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FOR EACH
STEP!

THE LIFE RECOVERY[®] JOURNEY

INSPIRING STORIES

AND BIBLICAL WISDOM

AS YOU WORK THE TWELVE STEPS

AND LET THEM WORK YOU

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The Life Recovery Journey: Inspiring Stories and Biblical Wisdom as You Work the Twelve Steps and Let Them Work You

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STEP ONE

We admitted we were powerless over our problems
and that our lives had become unmanageable.

I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. . . . Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?

ROMANS 7:15, 24

Andrea's Story of Recovery: Getting Out of the Insanity

Many years of insanity finally brought me to where I am today. I could not seem to break the cycle. To my way of thinking, I had to do it all myself. I had to somehow, someday, pull myself out of the dark abyss of alcoholism. I tried every which way I could, but I could not do it. Then, in February 2007, my life started over.

My story is not unique. My childhood, sadly, was not unique. It was abusive—physically, mentally, emotionally, and sexually. All that stuff. If you've been there, you know it creates heartache and pain that don't subside. That's where the drugs came in and took me out of where I didn't want to be.

I started using drugs when I was twelve years old. The first thing I ever tried was a hit of acid, and it was on from there because it made me laugh and feel free, and I knew that's what I wanted. And so, from twelve years on, my life revolved around drugs in one way or another. Still, I was known as a good girl. I lived a dual life. At home I tried to be the peacekeeper, tried not to allow all the craziness

to go on—the upending of dinner tables, the random punches, the pulling of knives. That kind of stuff was everyday life in my household. I learned to be the good girl, and that’s why, when I was doing drugs, I had to keep my good-girl face on so nobody would know what I was doing. Trying to be two people at once creates a form of insanity in itself.

I have to admit, I really loved to party. Because I had never had a good time when I was young, whenever I went out as a teenager or a young adult, the party was on. My goals and dreams began to revolve around how I could continue to party and still make something of myself—the good girl and the party girl. Instead of going to college, which would have been way too much work, I went to vocational school for a year and became a certified dental technician. At night, I worked in a bar. I thought I had the best of both worlds—I did well at my job, because that’s what I had to do, and I was a great partier. Things seemed to be going really well.

My life went on like that for years. I ended up owning my own company and growing in the business world, but I never reached my full potential. Of course, that’s all in retrospect. Now I can see where my decisions were hindered by the drugs and the alcohol and the parties.

My unraveling began when I was thirty-one and became a mother for the first time. I had never had a role model and didn’t know how to be a mother. Worse yet, I was an alcoholic mother, with an alcoholic husband. He and I had two children together, but by the time the second baby was three months old, we had split up. I became a single mother of two with a business to run, doing speed to keep me going. And, you know, that just doesn’t work. After a while, you run down. There just weren’t enough hours in the day to do all the things I needed to do, and there wasn’t enough speed to keep me going. On top of that, my judgment was impaired and I made one bad decision after another. When my daughters were four and six, I discovered crack cocaine and I lost my soul. Before long, I had also lost my home, my business, and my kids.

For thirteen years, I ran on the insanity that crack brought into my life, along with all the other crazy things that came from the life I had lived. During that time, I also gave birth to a third daughter. But I did not raise any of my girls. (Thank God for the families that loved my children when I couldn't.) And never once did I come to grips with the fact that I was powerless over my problems and that my life had become unmanageable—even though I was going to recovery meetings throughout those thirteen years. I would get sober for a little while—long enough to get the judge off my back and get my kids and a job—but then I would think, *Well, now I can drink*. And pretty soon, after a few drinks, I would decide, *I'll just smoke a little crack*. And, you know, before I knew it, I'd lost my kids again, lost my job, and was right back in the middle of that sick cycle of insanity that we live in as alcoholics and drug addicts.

In 2007, the day finally came when I ran out of chances. My eighty-year-old mother was my last victim. I had already taken everything I could from her, but when I stole her car for the third time—even though I brought it back before the cops could catch me—I ended up in prison with a two-year sentence, of which I had to serve half. My daughters came to court, and they were angry that I wasn't sentenced to more time because I had created so much wreckage and pain during my years of drug addiction. When I went off to prison, I really didn't think I would ever have anybody back in my life after all I had done.

But even after all that, my story is one of recovery. While I was in prison, God spoke to me and I had a spiritual awakening. When the door closed on that prison cell, I thought, *What have I done to myself?* It had never occurred to me I would end up in jail. That was definitely not part of the dream. I was fifty years old and I was really scared. I got on my knees and said, "Okay, God, I surrender to you. If you're here and you hear me, I really need you to speak to me right now."

