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RING & ROBE

THE KENTUCKY EDITION





1 Timothy 1:13-14,17

I had a good childhood and didn't have any trauma. But I always felt like I had something to prove. I always wanted to be someone else or be something else. I was restless, irritable, and discontent. From the age of 10, I would have self-identified as atheist. I couldn't reconcile the existence of God with all the terrible things in the world. And if there were a God, I didn't want anything to do with Him because I felt He was unjust. I was violently opposed to religious people. I felt like I was the alpha and omega, and if people would just do as I wished they would be happy and I'd be happy and things would be great. I had a terribly negative worldview. Everything was stupid and it was a dog-eat-dog world. I read once, "If there is no God, everything is permitted." That rang a bell with me. I thought, "I can do what I want."

I didn't start using until I got out of high school. I was valedictorian and a Governor's scholar. I was dominated by perfection and derived my sense of self-worth from others. My "hit" was when people told me how smart I was or how great I was. The first time that I shot oxycodone, it was as if I saw the world the way everyone else was seeing it. I wasn't angry or depressed anymore. I felt free and happy. I thought there was no way I could become an addict because I was too smart. I could manage it.

But I couldn't manage it. I robbed everyone I knew to pay for drugs, particularly people close to me. I was sharing needles, and eventually I got an infection from a needle and ended up in the hospital for 23 days. I continued to use the same needle that gave me the infection while I was at the hospital and got sicker and sicker. My kidneys shut down and they put me on dialysis. I remember that the preacher from the church where I grew up came to see me. I was convinced I was going to die, and I was so angry. He said, "Where are you with God?" I said, "Look at me. Are you kidding? I'm good on that. I don't want anything to do with it." He asked me to pray with him, and I felt like I was doing him a favor by letting him pray. I thought we were talking to an imaginary man in the sky that made people feel better. I had no belief.

I was arrested for five drug trafficking felonies and convicted of one. Before the court date, I began dating my wife. I had known her all my life. She is a good girl and I couldn't believe that she would have anything to do with me. At the time, I was doing maintenance drugs and swore to her I would tell her if I started doing drugs again. I lied. I maintained for a while, but after a while I drained her bank account. She confronted me, and I was so broken that I thought about suicide.

Thank God, I didn't go through with that. Instead, God reminded me of a guy I had met who had gone on to get sober. I decided to try the residential fellowship program that helped him. I had been to treatment before, but this was the first time I made a commitment to myself that I was going to do everything they asked. The first step in the program

is determining what the problem is. They told me I had a three-fold illness: a craving of the body, a spiritual malady, and a mental obsession that would continue to take me back to that which was killing me. Regardless of how good life was, I would continue to use. The leaders of the program were spiritual, but they didn't proselytize me—they disciplined me through their actions. They told me no human power could relieve me of my addiction—but God could and would.

Everyone in the program had a sponsor, someone who has a relationship with God and who has had the same problem and gotten sober. My sponsor helped me understand that I was playing God in my own life, and this created a disconnect between me and the power of God. He talked to me about following God's will for my life. He said, "Here is what following your own will has done for you: You have a state inmate number, you have

The next step was to sit down with my sponsor and talk about things that I had done that I hoped no one would ever know about. While I was telling him my grave-takers, I was shaking and felt sick, but then he told me he had done the same things. When we finished, I experienced God like I never had before. I didn't have any fear. I could finally breathe and felt like everything was going to be alright. It was the most relief I had ever felt in my life. It was like the feeling the drugs had given me, but now it was God who provided the peace and relief. I spent an hour being quiet with God and then hit my knees and said a prayer.

After I made the list and saw the harm that I had caused, I had to apologize—and by that, I don't mean just say "I'm sorry." I have made amends now to almost 200 people. For each person, I made a direct approach and outlined clearly what I did to wrong them and then

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. 1 Timothy 1:13-14, 17

robbed everyone you love, and you can't hold a relationship or a job. Do you suppose if there is a God He can mess your life up as much as you have?" But I didn't even know if I believed in God, and even if I did, there is a profound difference between belief and trusting God with your life.

My sponsor addressed this. He said, "Let's see what is blocking you from God." What we found is that resentment, fear, and personal relationship misconduct were the common manifestations. He asked me to go back through my life and make a list of everyone I resented and write out the reason why I resented them. I filled a notebook with about 250 names. I was also supposed to write down the mistakes I had made myself in each of those situations. When I did this, I could see that essentially my own selfishness and dishonesty had set in motion what had happened in nearly every situation, and part of that was because of fears that drove my behavior. This process deflated my ego and made me vulnerable, but that was what I needed. I needed for my eyes to be opened to the truth. I needed humility.

asked what I could do to make it right. It is scary and stressful to approach someone to make amends, but I have never had one go bad after approaching 200 people. Afterward, I always walk away floating. It is a great feeling.

The time came for my court date for the felony of drug trafficking. I was close to completing the program and had been sober six months. I felt confident that they would probate me, but they sentenced me to four years, and I had to go that day. I ended up in a detention center and carried the message of God into the jail. I had always had trouble in jail before, but this time I felt free. I was one of the most respected people in there for the right reasons. People liked me and were good to me. After two months, I got transferred to another jail to do the SAP program. They put me in charge of doing classes, and I got to sponsor a couple of guys there. Then after just two more months I got out.

