

TESTIMONIES

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AMANDA'S TESTIMONY

My name is Amanda, I'm a believer in Jesus Christ who is in recovery from drug addiction, SSA, and negative self-perception. My life is a testimony to not only Christ's ability, but to His willingness to restore, support, and strengthen anyone who is utterly hopeless. Zeph. 3:17 says *"The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one, who will save..."*

I grew up the youngest of two in a family where my parents are still together. I was the only girl on both sides of the family and grew up doing my best to keep up with the boys. I didn't have a bad childhood. My parents were not abusive, they didn't use drugs or alcohol. I was raised in church, the problem was we were expected to put on the appearance of a perfect family. You don't ever let anyone know what's really going on. So I did my best to live up to this expectation, all the while I felt like I was dying on the inside. I had my first sexual encounter when I was about 8 years old. She was my best friend and it felt safe and secure. Through this process I now know that was the beginning of my struggle with SSA. Somewhere around the age of 8-10 I began to experiment with the older neighbor boy down the street. When he was done with me he attempted to pass me off to his friend. There were a couple of other experiences like that but when I was 15 my boyfriend cheated on me. Guys seemed to only want to take whatever they could then discard me when they were done. I decided that guys were not worth giving any part of myself to, so I decided I would never let a guy close enough to hurt me again. Those experiences seemed to reinforce the belief that intimacy the way it was supposed to be, safe, would only be found with another girl. Now, growing up in church, I knew all too well that what I was feeling was wrong. That those behaviors were not just a sin, but they were considered, by others, one of the worst. I couldn't share with anyone about my struggles; I just knew that if anyone ever found out the truth about me they would throw me away and want nothing to do with me. So I learned at an early age to keep people at arms length. I would never let anyone close to me. As the years went on I continued to stuff those desires as the guilt and shame of having them to begin with only grew. How could I have these feelings, what's wrong with me, God why won't you take them away; were all questions I lived with. It wasn't long before those questions grew to fears of I'll never be right, no one will ever love me, there must be something wrong with me. That was the start of what would be many years of me trying anything to make me feel okay with myself. I tried many different ways to kill the pain and many different things to fill the void in my life. It began with self harm, then went to alcohol, and then to me trying to regain some kind of control in my life through anorexia. Nothing worked. At the age of 15 I began to experiment with drugs and less than a year later I tried meth for the first time. That was the beginning of a love affair that lasted for the next 8 years of my life. I thought I had finally found what I was looking for. It numbed my pain and covered my fears. I did not realize that there would come a time when I wouldn't be able to stop. By the age of 17 I was an IV drug user. My life had taken a dramatic turn for the worst. The needle had become my god and using was all I cared about. It was during this time, without even knowing my struggle with females, that the people around me began to encourage me to get involved in the bisexual lifestyle that was becoming popular. I felt like I was finally given permission to be who I thought I always was. See I had prayed for so long for God to remove those feelings and He never did; so I began to believe the lie that I must have just been born that way. With that new found freedom and the drugs numbing my conscience I gave into those desires for women that had always seemed to haunt me. With my drug use continuing to progress, so did the lifestyle that went with it. I gave myself away like I was nothing, because that was what I believed that I was nothing. I did things I never even imagined people did. Men were merely there to serve whatever purpose I had for them at the time and women had become nothing more than my way of validating myself. I didn't care who I hurt and I would abuse anyone who attempted to get close to me. Growing up my dad, because he loved me and wanted to protect me, would say, "It's different for girls than it is for boys." Keep in mind that my perception was rarely based on truth, but it seemed he would be so hard on me and my brother could do whatever. So, I decided that if it was different and this is what it's like for a girl then I don't want any part of it. I began to find my sense of worth through what I thought my brother found his in. So, I measured my self-worth by how much dope I could do or by how many

women I slept with, but there was never enough of either. By the age of 18 I was pleading with God to get me off drugs or let me die, I didn't care what it took, rather or not I had to go to jail, I just hated myself and I wanted out. I ended up going to jail and then to treatment shortly after. I wanted off the drugs so bad, but the problem was that the thing I hated the most about myself was the thing I loved the most and I didn't know what to do with all that. When I got out of treatment I chose not to follow any suggestions. I only went to a couple meetings, I didn't stop hanging out with old friends. I did get a sponsor, but I never called her, so it wasn't long before I went right back to it. It was all I knew. My identity was so wrapped up in that lifestyle. Without the drugs all those old fears came back to the surface. See, to me I was just a hopeless junkie, so without the dope I believed I really would be nothing. So my addiction picked up where it had left off. The more I used the worse I became and the worse I became the more I used. I didn't care about my past because I covered it up with drugs, and I cared even less about my future because I didn't think I had one. My life consisted of a never ending desperation for more and there was never enough of anything. All I wanted was to be okay with myself, and nothing ever made me okay. The thing I've learned about sin is that it never satisfies and it always leaves you wanting more. I was always left feeling unloved, abandoned, and like I would never be enough for anyone. I was consumed with misery and despair. Everything I had tried failed. I tried to use a certain way, or only at certain times, I moved to a different state, but nothing worked. I found myself in this rundown trailer with no electricity and no water, shooting dope as usual and I just began to cry. I was sitting there looking at it all crying because I didn't want to do it anymore, but had long ago lost any hope of ever being anything different. I continued to use that night, but I believe that deep in my heart, without even realizing it, I cried out to Jesus for the first in a long time, and He heard me. My favorite passage in scripture is Lam 3:54-57, it says, *"The water rose over my head, and I cried out, 'this is the end!' But I called on your name from deep within the pit. You heard me when I cried, 'listen to my pleading! Hear my cry for help!' Yes you came when I cried, you told me do not fear."* That night something changed. It was like He carried me from place to place until I finally found myself somewhere I could get help. It was in detox I began to hope. I found myself thinking of those people, at the couple of meetings I did go to, who had years clean. I thought that maybe if I did what they did then maybe I could get clean too. So I became very willing to do whatever I had to do to stay clean. I got out and started attending a traditional recovery meeting. It was there that I met my sponsor, she loved Jesus and reintroduced me to church. Like I said I grew up in church. I knew all the bible stories and I could quote scripture, but what I didn't know at the time was that I had never truly met Jesus. I stayed clean for about a year, got involved in a CR group our church was starting, but I still had an emptiness in me. It was that same emptiness I had tried so long to fill with all those things that were only empty themselves. I always thought the next one would do it. The next fix, the next relationship, the next whatever. But there was no amount of any of it that was going to mend the brokenness I felt. It wasn't long before I realized that I couldn't go to church enough or read my bible enough, there was nothing that was going to fill the void, but a relationship with Jesus. On Oct 24, 2004 I met Him in a small group bible study and asked Him to forgive me, to change me, to be my Savior and the Lord of my life. I have never been the same. I had always believed that I was too far gone to ever be saved, that my sin was unforgivable, but I was wrong, our God will always reach into the deepest pit. Rom 3:22-24 says, *"We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet, God with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous."* I didn't have to clean myself up to have a relationship with Him. Recovery has been, and still is, an amazing but difficult process. I have had to be willing to lay down whatever it is He shows me as He shows me it. It's about more than just not using drugs. It's about not being bound by any obsessive, compulsive, or self-destructive behavior. At 90 days clean I realized that if I didn't stop having relationships with women then I was going to end up getting high. So I made a choice to stop living that lifestyle. I stopped the behavior, but I stuffed all the feelings. I was getting back in church and people didn't talk about that stuff. If you struggled with SSA then you were the worst of the worst, right. I felt people were going to judge me, condemn me, and want nothing to do with me. So I worked on my addiction issues and stuffed everything else. Without the drugs and without the sexual relationships I had to find a new way to cope. I found that I could use my thought life as a means of escape. So I would use fantasies to deal with life issues. I met my husband the day after I accepted Christ as my Savior. On our first date I told him I was a recovering addict who

