. One of the prison officers said to me later, “How did you like that bag? Be blessed!” This just does NOT HAPPEN IN PRISON! Then I had a court date about the altercation with the guard that landed me in the hole and they forgave it and cleaned it off my record. I got the best job you could get in prison. I started serving in the prison church, ushering and preaching from time to time. I was moved to a prison in Virginia, then to Kentucky, my home state. Here I was discipled by a wonderful prison chaplain, a committed, godly man.

the resident drug abuse program and agreed to be my supervisor for this certification process. After I became a certified counselor, I created my own ministry for outpatient substance abuse treatment. This ministry has expanded and I now have my own building. In 2016, I went back to graduate school to become a licensed professional clinical counselor in mental health. I will graduate in July 2018 with a Masters in Counseling and Human Development after which I will be able to expand my ministry into mental health counseling as well as substance abuse counseling. I am also now working for Job Corp, an agency of the U.S. Department of Labor and Department of Agriculture. In this role, I work with 16-24 year olds to provide counseling and substance abuse prevention and intervention.

My life bears witness to a God that is MERCIFUL and GRACIOUS. He gave me life. He gave me a chance to turn it all around. I should have been in prison for life. I damaged and destroyed thousands of lives. It still amazes me...moves me to tears. I am FORGIVEN. Because of God’s love that is beyond all comprehension and Christ’s sacrifice, I am FORGIVEN. Pure. Blameless. My slate is clean. ■



## PROVERBS 31:25

My mom raised us in church until I was 9, and I was baptized as a young girl. We were very involved in church and I loved Sunday school. As I got older, we no longer attended church. I started smoking pot and drinking when I was 12 years old. I ended up pregnant at 16 years old. When my son was born I really hoped that I had found a pure love that wouldn't go away. I didn't know my birth father at that point in my life. I got pregnant on purpose because I wanted love. But I was a kid myself and never thought about how I would provide for a baby. My son's father was 15 and neither of us knew how to do the things we needed to do to be good parents. So, when my son was 1 year old, my mom took him to raise. I grieved so much for him. I didn't care what happened to me after that. I was sleeping in school buses and in public bathrooms. Sometimes I slept on other people's couches, and when I did, I felt I owed something to the guys who were allowing me to stay. I allowed my body to be given away because that was the only asset I had to give. I felt I wasn't worth any more than that.

I wasn't addicted to drugs at this time but I was making many bad and dangerous decisions. I remember one time the police picked me up as I was driving around with several men much older than me who were convicted felons. He asked me what I was doing and I told him I had nowhere to go. He knew how vulnerable I was in that situation, and to get me to a safe place, he paid for a hotel room for me and bought me a meal. He dropped me off and left. I know that was God showing kindness to me, protecting me.

When I was 21, my birth father got married and his wife heard about me from a mutual friend. She contacted me and asked if I would want to come live with them. I stayed with them for six to twelve months. They bought me a car and new clothes. His wife was so kind and she really tried to help me. I started nursing assistant school and did very well. I was third in my class and was ready to graduate, but then they wouldn't let me because I didn't have my GED. That was another hard hit and I went back on a downward spiral.

I left my father's house and got into a relationship with another man. We had two children together. We were very poor and lived way out in the country with no indoor toilet. My sister took us in at one point. We split up after about four years when our youngest child was 3 years old.

In 2003, my children and I moved into an apartment, and not long after that my sister died. I began to lose my mind after that. The enemy just came in and consumed me mentally and physically. I lost custody of my children because of multiple suicide attempts. I was in and out of the psychiatric unit several times. They put me on many medications. Some made the cutting worse and some made me numb and emotionless. I knew something was wrong but I didn't know how

to find God, and my life had no meaning without Him.