A man I met through the fellowship program knew I was looking for work. He told me he could use me for a couple of days doing electrical work. I have been working

(continued on page 7)



PSALM 59:16

I was raised in a home with great parents. There was never any addiction in our family. I graduated high school with honors and then moved out on my own and had my first job. I met the owner's son when I was 18 and he was 33. He introduced me to marijuana and hydrocodone. He told me the pills would help me have more energy. I married him and we had two children. During our 12-year marriage, our relationship became toxic. We had violent fights. Eventually I was afraid our children would get hurt in one of our fights, so I left. Not long after I left, he had a massive heart attack and died and I became the sole provider for our children. I had become a "functioning" addict, working two and three jobs to support our family. I would take speed and hydrocodone to keep me going.

A few years after he died, I married another man who introduced me to IV drugs. He was very controlling. My willingness to comply with him furthered my addiction. I went from pain pills to heroin, meth, and crack cocaine in a very short time. I had almost 18 years of addiction on and off. I would go into treatment and then relapse. I lost custody of my children, and without my kids, I didn't care. I quit. I didn't have anything to live for.

In December 2016, my husband dropped me off at a dope house and left me there for two days. When he came back I asked for my truck keys and told him I wanted to go home to my parents. He beat me and choked me and left me for dead. I was unconscious all night in someone's yard in 15-degree weather. The people in the dope house found me at four in the morning. They brought me in the dope house, and as I lay there in and out of consciousness, I remember watching them shoot up and put needles in a tin that they could get rid of if they had to call an ambulance for me. I was disgusted, but then realized, "THAT WAS ME." Miraculously, one of the girls knew my parents and called my mom and they came and got me. They took me home and the entire family sat down with me. I told them I needed them to help me. My dad said it was the last time. He couldn't stand to do it anymore. My dad has had three heart attacks, and I'm pretty sure I caused two of them. I could finally see how much I had hurt them.

I wanted to get into a residential program, but there was a spot open at an outpatient facility and I took it. I stayed with my sister and her husband during treatment. They lived on a farm out in the middle of nowhere, which was good for me. My sister took the wheels off my truck and put it on blocks. I had agreed to give her that control, because I knew if I left I wasn't strong enough to resist drugs.

In my program, I had four hours a week of counseling. God sent just the right person to help me. She came two to three days after I started the program. She had been working at a residential facility, but out of the blue she was sent by the company to work in my outpatient program.

When she met me a couple of times in group, she said that she felt God had sent her to outpatient to help me. She was so much like me and could speak to me. I was still having such a hard time about losing custody of my kids. She gave me two pieces of paper. It was a copy of different verses from Proverbs in the Bible. She said, "I think you need these. Just read these when you are home and having a hard time. God has not forsaken you. You may not know why He has let these things happen in your life, but there is a reason." I spent all weekend reading those Proverbs. I couldn't put them down. I didn't know what was happening to me. It made me realize how many times God was there with me . . . when I was in a terrible violent fight, when I was sick after drug use, when I was lying in that yard nearly dead and frozen. He hadn't forsaken me. He was walking with me.

There was something changing in my life. I started going to Celebrate Recovery. I got a Bible and started doing a Bible study and spent a lot of time reading the Bible. God provided people for me to encourage me. The Peer Support Specialists that worked with me during recovery saw potential in me. They never let me fail and held me up when I couldn't stand on my own. They taught

You are my fortress and my refuge in times of trouble. Psalm 59:16

me my value, that I didn't have to be controlled and abused by men. They showed me I don't have to take drugs when I face difficulties. I know my true identity now. I can face anything. I learned that no matter what, I always have God in my life. I used to think I had done so many things wrong that God couldn't love me. I didn't know how wrong I was. My eyes were opened when I read the Proverbs and started Bible study. God is forgiving and kind and no one has done anything so bad they can't be forgiven. He loves you regardless.

Then I discovered God not only forgave me and loves me, but He has a purpose for me. The gift God wants me to use is giving hope. Every one of the hardships I went through makes me who I am now and has prepared me to bring hope to others. At the end of my treatment program, I began a training program to become certified as a Peer Support Specialist so that I could help others going through

addictions. About three weeks before I graduated, I got a job offer. In my job, I go to high schools and let them know there is help out there and that they can turn their life around and have a life after addiction. I also go to needle exchange programs and talk to the clients to build relationships and talk to them about hope and help get them into treatment. Every 13 hours that the exchange is open, one person comes to treatment.

I got baptized, and that night I slept more peacefully than I have slept in 20 years. I went into that tub with all kinds of bangs and bruises, and I came out forgiven. It all got left in the water. I can forgive others, I can forgive myself. Now I can pray for those who hurt me, but I couldn't do that before my baptism. I didn't think I was capable of that much compassion. My heart had hardened so much.

