



Finding God's Mercy in Recovery

By Marilyn Thomas

He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings (Psalm 40:2 KJV).

Growing up in the South Carolina Lowcountry, John recalls a happy childhood in which he enjoyed the fresh ocean breezes and the open countryside. School was more of a challenge for him but was without any major difficulties until his high school years. That's when problems with rebellion, relationships, and substance abuse began to surface. His concerned parents noticed his struggles and took him to psychologists and psychiatrists, but nothing seemed to help. He eventually found himself sinking into a depression that resulted in a failed suicide attempt. With that event, he was hospitalized and began intensive treatment to address his mental health needs.

Under a doctor's supervision, John greatly improved, but on his own, he would not take any medication. Once stabilized, his parents enrolled him in a faith-based boarding school where he learned to be more independent and take responsibility for himself. While there, John was also taught biblical doctrines that encouraged him spiritually; however, the obsession to obtain and use drugs and alcohol returned and John gave in. As a result, his mental health and relationships began to deteriorate again, and he occasionally found himself answering to the local law enforcement for his actions.

When John went off to college, he soon lost interest in academics and started skipping classes. He joined a fraternity where the unhealthy habit of drinking and using drugs was a common occurrence. This, in turn, intensified his mental health symptoms, especially paranoia. He was soon hospitalized again and received medication that stabilized his condition. When released, he moved into an apartment with a close friend and found gainful employment. Unfortunately, his roommate had similar issues with alcohol and, together, their drinking escalated.

During that time, John received a DUI and his license was suspended. To reinstate his driving privileges, he was required to attend five 12-step program meetings and complete the state-sponsored Alcohol and Drug Safety Action Program. In his first 12-step meeting, he recalls seeing a former friend and was surprised that this person could openly confess that he was an alcoholic. John was not yet ready to admit that he, too, was an alcoholic, but the courage of his acquaintance impressed him.

Then a major tragedy struck that caused John to take a closer look at the course of his life. At the age of 24, John's best friend was killed in a motorcycle accident within a block of his parents' house. He was driving under the influence of alcohol when his motorbike malfunctioned and wrecked. This event brutally jolted John's existence, and for a while, he joined a 12-step group. He stayed sober for three years until substance abuse blindsided him yet again. Some of his buddies, who knew he was an alcoholic but didn't fully understand the nature of the disease, offered him drugs and alcohol, and in a moment of weakness, John accepted it. Several weeks before that occasion, his mental health symptoms of paranoia and delusions had

begun to resurface, and since he wasn't taking any medication, the substance abuse only intensified his symptoms. In the end, John had a complete psychotic break and became very ill. His behavior ultimately led to incarceration, which included time spent both in jail and in a psychiatric facility.

When John looks back at these events in his life, he believes God allowed him to hit rock bottom and end up in jail just to bring him closer to Himself. When he was without any hope, he started to study the Bible and had a life-changing conversion by accepting Jesus Christ as his Savior and turning his will and life over to Him. John testifies that while he was in the jail and hospital, God lifted him above his circumstances by sustaining him with a faith to endure.

During his hospital stay, John began to trust his doctors and recognize his need for medication. He became stabilized, and the paranoia and delusions eventually stopped. He stayed in the medical facility until he learned to develop a routine, take care of himself, and make healthy choices.

After he was discharged, John moved into a community residential care facility where he spent the next few years trying to make a life for himself. Being employed was not yet an option, so he helped with the chores, became actively involved in a church, and volunteered at a local outreach that fed the homeless. When he was able to leave the residential care facility, John enlisted in the Homeshare program. This arrangement allows community volunteers to share their home with someone with a mental illness and provide them with support until they can "get back on their feet" and return to the community.

Today, John is growing spiritually and lives a successful life of recovery. He is completely independent and works for a local mental health center as a certified peer support specialist. While in that position, he participated in the Recovery for Life program, which is sponsored by South Carolina Self-Help Association Regarding Emotions (SC SHARE). SC SHARE is a nonprofit agency dedicated to offering hope and recovery to people with mental illness through education. John now teaches the Recovery for Life program to others in his community. He continues to be active in his church, enjoys singing in the choir, regularly attends a Bible-based 12-step program, and is involved in an outreach ministry in which he holds Bible studies with inmates.

In retrospect, John realizes it was God's mercy that rescued him and placed him upon the solid footing where he now stands. In his own words, he says, "Christ has done for me what I couldn't do for myself. By surrendering my life to Him . . . it changed my life completely. I don't live the way I used to live, and I don't value the things I used to value. Serving in my church and helping other people—that's what my life is all about now. Before, I was serving myself to get what I could for myself. Now, it's all about Him. It's because of Him I do what I do and try to share the hope of recovery with other people."

John claims Galatians 2:20 as his life verse: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (KJV).

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