In 2007, I was in a horrible car accident. My pelvis was broken in half. I was in the hospital for a month. I was in so much pain. For the first year after the accident, I was prescribed pain medication. I remember the day I knew I was addicted. I ran out of pain pills and my whole body was shaking and trembling. I was so sick. I began using IV drugs and that took control of everything in my life. Even just an hour after doing drugs, I would get sick and need more. I prostituted myself to get drug money. It was no longer about getting high. It was about trying not to be sick. The mental obsession was insanity. It was all I could think of. Life became all about who I could rob, con, or sleep with to get my next drug. I knew addiction was of the devil. The moment you prepare to change your life is the moment people come out of the woodwork to give you free drugs. I saw this happen in my own life.

The day came when I was tired of it all. I cried out to God for help. Shortly after, a local drug enforcement agent caught me on tape selling drugs. God was answering my cry for help and intervening to save me. They put me in jail and then released me to drug court, which is an outpatient accountability program with drug testing and meetings with

**She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear of the future.**

Proverbs 31:25

drug counselors. I talked to God a lot at this point. I asked God to let me serve Him and His people. While I was still in the drug court program, I discovered that I had leadership ability. I began facilitating faith-based recovery meetings through Lifeline. I continued to work with Lifeline after graduating drug court. I got custody of my kids back and we had four great years.

But then I relapsed. I got on heroin and it was worse than the first time. I remember my arms and chest being covered with needle holes. Social services were going to take my children, and I tried to stay clean so I could keep them, but I failed a drug test. I don't know why I relapsed. It was a big surprise to everyone, including me. I had become the poster child in my town for overcoming substance abuse. God had changed me completely and then I relapsed. I talked to God again and said, "I have made a mess of this. I don't want this anymore." I went through detox and as soon as drugs were out of my

system, I began to ask God for deliverance from drug addiction. I knew I couldn't go on without God. I began to seek the Holy Spirit with everything in me. I started working at the church doing anything they would let me do, cleaning toilets...anything.

When my children were taken away because of my relapse in 2015, I thought my life had ended. But it was just the beginning. That was the last day I got high on anything. I have custody again, and I'm a productive parent to two great kids who are getting ready to graduate high school. The Lord answered my prayer and has delivered me from addiction. I am still very careful. If I feel any trigger, I talk to my pastor. I stay really close to God. When I wake up, the first thing I think about is Jesus. My relationship with Jesus is the only thing that has worked to help me. I can't do this alone—not even for one day. Every day I ask God to help me and He does. I don't function well without God...I can't lose Him. Everything is at stake.

I now work as the Director of ReWired, a faith-based addiction recovery program. A local church has taken ReWired on as one of their ministries. We have a church service on Saturdays and each time we meet there is a revival spirit. The pastor and I let the Holy Spirit lead and we worship and sing

for God. Through ReWired, I also work as a coach with 10 people who have additions. The most important thing we do is provide spiritual guidance. We share our stories to help others know there is hope and that God can break the bondage of addiction.

I never thought I would be qualified to serve God or make it to heaven, but my pastor taught me that it is about a relationship, not perfect rule-following. God is love and it isn't about requirements. The right lifestyle is acquired through the relationship with Him.

I am a miracle, because without God I would be dead or in a crack house at 90 pounds doing dope. I never expected that there would be a greater purpose to come out of the pain of my life. But God is using it all for good. I look at my "before" pictures – my mug shot – and cry because of how good God is and how real He is. He has loved me, forgiven me, and transformed me. I want everybody to know. ■



## PSALM 37:4

My parents were divorced when I was 3 years old. My mom was married nine times and we moved every two or three years. I was surrounded by drugs growing up. I was 5 years old the first time I saw cocaine being used. My dad wasn't involved in my life in a meaningful way, and as time went on he spent less and less time with me. Many times, I can remember having my bag packed and watching for him to come and get me for the weekend and him never showing up. To fill the void, I ran to the streets. I started smoking cigarettes and hanging out with kids that huffed gas and White Out. At about 15 I met a friend who introduced me to alcohol and acid. Our moms would buy us alcohol thinking it was safer for us to drink at home. I needed money to buy a car and went to my dad. He gave me marijuana to sell. I started smoking marijuana with my mom and dad. When I was about 20 I was introduced to cocaine.