I hope to build a better relationship with my children and be the mother they deserve. It will take time. I have put that in God's hands. God knows they are safe and stable now. I prayed for God to give me strength to let my kids go and stay with their grandmother, and He did. They are great kids, happy and healthy and do well in school.

I didn't even know that the life I am living was possible. What was missing in treatment the first three times was that

I had ignored God's call. I acted like God wasn't there. I hadn't given my life to Christ. But now I know God's got me. That is my strength and confidence. When I'm having my worst day, I can talk to God about it and it's okay. I don't have to be afraid. I pray that my words will serve Him and for His will to be done through me, and He gives me the tools and right words to say when I talk with someone in addiction.

God has truly healed my heart. I had PTSD from past relationships and experiences with using. I've been in jail and seen wicked things. God has healed me all of that. A while ago, I promised my mom and dad that they would get their daughter back. But recently when I was speaking at a community event, I told them they aren't going to get their daughter back. I am not the same person. I am a new creation through Christ, and I thank God for that. ■



EZEKIEL 11:19

I grew up in a very small town. I had wonderful parents and one brother. My childhood was happy and uneventful. I was close to my father and he suggested that I consider taking care of people for a living since I had been a caretaker for several people in our family when they were sick. I decided to take his advice and pursued becoming a nurse. From 1994–2001 I worked as a nurse in a hospital. Life was pretty uneventful at that time.

Then three things happened that I couldn't deal with. My brother was killed by a friend, my mother was dying with breast cancer, and I had a hysterectomy.

I was so angry with the man who killed my brother. I fought in court trying to send him to prison. Not long after that I got hurt on the job and started using the pills I had been prescribed for an injury to help my emotional pain. I never thought addiction would happen to me, but I became addicted to the pills that took away my pain.

After my mom died in 2004, I got in trouble, lost my nurse's license, and went to jail. The board said I would never get my license back. The judge wanted me to have treatment for drug abuse and I spent three months in jail waiting for a bed to open up in an addiction program. I was able to go to a faith-based residential treatment center where I spent 180 days in treatment. The people were so loving there. They tried to show me beauty where I saw none. They started talking about things my mom had tried to talk with me about—about Jesus.

While I was in treatment I had terrible insomnia. Someone suggested that I pray when I woke up during the night. I took their advice and I prayed that God would reveal Himself to me and give me peace. It was gradual, but the Lord did reveal Himself to me and give me peace. When I got out of treatment I found my mom's Bible and it was like a love letter to me. She had written all sorts of things in the margins. These were the same things I had heard in treatment.

The treatment center was named after a young woman who had been killed by a teenager over a \$30 drug debt. One night I heard her father speak. He talked about forgiving the teenager who had killed his daughter. He said that he had given the teen a Bible and asked for mercy on him with the authorities. At this point I was still harboring so much anger toward the man who had killed my brother. When I heard this man speak, it was the first time I thought I might be able to forgive the man who killed my brother. I thought if this man could forgive the person who killed his daughter, why couldn't I forgive the man who killed my brother?

The state nursing board said I would never get my license back. But the staff at the treatment center encouraged me to try to get my license back, and eventually I began working toward that. After I graduated the treatment program, I went to work at the treatment center as residential staff, taking care of clients and their needs. One of our clients was the niece of the man who killed my brother. Her mother (the sister of the man who killed my brother) came to visit her, and when she came through the door she cried and I cried. At that exact moment, I could see how everyone was a victim in circumstances of my brother's death.

I could see not only what it had done to my life but what it had done to the lives of his family. This experience was so healing for me. This was the event of forgiveness I needed.

I continued working at the treatment center and continued pursuing reinstatement of my nursing license. It took me three years to meet the requirements. One year ago today I got my license back. Now I work as a nurse at the very treatment center where I did my rehab. Most of the

let him. Now I pray before everything, and that helps me. God knows just what you need. God knew I needed to forgive to be healthy and whole again, and He helped me to do that by speaking to me through the father of the girl who was killed and by softening my heart through the tears of the sister of the man who killed my brother. God responded to my prayers for peace. I have a peace now that I never had in my life. Things that used to bother me don't bother me anymore. God answered my prayers

I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 11:19

time we have 20 people in treatment at the center at one time. It is a wonderful thing to see all 20 people get their worth back and see the glow back in their faces. Most have been abused, and when they come in they are hopeless and sick and don't think they can beat the addiction. They feel it is bigger than them. And then God steps in and they go from being a victim to being victorious. By taking the hand of the next person, they develop muscles and get stronger. By helping others, they get stronger themselves. This has been true for me as well.

God is good and God doesn't put things on you to be harsh. He is there to help you get through things if you will

to reveal Himself to me. He put people in my life to point out His beauty and lead me to Him—my mother, the staff at the treatment center, even finding my mom's Bible. God made a way for my nursing license to be restored even though they said it would never happen, and He has given me an even more meaningful and fulfilling nursing career than I had before. Over and over God has been faithful and given me what I have needed.

The way I feel about Jesus now is different than the way I felt as a child. He is not harsh and judgmental. He is a heavenly Father that is there to help you deal with life. Even when you fall, He still wants to hold your hand. ■

(continued from page3, Romans 8:38)

there for three years. It is now full-time and is a great job. There is such demand that I could work seven days a week. It gives me the means to pay back amends and pay for a house.