When my cellmate offered me her Bible, I closed my eyes, opened it up, pointed to the page, and then looked to see what it said. Here's

what I read: “The LORD has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death. Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, and I will praise the LORD. . . . I will praise You, for You have answered me, and have become my salvation” (Psalm 118:18-19, 21, NKJV). Today, the Lord is and always will be my salvation. And there is no doubt in my mind that my finger went right to those words so that I would know God was speaking directly to me. The message could not have been clearer to me.

During my year in prison, I worked really hard at getting my act together, and I applied to get into the drug program there. At first, my request was denied, but I kept insisting, “I need this program.” The man in charge said, “I really doubt it. But maybe you’ll hear from me.” The next day, I received permission to enter the drug program. They even let me leave temporarily to appear in court for a hearing on a four-year suspended sentence from an earlier brush with the law. The day I appeared, the judge who had said, “If I ever see you again, you’ll do every day of these four years,” was not presiding, and the suspended sentence was not revoked. That could only have been the hand of God at work.

When I went back to prison, I worked even harder. I found a sponsor—a woman who was going to be incarcerated for the rest of her life because she had killed two people while driving drunk. When I asked her to sponsor me, she said, “You had better do everything I say, or you will end up right here next to me.”

Once I was in the program, I worked the Steps. I had a counselor therapist who assisted me, and I revealed the deep, dark, dirty secrets of what had been done to me and what I had done to others. I also read my Bible every day. At first I didn’t know how to read the Bible, so before I opened it, I would pray, “Please, God, give me the understanding of your Word. Let it hit me so I know what I’m reading.” Still, in the beginning, the words didn’t always make sense. I also started reading *Our Daily Bread*, a devotional booklet produced by RBC Ministries.

While I was in prison, I wrote to my kids every day. I received two

letters in return. The first was from my eldest daughter, who wrote, “Dear Andrea, you don’t deserve to be called Mother.” The second letter was to tell me that my first grandson had been born and what a loser I was to choose crack and end up in prison so I couldn’t even be there when my daughter had her first child. Though it hurt to read such harsh words, I said, “That’s okay. God is the healer of families.” And I just kept writing.

When I walked out of prison, I paroled straight into a drug program, but I left after six months. Four months later, I was back in prison. That just goes to show how you can be in a recovery home for six months and not be doing the deal. I still needed to connect my head with my heart—and I needed to turn to God to lead me every step of the way. I had to learn how to surrender to him. Back in prison, I really hit bottom, but then things began to change for the good, forever, one day at a time.

If you’re going to be in a program, you have to do the work. And you have to *decide* that’s what you want to do. If you make that choice and continue to walk it out day by day, you will find that you have a life beyond your wildest dreams. That may sound corny, but today my life has turned around so that I don’t have to hurt anybody.

My children love me now. I have my own place, along with my youngest daughter, who is sixteen. I hadn’t paid rent in twenty years—I’d lived off my mother and anybody else I could—but now I’ve had a job for three years (thank God for my business experience) and I’m paying my bills. Before I fell off the precipice of life into a deep, dark abyss, I had been promoted a couple of times, and it was the same company that hired me back as a parolee. We hire a lot of parolees and people who are in recovery.

I just want to tell you that recovery is there for the taking. All you have to do is get on your knees and ask God to direct your thinking on a daily basis. I suggest a Bible study resource such as *Our Daily Bread* as a good place to start. Read the daily message. Read the Bible verses that go along with it, and that will begin your journey through

the Bible. Ask God to reveal his Word to you, and you will find that it all makes sense somehow. And when you lay your head down at night, say a prayer that you will be better the next day.

STEP ONE INSIGHT

We all know the meaning of the phrase “playing possum.” It describes how a certain animal falls over and pretends to be dead when faced with a threatening situation. We humans are apt to do the same thing. When we encounter situations we perceive as dangerous or beyond us in some way, we cop out—we play dead. It’s a form of surrender. In the animal kingdom, such a tactic often confuses the predator, and the one playing possum is left untouched. But it doesn’t always work that way.

For most of us, playing possum is something we are determined to avoid at all costs. We see it as a sign of weakness, defeat, or humiliation, and there is something inside of us that recoils from such negative ideas. Everything in us wants to say, “No, I can handle it!” Unlike the opossum, we typically are determined to fight on and never surrender.