In 1998, I had a car wreck while speeding over 120 miles per hour. This is the first time I went to jail, but the charges were dropped. In 1999 I went to jail for possession of marijuana. This was the year my son was born. His mom and I had both been meth users and he had serious health issues from birth. His lungs were not producing oxygen. He was in the hospital for weeks but thankfully he responded well to treatment. We took him home and two hours later Child Protective Services came to our home. We had periodic drug tests after that. In 2000, my son and his mother were in a bad car wreck and she was killed. Miraculously, he only had a few scratches. I wanted to be numb after this. He went to live with his maternal grandmother and that gave me the freedom to do what I wanted, which was to indulge in meth.

I went to prison in 2001 and was in and out of prison for over a decade. During this time, I learned to manufacture meth, and my relationship with my son was non-existent. In 2013 I was put into solitary confinement in prison. There was no window and no interaction with people for five days. It was unbearable. I prayed, "God, if you are real, get me out of this room." In two days, they moved me to another room with a window. But I felt this was a coincidence. Again, I prayed, "God, if you are real get me out of this jail." Not even 36 hours later they came to get me and moved me to another jail. There I met a guy who convinced me to read the Bible. I read the Bible for about two weeks and this softened my heart. On August 18, 2013, I cried out to God and received Christ and the Holy Spirit. I had a spiritual experience that night that changed my life. The experience was like liquid love. Everything was broken off of me. I no longer had the desire for drugs after that. Everything was changed. Another inmate said to me, "I've never seen a change in anyone like I have seen in you. I want what you have."

In 2014, I got out of prison in one state but I was facing a 20-year prison sentence in another state. I asked the judge

to lessen my bond and he cut my bond amount by 90%—from \$10,000 to \$1,000. My dad and a friend posted my bond and I was able to spend time in a halfway house and spend some time with my son before going back to prison. My 20-year sentence was cut in half and I began serving my 10 years in July 2015. This was the best time I had ever spent in prison because I went back saved and I met some wonderful people.

**Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.**

Psalm 37:4

I witnessed to my roommate and prayed for him and for his release, and he was paroled. In two years, I had the opportunity for parole. Everyone was skeptical because it was so unlikely given my history, but I felt strongly that I would have favor and that they would grant me parole. When I went before the parole board I told them if I was paroled, my plan was to go back to the halfway house. They granted me parole.

I spent six months in the halfway house, and as soon

as I got out I started going back into the jail to minister. I am now a part of Residents Encounter Christ (REC), an organization that has three-day weekends with inmates to teach them the Good News and bring them into a relationship with Christ. God has prepared me for the ministry I am doing now, offering hope and bringing people to Christ and discipling them. I spend time with the Lord every day. The power of the Holy Spirit is the only way I have the strength to live the life I am living now. It is an

honor to bring Him glory and exalt Him.

God knows our heart and wants to give us the desires of our heart. He is restoring my relationship with my son. I am so thankful for the many ways God protected him over the years. I can now see all of the little and big things God did to save me and draw me to Him. I'm so thankful for God's love that is beyond our understanding and that He answered my cries for help and changed me. I am a new creation and His power in me strengthens me every day. ■

(continued from page13, John 10:10)

a boy named Gage, which means "a deposit of good faith."