I never stopped loving my girlfriend but wanted to approach her in the right way. After I was sober two years, I called and asked to talk to her. I told her that there were some things that I wanted to make right. I had saved \$1,000 to pay her back the \$800 I had stolen from her, with interest. But she never got back with me. A year later the same thing—I called but she never got back with me. Then about a year later I tried a third time. I texted her and I heard back. We met and I made amends with her in early December 2017. We both wanted to start dating again, but I told her I didn't want to keep it a secret from her parents, so I asked her parents if I could talk to them. I went to their house and outlined what I had done

and asked what I could do to make it right. Her father said, "I'd like to see you in church every Sunday." We got married this spring and each Sunday I sit next to her parents at church.

If I look back at my own history and at my current experience, I can see how God was and is in the midst of it all, protecting me and others and working things out for good. Miracles are all around us. We just need to be aware.

What I have experienced is more than just freedom from drugs and alcohol. It is freedom from myself. God's way of living is indescribably wonderful. It is a way of living in harmony, of joining in brotherly action. The root of my problem is selfishness and the opposite of that is selflessness. When I turn my thoughts to helping other people, God takes care of my problems. I know that God loves me more than any human could love me. It is astonishing, really—to know that He loves me in spite of myself and regardless of what happens. ■



PROVERBS 13:20

When I was 11 years old I was at poker house with grown men, seeing drug deals go down. At 13, I got caught smoking weed, and the cops brought me home. I didn't get in trouble with my dad, so I knew I could do it again. At 14, I needed money and a father figure gave me pills to sell. That was the first time I sold drugs. In high school I drank, smoked, and did a few pills. I was selling some too. At 17, I ran into a cocaine dealer. I ended up doing cocaine and selling cocaine for this man. Right when I was graduating high school, my dad went missing and they found his body. It was a murder, probably drug related.

I didn't want to deal with my emotions, so I did more drugs to deal with the pain. Three years after my dad died, I got my first felony charge for trafficking drugs. I did a year in jail. Then a man who had grown up in our home who was like a brother to me died from alcohol poison. Also, my first cousin and a couple of friends died in a vehicle accident and couple more committed suicide within the next couple of years. This drove me further into drugs.

I did two more years for cocaine and got out in 2005 but went right back to the madness of drugs. Eventually, I got put on drug court and stayed sober on drug court for close to a year.

I was working for Dish network and making good money but got laid off. One day I needed gas money to get to drug court to take a drug test, so I sold some drugs to a guy and he wore a wire on me and it was the first drug transaction I had made in a year. Then I was facing 45 years.

A woman from Celebrate Recovery/church came to see me in jail and bonded me out and told me to pray about it. It was the first time I ever prayed, and it was a weak prayer. I prayed for three things: that my mom would get out of jail (she got out on house arrest), that I wouldn't get 10 or more years (I got only six years), and that my girlfriend would get help (she went to treatment after that).

The woman from Celebrate Recovery/church made me look at Christians differently. I saw in her the joy of knowing Jesus. She smiled all the time. I thought she was crazy. I thought, "What's wrong with her?" I know now she knew God and the love and joy in Christ. I thought every little thing was going to send you to hell and that I could never do enough right, but I started understanding that it is all about grace and that Jesus took away sin. I started reading my Bible and learned more about Jesus.

I did 16 and a half months and then went up for parole. I got parole and hit my knees to thank God in front of the men waiting for their parole hearing.

But I went right back to the trap. I started going to Florida to the doctors to get prescription drugs. About two years after I got out, the same lady shows up at my house while I'm selling drugs. She had a Bible and wanted to have a Bible study with me on my porch. It was the love of a Christian that drew me to Christ. She didn't condemn me. She encouraged

me. I started going to her church and within a month I got baptized. She wanted me to move away because it was a bad area. That wasn't good because I met some drug connections in the heroin game. Then I got on heroin and started selling it. I stayed at this new town for three years, then in 2015 I moved back to my hometown. In 2016, my mom died of cancer. She was the last parent or grandparent I had alive. A month later, I split up with my girlfriend of eight years. I just didn't care at this point. I was taking 30 Xanax per day, but I wasn't shooting

person said, "You are free today. Don't focus on tomorrow. Focus on your freedom today. God will work it out."

After I finished treatment, I went to a transition house. I volunteered my time seven days a week at churches. I worked at Grace Café, serving and going to church with the homeless. A lot of beautiful things were happening.

When I went back in front of the judge, I had put on 40 pounds and was so much healthier. He said, "What in the world happened to you?" I said, "Jesus." Instead of sending me to prison he said, "Let's see how you do in treatment." I stayed at

Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm. Proverbs 13:20

dope, so I thought I wasn't a junkie. Then I got raided in May 2017. At 6 a.m. there were dogs at both doors, five cop cars, and an undercover car. I went to jail and made bond the next day. They issued a warrant for failing a drug test. I went back to the jail and detoxed so hard I don't remember the first three weeks in jail.