just accepted Christ and on our second date I remember saying, just so everything is out in the open, I used to sleep with women too. Poor guy, looking back I laugh because there's no telling what he was thinking. I wanted to give him the opportunity up front to run if he wanted to, but he didn't. I'm sure there have been many times since that he wished he had. It was quite a beginning. We didn't really talk about it much after that. Our relationship moved quickly. We were engaged by Feb, married by May, and completely oblivious to what was coming. Our marriage began to fall apart on the honeymoon and remained near ruin for the next 3 years. He was my first relationship sober and it wasn't until I got in a relationship I couldn't run from, did all those feelings for women and against men start coming to the surface. I thought my husband was no different than every other man in my past, and I became consumed with the desire for women. I began believing that I would never be happy in a relationship with a man. It was then I started to pray, just like when I was young, for God to remove my feelings for women. I would beg Him to take them away. I would say, if this is not how you intended me to be, then take it away. But just like when I was younger, I didn't want to have to talk about it with anyone. I just wanted it to go away. One night I was in my room and God took me to a scripture in Deuteronomy where it says I'm going to bring you to a land where nothing is lacking. I knew he meant in my marriage. I started to pray that old familiar prayer when I felt God say to me, Amanda, I will set you free from this the same way I did your drug addiction, but you are going to have to do the same things to get it. That terrified me because what He was saying was that I was going to have to talk about it and work steps on it. I remember, simply out of desperation for some relief, the first night I shared with my small group at CR that my name is Amanda and I struggle with the desire for other women. I just knew they were going to freak out and want nothing to do with me. My delusional fear was that after the meeting they would all walk as far away from me as they could. That they were going to think I wanted them or something. You know, 'cause if you struggle with SSA you must want every woman you see. But the amazing thing about these women, was when the meeting was over they each gave me a hug and said they loved me and were proud of me. Oh the healing that began that night. So I began to talk about it. I shared my struggle with those women in spite of the fear and shame that went with it. I decided that I was no longer okay with my thought life being a means of escape. I started working the steps and committed to taking every thought captive and bringing them to obedience to Christ. Don't misunderstand, things didn't change overnight just because I finally decided to do something different. It has been a long difficult process with more failures than I can count. There were so many times I would get discouraged and begin to lose hope of ever being any different, and God would remind me that He is the God He says He is and He will do the things He says He will do, and that it is not dependent on what my circumstances look like or how many times I have messed up. So even though everything I saw and felt told me different I chose to believe my God. In 2009 I saw His promise to me being fulfilled when he removed the desire and obsession for women. Just like with my drug addiction there came a time when the obsession was lifted from me and I began to experience freedom in my life. That doesn't mean the temptation doesn't ever return. There are times I still face temptation in that area. Times I struggle with desire for women and I start to doubt God's work in my life, but those times no longer define me. Today I am walking in freedom, struggling or not, because my God is always faithful. He promises He will never leave me or forsake me. He will not abandon me in the struggle. He is my comforter and my God. He has changed the desires of my heart and today I know that my worth is found in Him alone. There was never enough of anything to make me okay with myself because none of those things were ever meant to. Only He has the power to save and the ability to meet my deepest need. I am powerless to save myself, I have proven that over and over again. But as I practice spiritual principles like honesty, humility, willingness, and surrender; and I do the practical things like meetings, step work, and sponsorship; He begins to restore and heal me, and mend the broken relationships in my life. I am not the same any more. I'm not, nor have I ever been, worthless and unlovable, and I'm no longer empty and searching. I have found what I was looking for and it was a relationship with Christ. My husband and I have an 8yr old son and our marriage has experienced some crazy healing. We are closer than ever, I'm overcoming my fear of intimacy, and I'm letting walls down slowly but surely. God continues to reveal to me my distorted views and the lies I believe that have kept me closed off to my husband. Just recently God reminded me that He had promised to bring me to a land where nothing was lacking. He showed me that I had settled for half of that promise being fulfilled and that He had more for me if I would believe Him for it. Today I am choosing to believe Him. My God is in

the process of renewing my mind and demolishing the lies that were used to form my false belief system. Like I said, at times, I still struggle with the desire for women and I have to fight the instinct to shut down with my husband. Man, it's a process, but I'm grateful that He promises to finish the work He has begun. He has made the promise, but I have to choose to believe Him for it. God is in the business of restoration. He has not only restored to me what was lost; he is continually restoring me to the person I never imagined I could become, but to whom He always intended me to be. It's not always easy, I don't always feel free, and sometimes I begin to doubt, but it is during those times He reminds me that His grace is sufficient for me. I have learned that my feelings don't have to determine my behavior and that my current struggles do not negate all He has done for me. Just because I may not feel free doesn't mean I'm any less free. During those times I choose to stand on the truth that whom the Son has set free is free indeed, no matter my feelings. I can't afford to let guilt and shame or fear and doubt drag me down. I have to let those feelings drive me to Jesus. I am not nor will I ever be perfect. The good news is that my God does not expect me to be. For He knows how we are formed and He remembers that we are just dust. I didn't come into recovery overflowing with faith. It has been through experiences that I have learned to believe and trust in Christ. There are still times when I begin to romanticize my past or think that this world has something to offer me, it is then I have to choose to play the mental tape all the way through to the pain, because the pain will always come. Then like the Psalmist I pray, *"Lord, turn my eyes from worthless things, and give me life through your word."* I read a book one time that talked about an environment of grace. That's what I have found in CR. A place where I can be myself and drop the mask. It is a place where I can come and share the worst about myself and people are going to love me more and not less. They aren't going to okay my sin, but they are going to love me through the process. I spent so many years being whoever people wanted me to be. I won't put that mask back on for anyone. I won't pretend to have everything all together. If I'm struggling I'm going to let my sponsor and accountability team know, because that's what has worked for me so far. These women have walked this journey with me and have taught me how to have healthy, godly relationships with women. I had to be taught that. I have also learned that if I put my fears, struggles, insecurities... in the light they lose their power. I thank the Lord that He doesn't look for perfect people, because His power works best in weakness. I still have to choose to walk through pain without turning to some old behavior or character defect to change the way I feel. I don't always get it right, some days all I can do is hold on and not use no matter what, but today my hope is not in how good I can be, but in how good my God is. So my encouragement to you is to get honest and don't lose hope. It doesn't matter what you've done, how long, or what's been done to you. You are not too far gone, you haven't done too much, Christ came to set every captive free. You don't have to be perfect, Healing and freedom is not equal to perfection it comes through daily surrender. As I surrender to Him, He changes me. So, even if your circumstances and everything else tells you different choose to believe Him. The thing you think is beyond hope is the exact thing He wants to set you free from. Not that it will all be zapped and you will never struggle again, but you can be free from the negative impact it has on your life. You don't have to be chained to it. He is good, He sees you, and He loves you. We are surrounded by desperate and hurting people bound by the chains of their addictions and secret sins. God wants to heal our hurts, set us free from our chains, and use us to bring hope to others. It never ceases to amaze me that my God would choose to use someone like me. So here's the hope I bring... There is a God. His love for you and me is so vast, so crazy, so unfailing that when we were at our darkest He chose to die for us. When we had nothing to offer He said I want that one. So, today, I choose to trust the One who died for me.

I'll end with this Psalm 30:11-12: *"You turned my wailing to dancing, you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. Lord my God, I will praise you forever."* Thank you for letting me share.

JOY'S TESTIMONY

I'm a believer in Jesus Christ who has found victory over anger, abuse, and denial and my name is Joy. The Facebook snapshot of my life would go like this: encounters with God throughout my childhood, spent 2 ½ years in Africa as a missionary kid, married at age 20 to a man I met at Bible College, raised 3 beautiful children, was a faithful, submissive wife, and served in church and the community sharing Jesus with various children ministries. Doesn't that sound good?

But the reality is that there were lies and woundings to my spirit that warped me. You see, I thought serving Jesus meant losing myself and pleasing others. Jesus first, Others second, Yourself last (JOY). That acrostic may be true, but the enemy used it in my life to make me feel unchosen.

I was born in Washington State to a family where church was the focus. I knew I was a sinner at a young age, as I was already developing habits of stealing and lying. I had learned about Jesus, God's Son who came to earth to pay the punishment for the things I did wrong. One night, at the age of 7, I knelt down by my bed and told Jesus I believed He was the God the Son and that He had come to pay for my wrong doings. I asked Him to truly save me from those things. And He did! But that didn't mean that I didn't struggle. For many years I thought that I had to work hard as a believer in Jesus, and only then would He accept me.

At age 9 my life changed dramatically as my parents became missionaries to the heart of Africa. This began a time where I would live at home for one month and then go off to boarding school for three months, repeating that cycle for the 2 ½ years we lived there. I lost the bond with my parents at this point: for me that meant I stopped sharing my joys and struggles with them. Several traumatic things happened to me then, but I never told anyone.

God tells me in His Word that He would never leave me or forsake me, but I chose not to think of Him or His way of thinking. You see, the enemy was whispering this lie in my ear that I would hear for decades: You are on your own. It started the first day I was at boarding school. I sought out my older brother for support, and instead he picked on me verbally to gain favor with boys his age. I got so angry I tried to attack him, but he just held my arms and they all laughed at me. I felt so helpless and abandoned that day. It was the beginning of a file in my brain that would fill with similar circumstances, just adding to my feeling abandoned and alone. But that was okay, I thought: I could handle things myself. I believe now that God was with me in that moment—and all the moments I have felt abandoned and alone. I can now see that He was protecting me from many things, and always waiting for me to reach out to Him in relationship.

I did have an incredible time with God once while at boarding school. I climbed up into the barn hayloft and read the entire book of Matthew when I was in fifth grade. It was such a time of spiritual love hovering over me as I read about Jesus. I did get in trouble for missing dinner that night, but it was well worth it.