Six days after the baby was born, my dad got hit by a car as he was leaving jail and was killed. I hadn't talked to him in a year. I had tried to help him but he didn't want it. I felt so bad. When I looked at him in the casket, I thought, "What if he had taken the opportunity to follow Christ? If he had known the love of Christ everything would have been different." And I thought, that could have been me. I have so much regret about the things I have done, but God is using those experiences to allow me to help others. Today I find my joy in helping people find hope and helping them get their families back. Today I

realize life is not about material things it's about people; it's about family! I love my beautiful wife and my 5 amazing kids. God restored all the broken pieces of my heart and today I know what true freedom is. I never thought I could break the bond of addiction. I never thought I would be able to be a good dad, son, brother, and husband. Without Jesus, there is no way I could do what I am doing. I'm so thankful.

To me God is love, grace, and mercy. I have many days that I fall short and struggle with self-doubt, but I snap back and know that God loves me. It's the religious stuff that turns people away from God. But His love chases you down and finds you and pulls you out of the pit of hell. Once you experience that, how could you ever go back? ■

(continued from page15, Matthew 11:28)

relationship will someday be restored. God is preparing me for it. I feel like God has said, "I have plans to restore that, but I need you to be healed first. I need you to be sturdy and strong before I can do that."

I'm certain that God was present in everything I went through. I know God—not because any one told me anything about Him, but because I feel His presence. He

has brought me peace in the most trying of times. He has removed my obsession with alcohol and drugs. Every single day I get on my knees and thank Him for removing that obsession and ask Him to help me through the next day, and He does. I want people to know that this isn't something that is just for me. God will do this for other people too. He answers prayers. He sees you. He knows you and He will help. ■



## LAMENTATIONS 3:22-23

My parents were young and there were some problems at home. I moved out when I was 16 years old. I got pregnant when I was 17 and then got married. I got pregnant again when I was 18. The marriage ended in divorce when I was 22. After my divorce, I thought it would be best to move back with my children to my hometown where I had family and friends. My ex-husband hired an attorney who told the judge many bad things about my home county. The judge said he couldn't prove I was an unfit mother but that my home county was such a bad place to raise children that he had to award residential custody of the children to their father.

This was a turning point for me. I started not caring about anything after losing my children. I went to see a doctor and was prescribed a nerve pill. I started taking massive amounts of these daily. This became a lifestyle and because of multiple arrests and drug charges I was unable to get a job. I felt trapped into selling drugs to make a living. For 16 years, this was my life. Ten of those years I was locked up. I lost so much time with my children and my mom. My mom had always been there for me and had continued to be a support to me. But she passed away while I was still in addiction.

I never stopped believing in God, and one night in the jail cell I asked God to help me. Sometime later, I was offered drug treatment at a residential center instead of incarceration. About that time, I was allowed to leave jail to attend my uncle's funeral. While I was there I told my dad about the offer to go to treatment. I told him I wasn't going to go, that I planned to cut my ankle bracelet and run again. He tried to talk me out of it. I really was tired of running so I agreed to get treatment. But once I was there I wanted to leave. I was going to run away, but there was a massive snowstorm and I couldn't. I know that was God keeping me there!

I could see the women at the home laughing and having a good time and wanted to know why they were joyful. I started to become more open to the idea of a life without drugs. The CEO came around for a tour of our home and I heard him talking about a job opportunity if we would complete the program and stay clean a year. I asked him afterwards, "I have 17 felonies but you would hire me?" He said, "Absolutely." That was the turning point. Then I started taking treatment seriously. But I hadn't had any hope of any kind of decent life for 16 years. I knew God had to help me – and He did.

While I was in treatment, we went to church and I started getting it. I heard a sermon from Luke on building a good foundation. I knew that I needed a good foundation moving forward. After I completed my treatment, I became an intern with the addiction program, but that didn't work out so I worked as a volunteer in return for my rent as a part of a church program. During those three months, I was really soul searching. God was really working on me. It felt so good to have my

life back. I knew that I wanted use the rest of my life to help people. I got a new job as an intern in a different department, with the same addiction program I had been with before. I truly believe God put me in this department because it is such a good fit for me. My supervisor is just the type of person I am and was just the right person to mentor me.