Finally, I went before a judge. I knew something had to change. I told him I wanted to go to a long-term, residential faith-based recovery program. I knew the Bible and the power of God. I knew that's what I needed. Three days later, the same Celebrate Recovery lady and my sister showed up and took me to a faith-based residential recovery program.

My friend said some people's heart gets too hard to see God. That was really motivation for me to change. I always wanted to be the hardest dude in the jail. In treatment, I had to humble myself, ask questions, and do trash duty.

God changed me. I was broken. I had smoked for 20-plus years, and in two to three weeks my desire to smoke went away. My cussing went away. I was still facing 20 years and kept thinking about that, but a peer support

the transition house for 3 months but knew I needed to go home. It's been about six months since then. So much has happened. I am working with the judges in the area to do outreach for drug treatment. The judge I appeared before wrote me a personal letter to the jails to let me go into the local jail to get people in addiction recovery. I had done 55 months in that jail.

I also work as a full-time chaplain and run spiritual groups at an outpatient recovery center in my town. I pray God will give the people in my spiritual groups the fruits of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps you make the right choices. I love these people and support them. We can get people to say the sinner's prayer. But if we don't disciple them, we are throwing them back to the wolves. I'm also running a Celebrate Recovery group.

The woman from Celebrate Recovery/church is still a big part of my life today. She is like my second mom. She has a heart to help people. I thank God for her.

It's a whole love story, the Bible is. I tell everyone, "Jesus is a love extremist." You can hang all the laws and prophets in the Bible on two commandments: Love God and love people. Jesus said, "People will know you are my disciple if you love people the way I love you." Jesus is the visual image of the Father. He is a total healer. I am proof of that. I am a new creation. ■

(continued from page15, Romans 8:1)

For most of my life, I had three gods me, myself and I. My addiction was just a side effect of that. But the power of God changed me. I thank the Lord for what He's done. There are so many things I can do now because of the power of Christ. I have a full-time job now with an organization to do outreach services which is a job I would do for free. On Sundays, I preach and do revivals. The Lord has continued to bless and provide for our family. I don't have a bunch of money but we haven't

missed a meal. The world doesn't give me my peace and happiness and the world can't take it away. I understand now why the UPS man smiled and was happy all the time.

It doesn't matter how far you are gone if you will surrender to God. I didn't cut my teeth on a church pew but Jesus is as real as the air I breath and the ground I stand on. What God did for me he will do for anyone. If you are reading this story there is some reason that God has you alive. If you are truly done, God is ready to use you. He will give you a purpose and a passion and he will restore what you have lost. I believe this is true for anyone. There is a better life. ■



PHILIPPIANS 3:3-14

I have great parents. They taught me morals and ethics and raised me in the church. But there were some tragedies in my family that really had a negative impact on me. When I was 4 my grandfather was murdered. About 10 years later, my aunt (my dad's only sister) was brutally murdered by a family member. She wasn't just my aunt. She was my mom's best friend from high school. This was the beginning of my questioning of God. Why did that have to happen?

Later that year my dad was diagnosed with a brain tumor. They told him the chance of surviving the surgery to remove the tumor was slim to none. But he did survive and is alive and well today almost 20 years later. I still have my dad, and I thank God for that.

In 2003, I was 16 and got into a bad car accident. I was in so much pain, but the pain meds weren't working so I started using marijuana to help with the pain. I graduated from high school in 2004 and started college. I made the dean's list and had a 4.0 GPA, but I felt alone and isolated. I wanted to fit in and the only people who took an interest in me were smoking and drinking. My grades dropped and my dad made me move back home. Not long after that I found out I was pregnant with my first child. I was about six months pregnant with my daughter when I met my ex-husband at a bar. I was underage, 19 years old, pregnant, and in a bar—not good. He said all the right things and in all the right ways. He talked about wanting to take care of me and my daughter, and I fell for it. I moved him into my apartment, and after I had my daughter, he introduced me to crack cocaine. Not long after that, I was pregnant with my son and we decided to get married. I felt like I didn't do right by my daughter and I wanted to have a father for my son.

Unfortunately, I still used crack on and off during my pregnancy with my son. I'm so thankful he was healthy and not addicted when he was born. I went into a bad post-partum depression and that's when the heavy drug use started. We had already been kicked out of our apartment and were staying at his grandparents, but they kicked us out too because we were stealing from them and fighting. My son was 2 when my ex-husband's parents took custody of him. My parents were taking care of my daughter.

We started using meth to get off the crack, and I was in and out of jail. I finally called my parents and said "Come get me. I can't do this anymore." I moved in with my parents, but I was still doing meth and getting into trouble.