One day my parents showed up at boarding school and told us my Grandma, my Mom's mother, was dying of cancer and we were going back to America. We left boarding school the next day and in three days were back in the States. We moved to Oregon to live there for 6 months while my Grandmother died of cancer. I was thrown into 6th grade in the middle of the year, not even understanding American culture. We lived up on a farm in the country, with no other kids but my two brothers. From 24 girlfriends at boarding school to two boys. I hated it, and was incredibly lonely. We then moved back to Washington and settled back into life, but I was distant with my family. I was still handling life on my own. Have you ever been around someone a lot but they wouldn't let you in to who they really were? That was what I was like during this time in my life. I had a big hole in my heart of loneliness, and it stayed with me the rest of my growing up. Instead of having that hole filled with

God, the only One who can truly fill our lonely hearts, I thought boys would fill it.

In high school I had a three year relationship with a guy that started good but went sour. We had sex after a year, and then he began treating my body as if it belonged to him. I had some date rape experiences, and a lot of verbal and emotional abuse at that time. This time the enemy whispered SHAME into my ear, and I believed it so much I almost committed suicide twice. Both times, the Lord saved me. One time, I literally felt hugged by something supernatural with a warmth I can only describe as the love of God filled me. I decided I had to perform well for God to feel loved by Him, and after high school went off to a Bible College where all they taught was the Bible and missionary preparation.

I met my future husband at Bible College in Iowa. He was there for the second semester just to bide time while he sent off resumes for jobs. He was hired in the Chicago area. When he made clear his interest in me, I told him about my SHAME, yet he accepted me anyway. You see, the denomination we were from was very strong against "fornication"—sex before marriage, and I felt I was damaged goods. I married at 20 and went to live in the Chicago area, going to college for a while before I stopped to have children. I began to have jealousy during this time of my husband's attention of preteen girls at church, youth camps we served at, and weeknight church programs for the youth. He always told me I was crazy and something was wrong with me, and I believed him. A fuzzy sense of being unchosen was to follow me throughout the marriage, however. Jesus says in John 15: You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you...but I was focused on what my husband thought of me, not God. My identity—who I was—had to do with what others thought of me. But that is not true—my identity is truly decided by God and what He thinks of me. And what He says in the Bible about all of us is: You are loved with an everlasting love. Jer. 31:3

Two years into marriage, we had a son and three months later added 2 foster boys to the mix, 3 and 4 years old. At this point my life became unmanageable. I was so angry with the lack of freedom, being cooped up all day with the demands of motherhood, while my husband worked and went to night school for his master's degree. I realized at this point that I wanted to beat the foster kids, I would get so angry with them. I would dream of beating them, and began to feel like I was losing touch with reality, I was so angry. I'm thankful that we were legally not allowed to touch them, but once I did spank one of them, screaming, "I hate you!" I felt awful about it, and after a year we gave them up. I felt like such a failure. I was so angry with God, who I saw as having slammed me into a brick wall when all I'd wanted to do was serve Him! At this point I began to realize how depraved I was, as Jeremiah 17:9 points out: The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick, who can understand it? Even though I believed Jesus took the punishment for my wrong doings and died for them on the cross, I was living a life where I was in charge, and using my own coping skills. I was not listening to Jesus' voice, leading me to love, joy, and peace in my life. Something was very wrong.

Soon after the birth of my second son was when my husband's mental health started to deteriorate. He was put on medication, but we both knew: I was the answer to his anxiety. I began my decades of taking care of him at this time. Whenever he had trouble working on his master's thesis at work, I would pack up the kids and hang out with him, trying to keep the young children quiet so he could be calm and work. It was true insanity inside and out, but I bought into the lie of the enemy: You are the answer to his problems. He would stay at work as long as he needed to, and I would encourage him to come home whenever he was ready. This became the norm, where it was not uncommon for him to come home between 1 and 3am. And although I felt like a single mom, I ignored my feelings and tried to be his support. My thinking was, "Help him keep his job so that we can survive."

We moved to Ohio around this time, and I finally came in contact with some spiritual freedom materials, and people at our church that desired us to be free from the mess we often walk in as Christians. Although my husband didn't buy into it, I had a lot of un-forgiveness and bitterness broken off me those years. I felt like a new believer, where the Bible became alive to me, and I was growing. Finally I started to be filled with the love, joy and peace God gives freely to believers. But after the birth of my daughter, I soon got swept up into not caring for my own needs and doing too much for everyone else. It took a toll on me physically and mentally. One day I confessed to a woman in my church that I just

wanted to take pills and sleep forever, I was so tired of life. Thankfully she truly heard me and got help for me. I was in that severe depressive episode for several months, where therapy and medications became my daily routine. Dear church ladies watched my three kids for me most of the day.

Through therapy, I began to start taking care of myself, and even started standing up for myself with my husband, only to have him twist my words to the point that I would walk away completely confused and wondering what was wrong with me. I was beginning my life of living with mental, verbal, and emotional abuse at home. I actually let him control my mind with his manipulating words. There was so much anger in my husband, and occasionally he hit walls and doors where I was on the other side. Although I was never physically hit, I still felt it emotionally, knowing he really wanted to hit me. He went through times of paranoia, and not making sense. I started to live life in fear. It was very hard in those years to keep three children under 5 years old to be quiet so Daddy could be okay, but that was my job when he was home. This was not the model of marriage or parenting that God desired for me, but I was leaning on my own understanding and coping skills, and not trusting God.

His mental state led him to struggle with suicidal thoughts because work had become overwhelming to him, so we decided to take what we thought would be a less stressful job in San Antonio. **Why do we think changing our environment will change us? We just bring the mess of ourselves with us.** The job was not less stressful. During those three years, we went into marital counseling and I almost left him due to him spending hours with young girls on the internet, 'ministering' to them. The old lie I had believed long ago again surfaced: I was unchosen and not worth being cherished. I actually chose to attempt suicide then as well, and drove to a secluded area. I told Satan he could take my life but he could never have my faith. God placed an old photograph of some children on a rubbish pile near me—and when I saw it I was able to snap me back to reality and remember my children. I drove home. A friend begged me to not to leave my husband, telling me her parents had separated over and over through the years and it had deeply affected her. I chose to stay. I was so lonely those years, not having close friends until the very end of our time there.

We moved to Longview three years later for my husband to try yet another job, and see if this one would be better. This job was a career shift—into teaching at a university. Then he could have summers off and rest, right? It was worth a try. Emails with a 14 year old girl were discovered and he almost lost his job. We went into marital counseling yet again.

After 21 years of marriage, circumstances brought my husband to start confessing his infidelity through the years. I was devastated. All this time I had been holding him up and supporting him, and this is what he had done? I truly struggled with my self-worth, because I had placed my self-worth in what he thought of me. We were divorced after 23 years of marriage, and I plunged into finishing my teaching degree and working, with two kids in high school and one in college.

Thankfully, at this point I had a fantastic support group, and through counseling and forgiveness was working my way through the grief and pain of the years. When he moved into the house two doors down from me, I tried to move but couldn't, as my jobs as a housecleaner and painter were not considered stable enough to get a loan for a home, or rent. It was difficult. I lived in fear, feeling stalked a lot of the time.

The first three years after the divorce were rough. I finally graduated with a teaching degree and then couldn't get a teaching position for a year. That first year I substitute taught, sold my home and lived off the proceeds, moved into a friend's bedroom and put all my things in storage. My daughter started developing mental illness herself, needing to be hospitalized, and undergoing medicine changes that were very difficult on her, and extremely difficult financially for me, as my insurance didn't cover mental illness. I also had a car accident during this time that totaled my vehicle. The people at my church rallied around me, raising enough money to have a friend's 'lemon' car repaired so I could have it. Through all this, I cried out to God and saw Him come through, but I still struggled with feelings of, "You'll always be on your own. Life will never work out for you. You're just one of THOSE people, who others pity. God doesn't really care for you." **In my life, I truly think my own thoughts in my mind have been my worst enemy.**

After 3 years of divorce, when I had finally found a teaching position and a place to live, I was invited to Celebrate Recovery, a Christian recovery program that helps people with their struggles. It sounded like a great place to minister in, I thought! But before I came, circumstances occurred which brought up the inferno of anger within me again. I began to face the fact that I was not better, even though the chaos of my life had settled down! Romans 7:18 says: for I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. That is where I was.

At that point I was furious with God. I had tried to be healed from my past in my 20s and through the years after the divorce, only to have a circumstance happen, and I was right back where I started. Whether at Celebrate Recovery meetings or my church meetings, I couldn't sing during worship—I didn't believe in a God they sang of there. I was afraid to say much to others of what was going on inside of me because I thought I'd cause others to turn from God.