During my internship, I made a mistake and got into a relationship with a recovering addict. I felt like God was telling me the relationship wasn't healthy and that it would

sunshine, and my job. I love my job as an intake coordinator. I talk to a lot of people every day. Sometimes it is a person's lawyer or family member, but sometimes the person calls themselves about getting placed in one of our residential treatment programs. I get their information over the phone and help get them out of jail and into treatment. I understand where they have been and can communicate hope to them. Each month we celebrate milestones in recovery for the residents, and when their names are read each month I think how special it is that God let me be a part of their recovery.

**The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.** Lamentations 3:22-23

be easy to slip back into addiction. I stayed clean and stepped away from that relationship, but I was already pregnant when I left. I had no idea how I was going to provide for the baby. But God provided people in my life to help me. The organization I was interning with provided an apartment for me during the internship. After a one year, I was hired full-time as an intake coordinator in the program, and this provided the income for me to take care of myself and the baby. God also gave me a family at work. The intake team has really been my family. The pastors that work with our company and the leadership of the company have all supported me.

After I was hired full-time I needed to find my own apartment. I prayed, "God please let us find a decent place to live and be able to make it financially." One day I looked at Craigslist for a place to live, and the first place was so pretty and I thought, "That is so nice, but with my background there is no way they will let me rent there." My boss went to look at it with me and because the landlord knew him I was able to rent it. This was the first place I had ever lived on my own and I found out that my landlord's mother had the same first and last name as my mother! Not only did I get to live there but all utilities are paid, making it affordable. My landlords are Christians and it has been such a blessing.

I thank God every day for even the little things – the water in the shower, the electricity in our house, the

God is a loving God. He cares about the smallest things. He knows us personally. He knows what we need. He has much grace for the mistakes that we make. I am so thankful for my recovery. I was one of those people that people would say would never be clean. It's true that after you mess up your life, you just feel like there is no way out. But God saved my life and He changed me. I am so thankful that He gave me the opportunity to be a mom again.

My daughter is now 6 months old and has been an amazing gift. At first I had a hard time accepting the gift of a new baby. But my neighbor said, "Children are a gift from God, and He is not going to give you this gift if He isn't going to provide a way to take care of her." This changed how I felt about it. My neighbor was right—God has provided for our every need.

God restores what has been taken from you. I now have a relationship with my older children. My daughter is 20 and my son is 19. It is not a perfect relationship, but God is working this out too. When I took my daughter out recently to eat she said, "I am so glad, Mom, that I get to be here with you." She has a daughter now, my granddaughter, and she lets me see her and now I get to be a good influence and a good part of her life. When she comes to visit, I take her to church. It is funny how God brings things around. I loved my grandmother. I felt safe around her and found comfort with her. Maybe now I can be that person to my granddaughter. ■

# JOHN 10:10



I was one of seven children. I had the best mom ever; I have never seen a stronger woman. She went without so we could eat. My dad was in and out of jail and did over 20 years in state prison and federal prisons. My dad was my role model. He taught me how to con and hustle. I thought he was a gangster and that's what being a real man was.

My grandma lived next door. We were very close, and I stayed at her house many nights. She had so much determination and was a hard worker. She loved the Lord, went to church every Sunday, and talked to me about Jesus. In 2005, she died in my arms. That was a turning point. I was 16 and had been getting in trouble before that, but I wasn't doing drugs. I had friends that were doing drugs, and the drugs were easy to get. Some people have a slow downhill spiral, but for me it was immediately falling apart. I started with one pill and then went to IV drugs. I got suspended from school, kicked off the ball teams, and went to juvenile detention.