Then in 2014, I got very sick. My parents forced me go to the emergency room, and I'm so thankful they did. I am a Type 1 diabetic and hadn't been taking my insulin. I collapsed at the registration desk. They said my kidneys and liver were shutting down, and I was septic with infection throughout my body. I had double pneumonia and my heart was operating at only 15 percent. I was dying. The doctors put me into a medically induced coma and told my parents to make my final arrangements. But I didn't die. When I woke up, my mom was sitting next to me. With everything I had put them through, my parents were still there for me. I started in a program called Families Moving Beyond Abuse. I was two weeks from

graduating the program and caught new charges because there was dope in the car of someone I was driving. They weren't my drugs but still I was charged. The judge gave me a second chance and put me in felony drug court, but I didn't do so well in drug court. I was pregnant with twins and working full-time and there were three meetings a week; I was overwhelmed. I relapsed and spent a lot of my pregnancy locked up.

my kids on our first family vacation to the beach. And I have a new boyfriend, who treats me with respect and is good to my children. He has no use for drugs.

I have been clean two years, but I couldn't have done this without God. He has been with me every step of the way. God is compassion and His love is unconditional. He is always there and never leaves—we are the ones who leave. When I pray, it isn't a long, elegant prayer. It's just simple talking to God. And

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:13-14

On June 1, 2016, I got locked up for the last time. After three months, I made parole and they said I had to complete a Substance Abuse Program (SAP). I went to a residential treatment center that focuses on education, employment, and counseling. It was a tough program, but it was what I needed. As much as I fought the process, it changed my life. I learned to deal with my emotions and issues. I had never faced myself in the mirror until I went there. I learned who I was and discovered who I wanted to be. Every Tuesday night, there was a church service at the center. I attended regularly and found God again. I met a wonderful pastor who mentored me. She spent a lot of time talking about the love of God. She was unconditional in her love and care for me, and she is still very supportive of me. When I left there on March 14, I was not the same person that I was when I came in. I had been so angry, miserable, and bitter toward God, life, and myself. When I left, my relationship with God was restored and I was happy again.

After I completed the program, I called the restaurant where I had worked before and I was hired back. This month I was promoted. I am living with my parents and all my children are with me except for my son who still lives with his grandparents. I am standing on my own two feet; I have my own vehicle, pay my own bills, and I'm looking for my own apartment. I am getting ready to take

He has answered my prayers. God has made a way for me to be happier and less stressed at work. He has given me strength and determination to try new things and leave toxic relationships. God has helped me to forgive the person who killed my aunt. All you have to do is ask. Ask for forgiveness and ask for help in forgiving others.

Everything I have needed has been given to me even when I didn't know it. God gave me a wonderful family. My sister has been a rock and though she is younger than me, I have always looked up to her. She gives me confidence and hope in what I strive to be as a mother, a daughter and a woman. My mistakes taught her how to live and her living taught me how to be a woman. My grandparents gave me a great foundation in church as a young child. I lost my grandfather this past Christmas and while it was devastating to me, it didn't shake my faith because I know I will see him again. His last words to me were, "I am proud of you."

God saved my life in the terrible car accident, and again years later when I was in the hospital and the doctors said I was dying. God saved my life again when he provided the opportunity for me to go to the treatment center that changed my life. I believe that God has a purpose for my life. He is helping me to be a good mother to my children and is providing opportunities for me to help other people at work. I'm not perfect and I'm not going to claim to be, but I try.

God's miracles never cease. They are not just stories you read in the Bible. They happen every day. I am living proof. ■



JOHN 15:15

I was born in a town of 400 people in the mountains of Kentucky. My mother and sister are great women. They always looked out for me. My father was an abuser and a criminal. I witnessed violence, and it opened up that world to me. My relationship with him was volatile, but I still looked up to him. When I was in seventh grade, a boy hit me and I ran. When my dad found out, he gave me a tree limb and told me not to come home until I did what I needed to do. I almost went to jail for cracking the kid over the skull with the tree limb. My dad played a role in my path but I made my own choices as an adult.

In school I was constantly in trouble. When I was about 10 a doctor gave me a Tylenol 4 and I liked the effects the pill had on me. We had addiction in our family. My father was an alcoholic and drug addict. That Tylenol 4 was the beginning of drug addiction for me. I started stealing pills that year. I started smoking dope. My mom and dad split up and I blamed the world for not having dad around. I started acting out and doing horrible things. My high school said I wasn't going to graduate unless I started acting better. I straightened up, graduated, and went to college. I met a girl, who later became my wife. My freshman year I had a car wreck and got hurt really bad, and that ended my college career. After we got married, I made drugs available to my wife and helped her get a drug addiction. My daughter was born a little after that.

My drug addiction got really bad. I went to Florida and our marriage ended. All this time I played in several bands. The lifestyle was a problem. There were free drugs and access to women.

I came back to Kentucky and made some terrible decisions. I caught four charges and got a 50- year sentence. In prison, I couldn't get drugs like I was used to, so I straightened up some, but then I found a way to get drugs. I did the same thing in prison that I did on the street—I stayed high. I got in trouble for a violent act and got four years in segregation. I did 2 years, 11 months and 4 days without human contact. But that was the best two years of my life. The only book that was allowed in the hole was the Bible. I started reading it and the verse that really stood out to me was John 15:15.

"I no longer call you slaves because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends since I have told you everything the Father told me. You didn't choose me, I chose you. I appointed you to produce lasting fruit so the Father would give you whatever you asked for using my name. This is my command. Love each other."