One night, I decided I would give God one more try, and if it didn't work, I was walking away from all of it, God included. I took a chip at Celebrate Recovery for HOPE. I started a step study—really it was a Bible study—and got a mentor, or sponsor. Although I had worked through a lot of forgiveness toward my ex-husband, I finally realized that I had not forgiven myself, or seen how I had ignored the path I was on (denial). There were so many signs of what was happening to me in my life, and I began to see that the Lord had been trying to get my attention about the wrong directions of my reacting to life, and I had ignored Him. I had lived a life of passivity—letting life happen to me, and feeling powerless to stop it. Now I began to realize MY PART, and how I had contributed to the mess of my life by doing NOTHING. I began to face that, and wept heavily over the years I had wasted, not seeing where I truly was. I then was able to realize it was not God I was angry at, or my ex-husband, but myself. And I was able through the grace of God to forgive myself for believing lies and living in denial—throughout all of my adult life to that point.

I also was able to discover many of the lies I had believed as truth for me through the years, and how detrimental they were. I even began to see all the moving—from Africa to America, from state to state every 3-5 years in my marriage—as a deep pain, causing me to lose so many relationships, and feel so alone. I had tried to remedy that pain by putting walls of protection around myself. Walls that were wounding to my marriage. I even choose churches where others had the same protective walls I had and were comfortable with them!

I began noticing myself begin to change. I was starting to be able to sing the songs again in the worship times. God was at work! Praise God, He was not going to leave me in the mess I was—He was delivering me into the new creation I was meant to be!

I now spend time with God daily, and my anger has been replaced with Joy. I know what to do with it when it does return. I have given God my all, and am learning more and more what that means, as He keeps me out of denial and working through my issues DAILY. It is so freeing to walk in honesty with myself! I now want to serve the Lord out of pure gratitude for what He has done for me.

If you are reading this, and you have come to a place where life just isn't working right for you anymore—you are in the right place! There is hope here—great hope: Romans 5:6 says: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." His death and rising again has paved the way for us to be FREE from our sins, making us new creations in Him, filled with love, joy and peace!

So don't give up hope. Learn from my story and know your life can be changed too—it's what God longs to do. Give Him a chance. You won't regret it.

ROBBIE'S TESTIMONY

My name is Robbie and I'm a grateful believer in Jesus Christ in recovery from a lifetime of drug addiction. I'm here to share with you God's story of redemption in my life. Specifically, Marijuana and Meth are the drugs that my body prefers. Before recovery, my life had become **completely unmanageable and I lived a life of complete insanity**. I was staying up until 3:00 a.m. in the morning, waking back up at 6:00 a.m., averaging three hours of sleep a night for two plus years, seven days a week. I was driving my beautiful, one and only little girl around high. I was transporting heavy equipment high, and I avoided interacting with people as much as I could. My personality had become irritable and discontent and I was full of anger, rage, resentment and fear. I was selfish and self-absorbed and didn't care how my behavior was effecting others. All the while, I didn't think I had a problem; however, I certainly thought everyone around me had a problem. I took most of my anger and aggression out on my wife, Wendy. We had countless arguments and I blamed her constantly for my peculiar behavior. I never wanted to drive as a family anywhere. I always took a separate vehicle so that I could either arrive late or leave early. My wife confronted me multiple times about my behavior changes and chaotic way of life, but I shifted the focus from me to her and blamed her for everything. She asked me over and over again if I was using drugs, but I denied the allegations and continued to lie and continued to use. In fact, my entire life was a big lie. I couldn't be honest with myself, let alone other people. I isolated from my family and my friends and used work as my decoy. My life was spinning out of control and I knew I was about to lose everything, including my marriage, but I couldn't stop the vicious cycle of my addiction. I continued to risk it all for one more high.

My life of addiction actually started at the age of 13. My father was a severe alcoholic and my mother was the textbook enabler. My parents were so wrapped up in my father's problems that I basically was left to raise myself. I started hanging out with older boys in my neighborhood and I found my place within that group of boys. I no longer felt lonely. I actually felt accepted, and I especially liked the things they introduced me to. I started using marijuana and smoking cigarettes with these boys. It became everything I looked forward to. At the age of 17, four of my best friends died in a jeep wreck. About three months later, another friend committed suicide. Drugs and alcohol played a role in all these deaths, but I continued to use marijuana and experimented with other types of drugs. The hole in my heart and soul that I was trying to fill only grew bigger. I left Longview at the age of 18 and moved to California to work with my uncle painting houses while pursuing a career in golf. Believe it or not, my uncle and his crew also used drugs so I continued to feed my habit while living in California. I worked really hard on my golf game and moved to Georgia to start my apprenticeship with the PGA.

I continued to use marijuana while living in Georgia. Although I was on a positive career path, I always had drugs to lean on. I honestly thought as long as I didn't become an alcoholic, like my father, I was doing o.k. It never occurred to me that I just substituted one drug for another (alcohol for marijuana). It never occurred to me that I was already an addict.

My father passed away in 1994 (he was a recovering alcoholic) and his death took a toll on me. I held resentment towards him for his alcoholism and for not being there for me while growing up. However, at the same time, I desperately wanted his approval and his love. I hated that he finally got sober only to die a few years later. The void I was trying to fill continued to grow and I continued to stuff it with drugs.

Church and God were never a consistent part of my life while growing up. I attended church on occasion with my mom, but the things of God were never a part of my life or our home. I believed there was a God, but I had never really met Him through a personal salvation experience. I met my wife, Wendy, in 1996, while I was visiting my mom in Longview. We had a long distance relationship for about 9 months and were married in June of 1997. Wendy moved to Georgia and we lived there until 2003. The entire time, she never knew about my secret life with drugs. My life with God took a

new twist; however, because I married into a family where God was the foundation. My new in-laws were in the ministry so I had to adopt new ways of practicing a faith that I didn't really have. I am a people pleaser by nature so I wanted to be accepted by Wendy, her family and anyone that I was around. I've always been polite and helpful to other people. Deep down, though, I was insecure and **desperately** wanted to be accepted by others. I became good at being a chameleon; my shades changed depending on who I was around. When Wendy and I moved from Georgia back to Longview in 2003, the stakes were much higher. I was now living next door to my in-laws and the mask I wore became more and more challenging. We went to church, but I never wanted to be there. I sat in Sunday school and in church and listened to countless messages, but the only thing I thought about was where we would eat for lunch and my next high. The things of God didn't mean anything to me and my heart became more and more cold.

Around 2010, the hole in my heart was no longer satisfied with marijuana. The financial crisis that hit America took a toll on me and my family. I had a thriving dozer business that kept us abreast, but in order to keep the finances intact, I felt I needed to accept every job that came my way. The stress was overwhelming and I was introduced to something to relieve that stress. I was introduced to Meth and I knew the first time I tried it that it was the drug for me, and I never would be without it. Meth is in the speed category of drugs and made me feel extremely alert day and night. I bought into the lie that I needed this drug to maintain meeting the demands of my dozer business. With this drug, came obvious behavior changes and physical changes. My wife knew something was terribly wrong and confronted me countless times, but I continued denying I had a problem and blamed her for my behavior changes. My lowest point hit when my wife did an intervention on me in August of 2012. She knew she could no longer accept the lies and she knew that she must get to the root of the problem. She suspected that I was either having an affair or that I was using drugs. She ruled out the affair by having me followed by a private investigator. The next step was an intervention that required a drug test, and I failed it miserably. That was one of the lowest days of my life. I fought hard to not take that drug test, but it was inevitable. My back was finally against the wall and everything around me was collapsing. I promised my wife I could stop using the drugs on my own; however, after many more failed drug tests, she knew the problems were **far worse than she ever imagined**. My father-in-law, who loved me unconditionally, knew I was struggling. I'll never forget what he said to me. He said, "Robbie, I love you the same today as I did when I first met you. My view of you has not changed and I love you unconditionally." We went to lunch one afternoon and we discussed my relationship with God. After several hours of talking, it became clear to me that I didn't have a personal relationship with God. I believed in "a God," but I had never accepted Him as my personal Savior. My father-in-law led me to Christ on October 12th of 2012. I knew it was for real!! However, my struggles with addiction were becoming more and more of a strain and no matter how many times I promised myself and my wife that I wouldn't do it, the **vicious cycle** continued. Although I had accepted Jesus as my personal Savior, I was still convinced that I could do certain things on my own, without His help. After countless lies, Wendy finally asked me to leave in December of 2012. She told me she loved me and did not want a divorce, but that she and my daughter, Brooke, could no longer live with an active drug user. We separated and I temporarily moved in with my mom.