At 18 I was released and went right back to doing dope. I got into more trouble and was a three-time convicted felon and spent eight years in jails and prisons and detox centers. During this time, I felt I was destined to be in jail. I didn't trust people and was ashamed. But on the outside, I wanted everyone to think I was a tough guy. In 2010, my little sister who was 18 years old overdosed and died. She had called me a few hours before she overdosed and had a bunch of pills. I was so consumed in my own addiction I did nothing to help her. I was so lost I used her funeral to make people feel sorry for me to get dope. Not long after that, the girl I was with got pregnant. After our daughter was born, my aunt and uncle took her into their home. I'm thankful to God that they took her. They provided a good, safe home for her. We named our daughter after my little sister who had just passed away.

In 2014, I went through a substance abuse program in jail and stayed clean seven to eight months. I was sober but I wasn't in recovery. I hadn't changed anything about myself. I just wasn't using. I started dating a girl I had known since I was a kid. We got a place and she got pregnant. I was still clean from drugs but didn't have a job. I wasn't free and was ashamed and miserable. I was running around with my old buddies, hustling people for money. I was not being a man to provide for my family. We were living off my girlfriend's child support for her two children that were living with us.

Eventually I broke and started doing dope again and relapsed bad. I robbed my family's food stamps and sold their toys and diapers. My girlfriend wasn't into drugs. She was a good girl. It was the relationship I had always wanted, and I was throwing it away. Our son was born November 2, 2015. On Christmas Eve of 2015, I came in and threw down a rug I had stolen, and my girlfriend thought it was her Christmas present. She hit me hard and evil took over me. I was a monster. I

beat her. The next morning her father was at our door with a shotgun and the law was on the way. I went to jail, and when I got out she wanted nothing to do with me. I couldn't see any of my kids. They told me I had to get help if I wanted to see my kids. I went to my sister's grave and asked God why He took her and not me.

In February 2016, I checked myself into a detox hospital. I waited for about 10 hours and wanted to leave, but something kept telling me to stay. I thought, "If you leave, you are going to die." A month later, I checked into a residential drug treatment center. I hated everybody and hated myself. I couldn't stand to look at myself and had no hope whatsoever but knew if I didn't do something different I was going to die. For eleven days, I wanted to leave. I couldn't get focused. One day I was using my phone and as I was typing "Walk by Faith Not by Sight," I got caught with it, and you can get kicked out for that. However, the pastoral counselor at the home talked to me and said, "What if you could take all this bad and turn it into doing something good? What if you can take all that hustling and conning that you learned from your dad and use it to help people and show people hope? What was meant for evil God uses for good. You have a chance to change your family tree." This conversation changed me. The Assistant Director spoke with me about accountability and it opened my eyes and planted a seed that changed the way I saw things and I began holding myself accountable for everything I had ever done in my life. The Director of the program also talked to me that

I had already worked on moving beyond my past, but I hadn't really found Jesus. I was still stuck on following laws. The last night I was in the recovery program, we went to church and I heard a sermon about how believing in Jesus saves us and about Jesus' relentless love and forgiveness. I finally got it. I got saved that night and felt so free. The next day, I went home. I had come to terms that my girlfriend was not coming back, but I still wanted to be a good father to my children. I was living my life by faith. I told God, "I don't know what I'm doing, but I'm going to trust in You and have faith and stay the path." I was trusting in something totally different than I ever had.

I started going to church, and it was around Mother's Day. I knew all the sorrys couldn't change what I had done, but I sent my girlfriend a Mother's Day card and wrote Proverbs 3:5-6 in it.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."

I started taking my children to church and then asked if she would go to church with me. She started going to church with me and ended up getting saved too. We got married in June, just two months after I graduated the recovery program. My family was restored with custody of all children except my first daughter who is still living with my uncle and aunt. I want to do what is best for her. I want it to be God's will and God's timing when we get reunited. I have prayed that God would let me know the right thing to do at the right time.