I started praying and they finally let me out of the hole. I talked to my sister for the first time in years on the phone and noticed something different about her. I could hear something different in her voice. There was clarity and love. She told me she had been saved and had been baptized to show her faith. She asked me to start going to the chapel in prison. I love my sister to death. She is my rock...so I went to the chapel. I had always put down the people who went to chapel, saying they were weak. But these people I had degraded and made miserable showed me love. They hugged me and told me they were glad I was there. They wanted to know if I needed to talk or needed a Bible. I started going to a Bible study in the

mornings. There were 43 of us that did this. I got involved in the church and got on the worship team, playing in the band.

I met a man who was in prison who was over the praise team in the chapel. This man had been a preacher since he was 12 years old. He made a mistake that ended in a prison sentence. God used this preacher's mistake to help me. While he was in prison—for a whole year—he met with me almost every day to explain the Bible to me in stories and help me understand the Bible. Eventually I was able to help him because guys would pick on him and I was able to get that stopped.

I got moved to a maximum-security prison. I felt really bad because I wasn't praying and going to church. One day I was going to chow hall and something hit me and said, "Put your hands on this person and pray for him." I knew the man in front of me. We worked together in prison industries learning a trade. He was skinny but his belly was swollen. I didn't put my hands on him and pray

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. John 15:15

for him because there were a lot of people around and I was embarrassed. I prayed for my meal and it hit me again, "Go put your hands on him and pray for him!" I left the chow hall and thought I'd have to find him and pray for him. When I found him he was talking to someone and still I didn't pray for him. Finally, he turned around and looked me dead in the eye and said, "You probably won't see me again because they are taking me out of here. I've got cancer really bad." What if I had been obedient to God's call to pray for him? I don't know how this would have changed things, but I was getting a clear message to do it so it must have been important.

This was a catalyst to get me in gear. I started to going back to church and reading the Bible. I started realizing my true source of strength was Jesus. I got sent to a different prison and started doing sermons in the chapel. Then I got sent to another prison and became an in-house teacher and minister. Not a lot of people know much about the Bible. The prison had a newspaper and I was put to work on this, and I turned it into a faith-based newspaper. This is how God works. People were sort of open to it, honestly.

I got transferred to another prison to take moral recognition therapy classes, a program to help you let go of anything that is holding you back. I took the classes

and then with the teacher's consent, I revised the curriculum to mention faith and include Bible verses. I was very comfortable at this facility and was living in meritorious housing for good behavior. We had some experienced musicians and played some great praise and worship music in the yard. Everything was going great, and then they shipped me to another facility. I didn't know why. They put me in a nice dorm and put me working in Christian programming. Six months after being at this facility, I went up for parole. I had been in prison almost 25 years at this point. I didn't expect it, but they gave me parole. I had expected a 60-month flop.

I went to my mother's house when I got out of jail, and that night I went to a Celebrate Recovery meeting. I needed to know who I could call and talk to. A family friend took me to church the next morning. Two months ago, I became the associate pastor at this church. I co-lead Celebrate Recovery out of the same church on Monday nights and do the worship for that. I don't have a theology degree, but I wanted to be ordained the right

way, so I took ministry training and was ordained as a minister.

God is sovereign, and if you allow Him, He will take you to where you need to go. Sometimes you will not understand things, but God has a good plan and He will follow through on His plan. There are things we can't see and don't know at the time, but if you give it all to God, He will put the right people in your life and open the right doors for you to live the life He wants for you.

After all I have done, I looked at my mother and she said, "I'm proud of you" and meant it. It is absolutely God that allowed that to happen. I have done horrible things in the past, but now she trusts me and wants a relationship with me. I am not the same man. God did that. I haven't had a drink or drug since February 22, 2002 when I was saved. I used the first part of my life for me. I want to use the second half of my life to talk about Jesus and talk about the truth.

I am thankful for the time in prison. Without that I would not have opened my eyes to the truth I know today. God had a plan. Because He is all-knowing, He knew what it would take for me. I would much rather be a 50-year-old man and know what I know today than be a 21-year-old kid and be the person I was then. Give God a chance. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Learn about Jesus Christ because He is the only thing that will get us through and take us where we are supposed to go. ■



ROMANS 8:1

I grew up in a small town in the mountains of Kentucky. My father was a coal operator and my mother was a nurse. They are good people and my home was a good environment. In high school, I drank and smoked weed and thought every high schooler did that. When I got out of high school in the mid 90s OxyContin was rampant. It was so easy to get from doctors. It seemed like a miracle drug. It killed pain but it also killed families and dreams. I started fooling around with OxyContin and when I came home from college and saw that the pills were going for \$50 each, I saw the business opportunity. I could buy them for \$5 a piece at college and sell them for \$45 profit at home. So why go to college. I wish I could explain the availability of the drugs at that time – it was like getting a pack of cigarettes. I dropped out of college in the summer of 2000 right before my senior year. I got my girlfriend pregnant and moved home. I thought then I could quit drugs so I could be a good father. My dad offered me a job working with him in the coal business but instead I sold drugs to make a living. My child was born in March and that was the day I was quitting but I was late to see her being born because I was passed out high in the car. I felt like then I had blown that so I could never be a good dad.