During this time of separation, I prayed that God would lead me to a place of recovery. I found a place called Benchmark in Austin, Texas. Wendy and I drove to Benchmark to check it out and we both felt the Lord had placed Benchmark in our lives. It was a 90 day, 12 step recovery program. I knew that if I was going to beat meth addiction, it would require more than just a 30 day program. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. It took until the 45th day for me to really realize and admit that I was an addict and had been since the age of 13. I kept thinking I had control of it. I kept thinking that because I still had a job and wasn't living on the streets, that I wasn't a "true" addict. You see, meth is more of a mental addiction than a physical addiction. Working the 12 step program at Benchmark was the most challenging thing I've ever done. I had to face things that I didn't want to face, but with God's strength, and the prayers of my family, I completed the program. Upon completion, I immediately returned to my family and was received with open arms. I immediately started attending Celebrate Recovery at New Beginnings as well as AA. **I'm happy to report that I will celebrate 3 years of sobriety this January 21, 2016.** God HAS and IS doing a tremendous work in my life.

Without my personal relationship with God, I wouldn't be sober. THAT IS A FACT!! Let me repeat that, I needed a Savior and I needed to reach the point that I gave Him EVERYTHING. HE is now my foundation and my rock. HE is the one who now fills the hole or the void. I've turned my life and my will over to God and I pray every day that He leads my way in everything I do. Benchmark was a tool that God provided to help me, which was crucial for me because God knew my mind needed to be clear of drugs for a lengthy period of time for Him to do His work. Benchmark was a tool, and I give God ALL the glory for restoring me and my family. In addition, I want to express the importance of God's earthly tools. You see, although God delivered me from my drug addiction, He expects me to do the things He has placed on this earth to help keep me sober. This means that He holds me accountable to attend CR and AA and to continue mentoring and sponsoring other people. This isn't just a temporary commitment, it's a lifetime commitment. God knows that I'm vulnerable to Satan's attacks through drugs and He expects me to rely on HIM and the tools that He has provided through the 12 steps of recovery.

I'm a "Changed" man and I'm a "New" man. The old has passed away and the new stands here today to say that God can do anything!! My wife says that real change can be seen through actions and not by words. I can stand here today and tell you that my actions now tell the story. I no longer fear. I've placed my life into the hands of God. I now sleep at least eight hours a night, I'm no longer full of anger and resentment, and I have an actual relationship with my wife, my family, and my friends. In fact, my relationships now go beyond the surface; they actually have depth to them. I LOVE going to church and I surround myself with other believers. I no longer have to wear a mask or change my colors. **I have a freedom in God that I've never known before.** I ask God daily to remove my selfish/self-absorbed behaviors and to be sensitive to the needs of others. He has certainly helped me in that area along with many other areas of my life. If you had asked me several years ago to stand up and give my testimony, I would have said, "No". First, because I didn't have a testimony to share, and Second, I would have been too scared to stand up in front of a group of people. Now, God has given me the **desire** to share. In fact, I think it would be selfish on my part not to share what God has done in my life. He has restored me and my family and I rejoice in that. Since arriving home from Benchmark in April of 2013, I've had the privilege to share my testimony several times. In addition, God has placed many recovering addicts in my life that I mentor/sponsor. These relationships have grown into true friendships and we hold one another accountable. Just recently, I was asked to be a co-leader at the Celebrate Recovery at New Beginnings Baptist Church (our home church). In addition, I continue working with addicts through the Men's Hi-way 80 rescue mission along with other organizations. I'm so excited that God opened the doors for me to minister in these settings.

I now look to God as not only my Savior, but my friend, my confidant, and my Father. I actually take His words and His truths and apply them to my life, daily. I consciously make a decision to turn my will and my life over to God on a daily basis knowing that I can't do ANYTHING without Him or His strength. I remind myself that I'm not in control of ANYTHING and that God is the only one who can direct the show. I'm convinced that any life run on self-will leads to disaster; but a life run on God's will can only be a success. I take this journey one day at a time and each and every day I pray for the will of God to be carried out in my life and for God to give me the strength to trust in Him for everything I need. I no longer have a void or a hole to fill. That hole is full of the promises that God has given me. One of those promises is Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you, Robbie, they are plans for good and not for evil, to prosper you, not to harm you, and to give you a future and a hope."

My encouragement to each of you is that with Christ, nothing is impossible. Addiction or whatever your struggle, is very real, but with God and the tools He provides, you have hope for a new and a better future.

I'm not ashamed of my past. My past doesn't define me. It is because of my past that I found God. It is through the pain and the struggles that I found purpose in my life. My purpose is to share hope and to spread the Word that God can deliver, He can restore, and He can Redeem. God wants to use me and He wants to use **YOU** for His glory. Your story is important and your story can inspire others. I'm a recovering addict and I'm happy to say that through God's mercy and grace, I can be of help to other people who struggle. My life has purpose and my life has hope. Please know that your life has purpose too!

WENDY'S TESTIMONY

My name is Wendy, and I'm a grateful believer in Jesus Christ in recovery for co-dependency and anxiety, and I'm not ashamed to share my story. I grew up in a Christian home with parents who were and still are in the ministry. I accepted Christ as my Savior at an early age. In fact, I was only five years old. I clearly remember crying as I walked down the aisle at the overwhelming calling of the Holy Spirit.

I was fortunate to have grown up in a stable, Christian home. My parents have always been rock solid in their faith and have never wavered from God's calling. Although I had this stable foundation, I also had a lot of pressure because I wore the title, "preacher's kid." I often had people telling me that my parent's would be disappointed if I acted less than perfect. I adopted those words and placed a TREMENDOUS amount of pressure on myself to not disappoint.

In second grade, I began doubting my salvation and actually asked the Lord into my heart once again. This was the first sign (that I can recall) of growing insecurities within me. I loved the Lord and I remember always wanting to please Him, BUT I also had an equally **(if not greater)** desire to please my parent's.

As I entered high school, peer pressure began to mount. My parents had always been strict and somewhat overbearing in their approach to discipline. I was born with a "mind of my own" and was the child who was stubborn and wanted to do things "My Way." The philosophy of doing things "MY WAY" has been a **running theme** throughout my life. I slowly began compromising my values. Thankfully, due to my parent's reins on me, I was fortunate that I did not go TOO far outside the boundaries. I was never promiscuous in high school or college and I never had the desire to try drugs; however, I did occasionally drink alcohol with my friends because I liked the way it made me feel.

As I think about my testimony, I can't help but recognize a chain of events that led to some of my choices that I will share with you. **You never really realize how one thing affects the other until you reflect on the past; and at times, buried memories.**

During my sophomore year, I was asked to the prom by my brother's best friend. I'll never forget that night because I was faced with a problem that was WAY too big for me to handle. We had left the prom and we were supposed to meet my brother and other friends; however, I was driven to an isolated road where my brother's best friend attempted to rape me. I remember fighting him off asking him what in the heck he was doing, and he just suddenly stopped and started the car and we were off. Although the attempted rape was unsuccessful, my world changed that evening. I remember telling myself that no one could ever know about what had just happened (especially my parent's...I felt they would die if they knew). I also didn't want my brother to know. This would be my secret and I would never mention it to anyone. But, with this secret, fear and insecurities continued to mount.

During my senior year in high school, I had two things happen to me that would continue to influence my course for the future. 1) I started dating a guy (who I will call Lee) who was a freshman in college, and 2) I began working part-time at a store located in the Longview mall. One evening, it was just the store manager and me closing. As we were walking through the store room to leave the building, he grabbed me and pushed me against the wall. He forced me to do things to him that I knew nothing about. I was sexually assaulted that night and I was mortified and humiliated. I couldn't believe this grown, married man with children, could possibly force me to do the things that I did. I left that evening and went home. My best friend, "S", was waiting for me. She said, "What in the world happened to you?" you look like you have seen a ghost. I told her what happened and she said I needed to tell my parent's. I told her it would kill my parent's if they knew. I told her in no uncertain terms that NO ONE would ever hear about this. I told her to forget about it and to never bring it up again. This was yet another secret that I would carry and pretend never happened. With this secret, my fears and insecurities were growing at an ever rapid pace.