After we got married, I was honest about who I was and couldn't find a job anywhere. I went back to school to get a

**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.** John 10:10

day and gave me hope. He said he had been through eight rehabs and now he was the Director. I said, "I wish I could be where you are." He told me to reach higher than that. After that I got focused. I worked on the old baggage inside of me—the anger, the shame. I wanted to be free from that. I was still struggling with spirituality because of my sins. I hadn't submitted fully to Christ yet, but God was working in my life and shaping me. I was learning patience and humility. When I graduated from the recovery program, it was the only thing I had accomplished in my life. I framed the graduation certificate, and it is now hanging in the center of the wall at my office where I work.

college degree. We moved in with my mom, but it was a hard situation. We had to take showers with a water hose outside. The only thing I owned was a car and that blew up. I had to walk everywhere I needed to go. My wife and I didn't pray for money or things, we just prayed for our relationship with God to get stronger. But God always provided. The pastor of our church and his wife offered us a house to stay in rent-free, and the church bought us a 2009 minivan. I got certified as a peer support specialist and was hired on as a residential staff at the recovery program I went through. I was promoted to pastoral counselor in October 2017. We just had another baby April 13,

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# MATTHEW 11:28



I grew up in a single-parent household. It was just me, my brother, and my mom. My mom worked really hard at many jobs, but we struggled financially. When I was about 11 years old my mom took a job in a bar. This was a turning point in my life. Things began to change in our house. She started dating someone who was an alcoholic who was physically abusive to her. There was a lot of violence in our home, and at the age of 13 I moved in with friends and dropped out of school. I started drinking and hanging out with people much older than me. My alcohol addiction started the first day I took a drink.

From 13 to 16, I was bouncing from friend's house to friend's house, sleeping on couches. I eventually went back to my mom's home, but because of the friction between us, my mom and her boyfriend moved out. I stayed and my younger brother came to live with me. By the age of 16, I had my own apartment, my first job, and was taking care of my younger brother—and I was drinking...a lot. By that point, I had started dating a fellow that was a drug dealer and he moved in with us. I was with him for the next 13 years. I worked and he sold drugs. I started taking prescription pills at around 16 and by 18 I would shake in the mornings because of alcohol withdrawal. I realized I had a real problem with alcohol, so I stopped drinking and switched my addiction to prescription pills.

By 21 I was pregnant with my daughter. That was a great time in my life because for the first time since I was 13, I had clarity and felt like I might have a future. I didn't do drugs while I was pregnant, but as soon as she was born I started back on the prescription pills. I became addicted to OxyContin, and this was a whole different addiction—very expensive with a very powerful grip. I was still working, though. I was functioning enough that my family didn't know how bad my problem was, and I always held a job until my daughter was five. At that time, I had a tremendous addiction to OxyContin and other drugs, a \$400-per-day drug habit. I would have seizures without the drugs. I became so depressed and had a crippling fear. I had no control over my own body because of the drugs, and I didn't know how to fix it, so I just shut down. I had a mental break that went on for about six months. I had to quit my job. It was a horrible time in my life. Then my boyfriend went to jail, which created a big problem because he was funding my drug habit and paying our bills. So, my daughter and I became homeless. We went to live with my mom for a while, but it wasn't a good situation and I wouldn't let my daughter stay there, so she went to live with her paternal grandmother. I knew she was safe there, but it was extremely hard to let her go.

After that I got a drug possession charge. I remember shortly after that being at my mom's house on a cot in her living room. I cried out to God to help me, and He did. He gave me a supernatural peace and took the seizures and the withdrawal symptoms away. The supernatural peace lasted beyond that night. The weight of the world had been on my shoulders—I was facing drug charges, I had just lost my daughter, I was homeless. I had no reason to feel peace, but I did. I have no doubt that peace was from God.