The drug epidemic really became evident in the early 2000s and the law started to combat it. By this time, I was hooked and the best way to pay for my addiction was to sell the pills. I started getting into legal trouble. I was so gone in my addiction I thought I would die in it. I was lying and stealing from the people I loved most. And the world, rightly so, started labeling me as a thief and liar and I really bought into that identity. I was no halfway crook. I had a pocketful of money and was flying all over the country doing deals. I was good at what I thought was making me happy. But I was blinded.

About two years later I picked up my first two felonies in a roundup. I got probated through drug court. I maybe did 5-6 months in a jail. I continued to pick up felonies and in 2006 I got five years for trafficking. I did one year, got out and went right back to drug dealing. I was in and out of prisons and even tried rehab. My children's mother was praying that I would quit. In 2012, my son was born and I thought this is it. I am really going to quit. But one month later I was doing drugs.

In June 2016, I took three more years for trafficking. I did about 5-6 months in the county jail and made parole but I had to complete a Substance Abuse Program (SAP). I thought rehab was for quitters and I was just going to put in

my time. But in November 2017 I got a letter from my 15-year-old daughter. Until that time, I had never really been broken. I wasn't scared of people in prison or being killed. She wrote in her letter, "If you are that man that you always say you are just step out of our life. We love you and you will always be our dad but you continuously break our hearts. We hope you can find something or someone to make you happy because we never could." THAT broke me. God used that little girl to break me. As long as my kids blamed me I could deal with it but when they started blaming themselves I couldn't take it. My daughter was right. I had missed so much of their lives. I didn't get to see my son start kindergarten and I wasn't there for my daughter's induction in Beta Club and so many other things. At that moment, I knew I had really hit rock bottom but I didn't know what to do about it. I had been to so many rehabs but I had a spiritual problem and the world can't fix that.

they were separated by a blank page. But it's not your ability it is your availability and your willingness that matters. We started on a Bible verse or two each night and prayed. From December to April, 40 people were saved in that detention center. And people started getting visits from family they hadn't seen in a long time. God was answering our prayers. We believed and we started seeing miracles happen. I thought, "This is too good to be true. I'm telling everyone about Jesus!"

When I graduated the program, my mom, dad and granny came. My granny had called me every day and said, "I'm still praying for you. The Lord's going to change you one day." I had thought, "You keep praying to that invisible man." In my graduation speech, I was preaching and quoting the Bible. I'm sure my parents thought, "We dropped him off on drugs 6 months ago and now he is quoting the Bible?" I'm sure they thought I was crazy but not my granny. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1

About this time, a man who I knew from my hometown (he had been the UPS driver) came into the Department of Corrections facility where I was doing rehab and told me about a church service they were starting in our facility. What I remembered most about this man was when I had seen him in my hometown he always smiling and happy and I had thought "This man is confused." This man invited me to their first church service and I went. He started talking about a God I had never heard about. I didn't grow up in church but I had heard all this stuff I had to do to earn His love. I didn't know grace. All I knew was religion. I thought if God had something for me it was a hammer and I was already beat up so I wanted no part of that. But that night I learned about a God of love and forgiveness. He started reading from the Bible and one passage that really stood out was Joel 2:25 that said God would restore the years the locusts had eaten. I knew I wanted to surrender my life that night to God. You will hear the term "jailhouse religion" and I made fun of people for that but that night I didn't care who saw me give my life to the Lord. After that night, I had a unique hunger for the Word of God. I got a Gideon's Bible and started a Bible study. I didn't know anything about the Bible. The only thing I knew about the Old Testament and New Testament was that

She knew what had happened. She told me, "I can go home now. I have seen a miracle." Thank God for praying grandmas! There is power in prayer. When I got home my little boy hugged my leg and said, "Daddy are you home for good?" and I said, "I'm home for good." Since that day, God has blessed me. I sold t-shirts and was able to get car insurance and get my license back. That allowed me to drive to a homeless shelter to tell them about Jesus. Then I started going into jails. Nine months after I was incarcerated I incorporated into a ministry. We focus on outside the four walls of the church trying to minister to people who really need God's healing. When they see me in my hometown they say, "Only God could have changed that boy." My little boy used to be in the back of my car while I was selling dope now he is in my car when I share hope. He is 8 years old and really good at baseball. He wants to be a pro baseball player when he grows up AND a preacher like his daddy. My daughter recently gave me another letter. "We want to tell you how happy we are. We can't believe how much you have changed. My friends say I have the coolest dad and they are right. We do. Don't let the fact that you can't buy us a lot of things get you down. You are home and we have a dad. By the way pick me up at softball practice tomorrow."

(continued on page 7)

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.¹ 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.² I grew up with strict, religious parents and I knew the Old Testament and had memorized most of it.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ I watched in approval, guarding the coats of my friends, as they murdered a Christian.⁶ 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.⁷

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?"⁸

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."⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ So, be encouraged. Forget the past and look forward to what lies ahead.¹⁷ Remember that even if you are knocked down and pressed on every side by trouble, you are never abandoned by God.¹⁸ ■

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.

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