I continued dating Lee through my senior year and graduated. Lee was really good to me in the beginning. He seemed to really care for me, and my love for him continued to grow. We decided to go off to college together so I enrolled in a private Christian university. One thing I had going for me was the desire to do good in school. I loved school and I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to major in Psychology and Minor in business. My long-term goal was to become a school counselor and to open a private practice on the side. I excelled in college, but other things began to happen that would continue to feed my insecurities and fears. Lee began to use emotional abuse as his tool to keep me around. He delighted in making me think he had other girls on the side. In fact, he did have one girl who he continued to correspond with. Due to my insecurities, I felt that no one else would be interested in me so I held on to Lee like an oxygen mask. As we continued to date, he never acted interested in sex. As I stated before, I wasn't a promiscuous person and I held the value of abstaining from sex until I was married. However, that was growing harder and harder to do. When Lee and I would discuss this matter, he would always tell me that something was wrong with me. He would say, "If you would just lose weight, I may want to be with you", or "if you would just exercise more, I may want to be with you", or my favorite was "if you would just be more out-going, I may want to be with you." I was never good enough for Lee, but I wanted to force the relationship so I set out to change things about myself to become more attractive to him. Unfortunately, **I could never get it right**. No matter how many changes I made, I was still left unwanted and my insecurities were out of control. Toward the end of my sophomore year in college, I began having excruciating fears. It's really hard to explain, but my fears were totally unmanageable. I was fine during the daylight hours, but when nighttime hit, I was a complete basket case. I was living in a dorm with a roommate, and Lee lived in an apartment off campus. I began staying at his apartment every night because I couldn't sleep by myself. I wasn't able to discuss these fears with anyone because I was so embarrassed. I felt the only way I was going to survive the fears was to stay with Lee. Although we shared the same bed during that time, he still never wanted me and this exasperated my fears and led to a dependence on him that was totally dysfunctional. That summer, I came home and discussed my fears with my parent's. At the time, it never occurred to any of us that I may need to see a doctor and get on some medication to help me through this crisis in my life. Instead, my parent's began working with me on my faith in God. My mom said, we can pray for you as we have always done, but at some point, you are going to have to become dependent on God and your faith is going to have to be in Him, not in us. She was right; I had never **developed** a deep personal relationship with the Lord. When I began compromising my values and doing things "My way," outside of God's will, I stopped communicating with God. I began taking my mom's advice and I started talking with the Lord. I began memorizing scripture and believing that God would rescue me from my fears. I spent the entire summer in God's word and I began applying His word to my life. When I went back to college for my junior year, my fears subsided and I began to grow. However, it wasn't too long after being back, that my relationship with God began taking a backseat. Although the fears didn't come back, my insecurities and my dependence on Lee were still at an all-time high. I was fortunate to have a close friend in college named Mark. Our friendship had started my freshman year, but by the time I hit my junior year, we both knew our relationship was more than just a friendship. However, my off and on relationship with Lee and my complete dysfunctional dependence on Lee stood in the way of what could have been a very healthy relationship with Mark. I think God placed Mark in my life for a very special reason and that was to show me that I was loveable and beautiful just the way I was and that changing my colors for the approval of other's would only lead to further heartache.

I graduated from college and went on to pursue a master's degree in school counseling. But, before starting my master's degree, I wanted to take a semester off so I went to another college to stay with my best friend, "S". During this time, Lee and I still had our off and on relationship, and I was still struggling with insecurity. One night, I had too much to drink and I met a guy who swept me off my feet. He made me feel beautiful, so I finally fell to the pressure of sex. The next day I learned that he was married and had a child. Exactly one week later, Lee came to visit and used sex as his weapon to gain control of me because we were broken up at the time. **Wow! Choices outside the will of God have severe consequences.** Several weeks later, I found out I was pregnant. My world was turned upside down! As soon as I confirmed the pregnancy, I felt there was only 1 choice to make....to have an abortion. My friend "S" told me that I had other choices, but my mind was made up. I had several reasons for

this firm decision, 1) I could never tell my parent's because I would be such a disappointment, 2) I had a career plan and nothing was going to stop me from pursuing my master's degree, and 3) I wasn't sure who the father was. Wow!!! How in the world did I ever get here? Within weeks of finding out I was pregnant, I had the abortion. "S" and Lee were with me. I remember telling them in the car: 1) this would never be spoken of again; 2) this did not really happen and 3) I would take this secret to the grave and I expected them to do the same. I walked away from that abortion clinic and closed a door that I thought would never be re-opened.

I went on to marry Lee and received my master's degree in counseling. Lee and I were married for 3 ½ years and it was the most miserable and excruciating 3 ½ years I had faced in my life. Lee continued doing the same things (making me think he had other women), he never wanted to be intimate and I continued to try and "fix" myself for him to want me. I never spoke of my misery with my parent's until the day Lee and I separated. After several times of separating and getting back together, I called my parents and said, "Mom, I know you and Dad will be disappointed, but I can do one of two things. I can either divorce Lee or I can stay in the marriage, but if I stay, I will certainly take me life"...AND I MEANT IT. My mom and dad realized the severity of the situation and they stood beside me as I went through the process of a painful divorce. My parents (you know...the ones who I thought couldn't handle my mistakes and disappointments) were there for me like champions, loving me unconditionally. Through the divorce, I finally took the step of going to my own counseling. I spent a year in counseling working through my insecurities, my fears, and regaining my self-worth. I was given a host of tools and I walked away from that year of counseling a very different woman. I emerged as a vibrant, independent woman who never again would depend on a man. Although this was good, I never really included the Lord as part of my tools moving forward. I never considered that I had left the most important person out of my counseling....Jesus!! Again, I was operating in "MY WILL."

Upon happen-stance, I met a guy named "R". I had already told myself that I was not going to date... men were off my radar during that time, but here came "R". He reminded me so much of Mark (a gentle, loving soul who loved me just the way I was....my quirks and all). He didn't want to change anything about me internally or externally...AND, at this time in my life; I would have definitely told him where to go if he had. He was living in Georgia at the time, but was in Longview helping his mom make a move to a different home. We met through mutual friends. It was love at first sight and we dated long distance for 9 months and then married in 1997. I moved to Georgia and worked as a school counselor while I pursued my LPC license as a private counselor. It was while in Georgia that I fulfilled my dream of working in private practice on the side. "R" told me he was a Christian when we married, but neither of us was pursuing God. Instead, we were operating on "OUR WILLS," pursuing OUR careers and we were extremely happy in our marriage just the way things were. After 7 years in Georgia, we moved back to Texas to begin working in a family business and to pursue having a child. At the age of 35, I became pregnant with our one and only child who will be turning 11 years of age this January. Once back in Texas, we became involved in church and I began working on my personal relationship with the Lord. With the birth of our child, I had a burning desire to change my priorities and to make Jesus first in my life. The move back, starting in new professions, along with having a child, presented new challenges for us. As time passed, things began changing in our relationship. "R" began becoming a different person. It was a slow fade, but the behavior changes were becoming more and more evident. By the time 2010 rolled around, I didn't recognize "R" physically or emotionally. He had become mean (almost violent) and he had become extremely thin (almost skeleton like). Every time I approached him about these changes, he would blame me. It was always MY fault for why he became angry and it was MY fault that our marriage was falling apart. He was coming in every night at 2:00 and 3:00 a.m. and getting back up at 6:00 a.m. seven days a week. This went on for over two years. He was constantly working and was never around. I had literally become a single mother. We ignored one another most of the time, but inevitably, we would have explosive fights. I was even more bewildered and devastated when I found pornography on his phone. It was like I was drowning, barely able to breathe, and again, I thought SERIOUSLY, there HAS GOT TO BE something wrong with me (**I never seem to be good enough**). Again, I took the road of not telling anyone (not my parents and not even my best of friends). No one knew the hell I was living in. It was like flashbacks to all the terrible memories with Lee. Once again, I found myself in a relationship where I was the scapegoat