Instead of being sent to jail for the drug charges, I was sent to a treatment center for 27 days. After I completed the program, I was still homeless and lived in an abandoned house with no plumbing. I didn't have a job and started to drink and do drugs again. I met a man who became my boyfriend. He took me to church for the first time. I was 28 years old at the time. He was very kind to me. He believed in me and tried to help me. I wanted to live clean and sober but I had no idea how to live without drugs and alcohol. The next eight years were a cycle of

I was too far gone, the mistake was too big, I couldn't be restored, and I didn't deserve any happiness. I didn't realize this was what was going on and didn't know why I couldn't get better. God had given me a supernatural peace 10 years ago, but I wasn't able to do what God wanted me to do because of the guilt and shame. This time in treatment, I was able to let go of that shame and guilt and receive the blessings God had for me. I can't stress enough how crucial it was for me to forgive myself. Over the next few months, I started going to faith-based and recovery meetings nearly every day. I was building my relationship with God and surrounding myself with people who had recovered and had faith, hope, and dreams for their future. This helped me to build my own faith and grow spiritually.

While I was in the recovery program, I had a counselor who really encouraged me to become a Peer Support Specialist. This is a certification program in the state of Kentucky that requires 30 hours of training to prepare for working with people with addictions to help

**Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.** Matthew 11:28

getting in trouble, getting kicked out by my boyfriend, having a few months of sobriety, and then my boyfriend letting me come back home. Cops, lawyers, judges, my boyfriend—they all gave me so many chances. Over and over they gave me the chance to change. I was so blessed they didn't give up on me. No one, not even me, would have blamed them for giving up on me. I believe that God was intervening on my behalf. My boyfriend even said he felt like God would tell him to give me another chance.

Two years ago, I found out about a faith-based addiction recovery program that offered several hours of counseling per week and job mentoring. I knew someone who had been through the program and she had healing from her addictions. I got into the program and finally was able to address the core issue of my addictions. I was able to forgive myself. I had no problem forgiving everyone else, but couldn't forgive myself. In the eight years of the cycle of relapses, every time I would start to have a normal life and do well, I would eventually go back to the pain of not being with my daughter and not being there for her. I couldn't move past that mistake. I felt like

them through their recovery. Most people who have had addiction problems have a criminal background, and it is extremely hard to get a job—and not only any job, but a job that you are so passionate about. But with the Peer Support Specialist job, the background that would have hurt you in any other job qualifies you for this job! And most people who have recovered from addictions have a passion for helping others with recovery. I decided to pursue this path and was accepted to the Academy, a six-month program which combines the 30 hours of training to become a Peer Support Specialist with additional practicum training working with clients. Last month we had our formal graduation with caps and gowns. That was the only time I had ever walked in a formal graduation. The six months in the Academy helped me grow so much that even if I hadn't wanted to become a Peer Support Specialist, it would have been so beneficial to me. I now have a full-time job with an addiction recovery program. My daughter still lives with her grandmother and I am not allowed to see her yet. I understand this because her grandmother loves her and wants to protect her. But God has let me know that this

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**If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the 99 on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the 99 that did not wander off.**

Matthew 18:12-13

## About Our Name

Jesus spent time with all kinds of people, including notorious sinners. The religious leaders criticized him for hanging out with the wrong crowd. In response to them, Jesus told three stories. The last story was about a young man who told his father he wanted his inheritance money early. The father gave the young man his inheritance and he left home and spent all the money on wild living. He ended up taking a job feeding pigs and was so hungry even the pig's food looked good to him. He decided to go home to his father and ask for a job as one of his servants.

Luke 15:20-24 tells the rest...

*So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son."*

*But his father said to the servants, "Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill a calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and now has returned to life. He was lost but now he is found." So the party began.*

The ring and robe the father gave to his son were symbols of his love for his son and the son's worth, identity, and rightful place in his father's family. Likewise, God our Father loves us unconditionally. He doesn't force us to come home to Him but waits patiently, and when we do come home to Him, He is overjoyed and filled with compassion and love for us. Our identity as children of God and our place in His family are secure, just as the ring and the robe symbolize in this story. When you see the name "Ring and Robe" we hope you are reminded of God's love for you, your worth to God, and your place in His family. ■

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