and I set out to fix me. That once vibrant, independent woman, who emerged victoriously after Lee and I divorced, had slowly faded away. I couldn't understand what was happening. But, this time, because I was growing in the Lord, I knew that I had Jesus and instead of doing it "My Way" I was FINALLY open to doing it "His Way." I had come to a place in my life where I was able to admit that I was powerless, that my life had become completely unmanageable and that ONLY God could restore me and my life. I prayed that God would reveal the "culprit" of "R's" changes and to lead and guide me. I was smart enough to know that this problem was HUGE and it wasn't just me. But, I also knew that if I got to the "real" reason, a can of worms would be open, and life as I knew it would forever change. I was absolutely terrified. I continued praying to God and begging him for direction. One day, He made it clear. He told me I had to confide in someone and that it was time to open the can of worms. I confided in my brother and we both agreed I needed to hire a private investigator. We both knew it could only be 3 things: 1) drugs, 2) an affair, or 3) just a really bad marriage, OR ALL THREE!!! I told my brother that I truly didn't believe it was drugs and that my hunch was an affair. After a week of the private investigator following "R", we ruled out the affair. Drugs and a bad marriage were the only two reasonable things left on the table. My brother and sister-in-law came down from Amarillo and we had an intervention. I honestly believed that day that "R" wasn't on drugs. After an extremely painful intervention, it came to light that "R" was addicted to Methamphetamines and marijuana. I absolutely couldn't believe it. My brother told me that my parent's had to know. That was the hardest day of my life. I was SO incredibly numb and so shocked. This was August of 2012. "R" was terrified at losing me and our child so he promised he would stop using. However, we know the vicious cycle of addiction, especially when you don't have a higher power to turn your will over to, and "R" was no exception. Between August and October of 2012 he continued to use and I continued giving him chances. My parents were there 100% giving their support and unconditional love. My father met with "R" in October and told him he loved him unconditionally and that he didn't think any less of him due to his addiction. My father asked him about his salvation experience. "R" came to realize that he didn't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. After a long discussion, "R" asked Jesus into his heart. He tried overcoming the drug addiction on his own, but the vicious cycle continued to overwhelm him. In December of 2012, I realized that I had to set boundaries and I had to be a protector of me and our child. After much prayer, God gave me permission to ask "R" to leave. I told him that I wasn't seeking a divorce, but I could no longer have an active drug user in our home. We stayed separated through Christmas and I continued to pray that God would intervene. I loved "R", but I couldn't fix him, only God could fix this seemingly impossible problem. "R" came to me after Christmas and said he found a 90 day rehab center in Austin. I told him I was completely supportive and he entered the program in January 2013. The next three months were some of the hardest days of my life. Mid-way through his rehab, the counselor called me and said that "R" had been addicted to drugs since he was 13 and that he had never gone a day without abusing some sort of drug. He also went on to say that "R" was one of the toughest and most stubborn addicts that he had ever worked with. I said, "OH REALLY, YOU THINK"? On day 45, "R" still couldn't admit he had an addiction problem. I remember trying to go to sleep that night. I didn't have any tears left to cry and I just felt numb. So many thoughts flooded my mind. I met and married a man that had a secret drug problem that I never knew about. How could I possibly be that naïve? How could I have been married to a man that deceived me from day one? How could I ever trust him again? I felt like I was married to a man I didn't even REALLY know. What other secrets do I not know about? I remember telling God that I didn't even know how to pray. My mind was so jumbled and I was so exhausted. All I could think about was all the articles I had read about meth addiction. The odds of beating it were so low. I just thought, what am I thinking? This will never work. I have a child to think about and I refuse to live life in chaos. I remember saying, God I don't know what to do. It seems my only choice is to seek a divorce. If he can't admit he has a problem after 45 days, the writing is CERTAINLY on the wall as to how this is going to turn out! And even if he does recover from drug addiction, how will I ever trust him again and how will I ever forgive him for the way he has treated me? How can our marriage survive without trust? God, I don't know what to say other than I will never turn away from you. No matter what happens, God, my life is dependent on you....NOT man. I love you, Lord, and I so desire to honor you. I refuse to become bitter over this and I refuse to let this situation turn me away from you. Please help me God, please guide me. My human side...my logical side, was overtaken that night by the presence of the Lord. He didn't speak audibly, but He may as well have. He said, **S T A Y** (those four letters kept running across my forehead.... STAY). As I kept lying there,

He nudged me and said, "TRUST ME and let me do the work. This is truly a hopeless situation when looking through earthly eyes, but MY POWER can restore anything." He said, "Look through MY eyes." I told God, o.k., I trust you, and I'll stay until you direct me otherwise.

I knew that night that God was going to do some powerful things. I said I'm willing to stay God, but only you can do a work in him AND me. If your plan is for us to stay married then you are going to have to change MY heart because even if he stays sober, if I can't trust him and I can't forgive him, our marriage will never work. God reminded me of Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." I clung to that scripture and I clung to the fact that I would be o.k. no matter what happened. For the first time, it was evident that I was dependent on God and not on a man. It was evident that I had finally turned everything over to God and I was willing and ready for him to take the wheel. I knew no matter the outcome that my life would be o.k. as long as God was in the driver's seat. Within a week, the rehab counselor called to tell me that "R" was making positive changes and that he finally admitted he had a serious drug addiction. From that point, "R" worked fiercely in the program. Meanwhile, God was doing AMAZING things in my heart concerning forgiveness. In addition, I began an Alanon program and started my journey with the 12 steps. On April 20, 2013, "R" returned home from rehab. I was so nervous to see him, but as soon as our eyes met, God unveiled a new man. I know that sounds so strange and I know it sounds too good to be true, but I'm being completely transparent. God knew that I needed to be able to embrace "R" from day one (no barriers – just complete trust in God that He knew what He was doing). From that day, God removed the trust issues from me. From that day, my love for "R" was even stronger than the day we married. Just like I had buried secrets from my past, he had secrets, too, and they all boiled down to the same things....not wanting to disappoint and desperately wanting to be accepted. One thing this journey has taught both of us is to live transparent lives. Secrets are of the enemy. Satan wants to kill, steal and destroy and sin and secrets will ultimately destroy individuals and relationships. Satan knew that he couldn't get me in the way of alcohol, drug, or sex addiction, but he did know that he could chain me with self-worth issues and feed me the lie that I needed to be perfect and never disappoint, especially my parents. However, we serve a powerful God who can break those chains and set us free from the lies of Satan. When sin and struggles are brought to light, God can bring such good out of them. Romans 8:28 "For ALL things work together for the good to them that love the Lord."

We both continue in recovery and we celebrate our recovery here at CR every Tuesday night. In addition, God continues to work in my life through the 12 step process. I recently participated in an 8 week program called "Surrendering the Secret" – recovery from abortion. I finally grieved and came to terms with my choice of abortion. As I reflect on my past choices, I realize that I was not seeking God as my higher power and I was relying on my will – NOT His. But in that reflection, I also rejoice that God loves me and forgives me. He has redeemed me, He has restored me and He continues to do a work in me. Just like Jesus forgave me and extended his mercy to me, I was able to forgive "R" and extend grace and mercy to him. Sharing my secrets, my hurts and my hang-ups not only helps me in the healing process, but hopefully it offers hope to others. With Jesus, ALL things are possible.

In addition, the 12 steps have been tremendous for me in my recovery. Step 4 and step 8 have been crucial in my healing. For over 19 years, I blamed Lee for everything that happened in our relationship and for all my insecurities. Through CR and the 12 steps, I have finally admitted that I'm fully responsible for those dark days in my life. You see, it took me a long time to recognize that I had choices. I had a free-will to leave that bad relationship and to never marry Lee, but because my dependence was on a man instead of God, I chose to live in dysfunction. I have made amends to myself and to the people in my life that I have hurt. I'm grateful for a program where Jesus is my higher power and that I can admit that my life is completely unmanageable without the power of Jesus Christ living in me. Today, I stand here grateful for my story and grateful that I no longer have to wear a mask or hide. It's my scars and struggles that give hope. My chains are gone, I've been set free, My God my Savior has ransomed me, and like a flood His mercy reigns unending love, amazing grace. Thanks for letting me share my story.

WES' TESTIMONY

Hi, my name is Wes. I am a grateful believer in Jesus Christ and I am in recovery for tobacco and pornography.

CR is for Losers....I never said it that way, but that was what my opinion boiled down to. When I would think about my weaknesses and the sin that was so easily entangling for me I would usually pass off the conviction and shame with phrases that sounded like "I'm not THAT bad." I would tell myself that THOSE people had REAL problems....but not me.

Shows you how little I knew....it turns out that I was right, CR is for losers ... I just didn't know that I was one!!! (please don't get offended or upset with me....I promise that it will make more sense by the time I am done....and I pray that by that time you will be encouraged and uplifted by the hope and help that we have in our Savior Jesus Christ!! 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."* I have come to know that truth much better now!) I looked fine on the outside....but then again most of us do! I had gotten pretty good at hiding my tobacco usage and the reason that internet pornography is a multi-billion dollar enterprise is because the internet allows you to privatize your sin and keep it hidden. I looked fine on the outside but I was losing by not remembering Proverbs 15:11 which says, *"Even Death and Destruction hold no secrets from the LORD. How much more does he know the human heart!"* God knew my heart. He knew when I was truly repentant (which sometimes I was) and He knew when I was only giving lip service when I tried to let go of tobacco and pornography. Because I confessed my sin to God and stayed away from it for periods of time I did not see it as a cycle. Looking back I wish I had been honest and vulnerable enough to share with someone about my struggles and invite some accountability into my life. But, pride would not allow me to do those kinds of things because, again....I was not THAT bad. I was also losing by not realizing the impact of my sin. No one knew of my struggles. I never thought about how porn could actually hurt my wife. I never considered that when the husband as the spiritual head of the wife abandons his post he opens his wife and his family up to Satan's attacks and lies. I also never knew what intimacy I was missing out on because I kept my struggle with tobacco a secret from my wife. How sweet it is to have the one who loves you the most walk beside you through everything!

So how did we end up where we are now? I wish I could say it is because I had the wisdom and humility to submit to what God knew I needed but that is not the case. Rather, God had to direct our steps by changing our circumstances. A couple of years ago I stepped down as a pastor in the midst of some turbulent times at our church. It was one of the hardest decisions we have ever had to make. It hurt to feel unwanted...it seemed like several years of pouring myself into ministry and into loving the people I ministered to was being cast aside. I felt like a victim and I felt like I had no direction. God, as usual provided some direction and brought us to New Beginnings where we knew we would be able to find some much needed healing. We found some healing and refreshing and we were thankful for that, but it was the things we didn't know that we needed that we are thankful for now. God began to place me regularly in the path of men and women who were fearless in revealing their weaknesses while at the same time extolling His ability to exchange their weakness with His power and strength. Their honesty cut me to the quick. Here I was acting like I was super-spiritual while all the while I wrestled with the same things they were bold enough to confront and make war on. At the same time my wife kept reminding me of her desire to attend CR. She knew so many who were involved and she longed to experience the same freedom they had. I kept reminding her that she was not THAT bad! Finally the day of reckoning came. God had used the honesty of others to shame me and give me courage at the same time. I sat my wife down and commenced to break her very sensitive heart by sharing with her my sins and my struggles. The truth was that I needed to go to CR more than she did!

We began to attend and there was an early level of freedom that showed up rather quickly. It was nice to have the weight of shame begin to feel like it was being lifted! For a couple of months things were really good. But it did not take long for me to begin longing for a dip of tobacco. Pornography was more seldom so I did not miss it as much but tobacco was a daily habit when I was doing it. It had become familiar...too familiar....and I started dipping it again. I made it a few months before Misty asked me one night how I was doing. She started doing this early on once we started coming to CR but she hadn't in a long while. I spent those days dreading that she would ask and knowing that she eventually would. That is when the Day of reckoning the sequel occurred. Most sequels are disappointing and this one really was. I looked my wife in the eyes and lied to her and my stomach was in knots from that moment all the way to the next evening when I finally told her the truth. As a testimony to the sensitivity of her heart and strength God had given her she shared that somehow she already knew that but she forgave me anyway. I LOVE THAT WOMAN!!!

It was not too long after this that I began doing step-work. I appreciated the principles, the steps, and the reasons behind them but I wrestled with why I sinned the way I did. I could not see any real hurts. I grew up in a loving family. It seemed like others had great explanations for their behavior but I always knew I was loved...why did I feel the need to do these things??? My sin...why have I committed my sin? I am, as all are, without excuse. Why would I feel the need to ever begin, much less to continue to secretly allow myself the short-term pleasures of tobacco and pornography? Why would my repentance only be temporary? How could I preach about a sanctifying relationship with a Holy God while not allowing that work to be more furthered in my own heart? Yes, I am without excuse. But is there an explanation, some justifications (be they known or subconscious) that I have given undeserved validity to? Are there patterns of thinking that I can change; are there new patterns of behavior I can now adopt that will help protect me from repeating past sins and even cause me to reap new spiritual fruits? Finding these answers (and helping others find the same) is what CR has become for me. And in the steps I believe I have found some answers.

Ultimately I think the roots of my sin lie in my loneliness and insecurities when I was single. I could not see it at the time but looking back I know that insecurities in facing the pressures of life and ministry tended to make me feel out of control. Having a secret habit was something that I could control. Keeping tobacco hidden required me to be on top of my game when I was using it. I think that by fooling folks I had a sense of power over them...I knew something that they did not. Being lonely was something that brought fears and insecurities as well. When will I get married? How will I be able to find someone? But it also brought empty hours that were filled with television and tobacco and empty longings that were temporarily subdued by the occasional pleasures of pornography.

Why did these habits continue to plague me after I got married? Was real sex not sufficient? Did my wife not measure up? It seems that once the mind, soul, and body have found temporary pleasures they are not so easy to get rid of. I was no longer lonely but the pleasures of pornography were pleasures that I controlled and they could seem to ease stressful times. Marriage might be the cure for loneliness but it tends to add another level to your stress!

What effect did my "injuries" have on my sinful behavior? I wish I could say that I was completely at their mercy and was a victim but we know that is not true! I do not know that any of my injuries led specifically to my sinful practices but I can say that at the very least they served as fuel for the fire as my insecurities and loneliness were unable to adequately cope with the stresses of these injuries. Granted, most of my so-called injuries are more perceived than actual.

I do feel that I have always been fairly confident, able to step out on my own in life and ministry. But at the same time I think I have always been a little naive, believing myself to be more confident than I really was. This is probably due to the fact that much of my confidence was "self-confidence" and was based on my abilities and not on my position and calling in Christ. As to determining the source of my insecurities or my false confidence, I do not believe that there is a single underlying cause but rather the proverbial "death by a thousand cuts". I think a portion of those cuts are simply the results of being a twin. Everything you have and do is identical so there is a need to measure up to at least

what the twin is accomplishing. It is difficult not to compare ourselves to others as it is but it is even more difficult for those who have grown up being compared to someone by everyone. My parents have always loved me unconditionally and I do not feel that my parents placed any undue comparison upon us or forced any competition between us, but I am not sure how much they were aware of the need for building esteem separately. Nor, however were they very intentional in encouraging us to find our identity and strength through our faith in Christ. It was not that they did a poor job at all! It is just that in that particular area they did not go above and beyond like I wish they had looking back and like I hope Misty and I can do going forward. In all of this I do not want to excuse myself, as I was clearly taught the difference between right and wrong and was instructed and expected to do what was right as well! The fault is all mine!

If there was anything that my parents did that made it easier for me to participate in my sins it was that my dad has dipped tobacco for most of his adult life. He never encouraged or allowed us to try any and we knew that it would be hurtful to my mom if we did. I am sure though that the presence of tobacco though made the idea more natural and less intimidating. This fear of what my mom would think if we did could even be an underlying form of what my behavior was later. I wanted something that was wrong and instead of being bold enough to just do it I did it in seclusion because I much prefer praise over disappointment in the looks of others (apparently I have some codependent tendencies as well!). The same could be said of how I let pornography make its way into my life. Through a few chance encounters when I was young I felt the pull of the sensual and the sexual upon my little testosterone and dopamine driven preteen brain. Even though I was a Christian, off and on through the years chance encounters reminded me of the feelings that came from looking with lust. Eventually chance encounters were replaced with choice encounters...made possible via the anonymity and availability of the internet. Unlike tobacco which was a lesser evil, I knew that pornography was horrible because it denigrated women and sucked in and victimized the insecure with the lure of riches and pleasure. I tried to stay away from pornography but I would invariably allow myself to get drawn back in. Viewing pornography caused me to really identify with Romans 7:18-24, *"For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it. 19 For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but it is the sin that lives in me. 21 So I discover this principle: When I want to do what is good, evil is with me. 22 For in my inner self I joyfully agree with God's law. 23 But I see a different law in the parts of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and taking me prisoner to the law of sin in the parts of my body. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this dying body?"* The problem was that I was not routinely identifying with the verses from Romans chapter 8 which come right after these, *"Therefore, no condemnation now exists for those in Christ Jesus, 2 because the Spirit's law of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."*

What in the world have I done????? Well.....I have abused my mind and my body. In the process I have lied to my family, friends, and church members as I hid my sins. I have ministered and taught out of my own strength and cleverness. I have lied chiefly to God, myself, and my wife. I have stolen away hours, days, and years that could have been more fruitful had I been more Godly and less selfish. I have placed my body at risk of cancer, my marriage at risk of failure, and my future at risk of mere existence. I have deserted my post and opened my family up to Satan's spiritual attacks. I joined in a practice that takes advantage of the weak and exploits their bodies and their behavior, putting them at extreme risks for my momentary enjoyment. I have taken the temple of the Lord and the gift of sex and perverted their long-term purposes for short-term pleasures. I have looked to tobacco and pornography to fill needs that only my relationship with God can ultimately satisfy.

More important than what I have done though is what in the world am I doing now? Now I draw closer to God trying to spend more time asking Him things and less time telling Him things. Now I spend more time seeking Him and erecting boundaries to prevent me from seeking myself. Now I take more serious my role as a husband and father, I may still be asleep at my post sometimes but I am determined that I will not abandon it! Now I also see my wife as someone to confide in and not someone to hide things from! Now I have an appreciation for honesty and accountability...my flesh does not like it...but my

heart appreciates it! Now I have a real appreciation for Psalm 119:65-72 and it has become in some ways my CR verse: "65 Lord, You have treated Your servant well, just as You promised. 66 Teach me good judgment and discernment, for I rely on Your commands. 67 **Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.** 68 You are good, and You do what is good; teach me Your statutes. 69 The arrogant have smeared me with lies, but I obey Your precepts with all my heart. 70 Their hearts are hard and insensitive, but I delight in Your instruction. 71 **It was good for me to be afflicted so that I could learn Your statutes.** 72 Instruction from Your lips is better for me than thousands of gold and silver pieces." (HCSB) Thank you Lord for your affliction...and even more for your instruction! and thank you for the fearless folks who lead and attend Celebrate Recovery, here at New Beginnings and everywhere else it is welcomed. CR has helped me open my life before God and invite Him to mold me as He sees fit. And in the process I have found that CR is indeed for losers....I still am one, only now God has made me into a better class of loser! Paul said in Philippians 3:7-9, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—"

If this is your first time to be here, please come back and please do not give up! There is a reason that you are here and there is a hope that you can experience! His name is Jesus and his ears, and his hands and his feet are sitting beside you and they are willing to help you if you will keep coming! Come back and be a loser...let's lose the things of the world together and find more of the riches of Christ!

Thank you!