Recovery from our problems, addictions, and dependencies always begins by playing possum in a *genuine* way—by admitting defeat. When it comes to alcohol, drugs, sex, or food—or whatever the problem is that we can’t solve or control—we begin the healing process by coming to terms with the absolute truth that we are *powerless*. Our problem has the upper hand, and we are incapable of breaking free on our own.

Our battle tactics to avoid surrender are common. The first weapon we turn to is our own willpower. “I should be able to handle this on my own,” we tell ourselves. “In fact, I *can* handle this all by myself!” We convince ourselves we don’t need a program or anyone else to help us. “I can *break* this dependency!” To prove the strength of our willpower, we may succeed in breaking the pattern of our problems or our dependency for a period of time—sometimes for

six months or more. “The problem has gone away,” we tell ourselves. But then, invariably, because our enemy is stronger than we are, we once again experience defeat and humiliation—left to face the reality of our powerlessness. No matter how hard we try, we always end up in the same place. It’s like an endless loop that keeps us chasing after what we can never achieve.

We may also avoid surrendering to the truth of our powerlessness by using the weapon of blame—calling someone or something else the cause of our troubles. We tell ourselves, “I wouldn’t have this problem if it weren’t for _____.” (You can fill in the blank.) The fault always lies outside of us. Blaming is a wonderful way to avoid the reality of our powerlessness. If our problem is someone else’s fault, then he or she is the key to fixing everything. We need the other person to get fixed first.

We can spend a lot of time and effort in blaming, and all we get out of it is a continuation of our problem and a growing bitterness within. This bitterness comes not from our powerlessness over our problems, but from our helplessness in changing the other person. There is a world of difference between powerlessness and helplessness.

Denial is probably the most common weapon in our arsenal. Everyone around us sees what is happening to us, but we’re blind to it. They tell us we have a problem, and we deny what they are saying. When other people tell us that we are in denial, they may think we’re using it as a weapon to keep them off balance in their relationship with us. But the real purpose of our denial is to keep *ourselves* from facing the truth. Denial protects us from the truth. The more we use the weapon of denial, the more everything stays the same.

Another common weapon is isolation. If we tell ourselves that we *almost* have everything under control, we will gradually withdraw from anyone who presses the truth upon us. We often end up destroying friendships and even our family relationships. But when we stand alone, we stand defeated. We are powerless on our own! That’s why the first word of Step One is *we*. Nothing changes for

very long for the loner. It always takes a *community* to help us recover from our dependencies and our problems.

Our society teaches us the concepts of individualism and self-sufficiency, and thus the suggestion that we can't do it on our own goes against the grain. Further, when we are bound up in our problems, we get the grandiose idea that we don't need anybody—including God. But this prideful attitude will keep us fighting a losing battle with our problems, our addictions, and our dependencies. Honestly, we can never make it for very long on our own.

Maybe you have taken pride in the fact that your work hasn't suffered yet. But that's a hollow achievement. The truth is, our work is usually the last thing to fall apart. We will do everything we can to keep our jobs in spite of our problems. But eventually, as our addiction and our problems grow stronger and our lives become more unmanageable, our work will be affected as well.

The downward spiral will not stop until we finally come to grips with the fact that we are powerless. This is so hard for us to accept. If you're a woman, it may be even harder for you to accept because women have been fighting to regain a sense of power in society for decades. A woman may say to herself, "I need to claim my power as a woman!" But claiming power is not helpful when we are dealing with addictions, dependencies, or perpetual problems. The struggle to retain a sense of control simply keeps us on the treadmill to nowhere. The truth is that once we accept our powerlessness, we stop the erosion of our sense of who we are.

When we finally surrender and accept the reality that we are truly powerless, we begin to develop eyes that gradually open to the truth of our lives. When this happens, our recovery begins—the process of getting our lives and our families back. We begin to see that our lives really have become unmanageable. As we let go of the defensive posture of denial, we see clearly that our relationships have suffered. People have pulled away from us to the point that our only "friend" is our addiction or our problem.

As we see more clearly the consequences of our behaviors, we are

left with the pain of how we have hurt those we love. We are filled with an awareness of our guilt and shame—and we may be tempted to go back and bury ourselves in our dependencies so we can avoid the painful truth of what we have done to our lives. But once we begin the steps to recovery, we must stay the course. Remember, this is just the beginning.

When we accept that we are powerless, we discover the paradox of surrender. It's the paradox James identifies when he writes, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor" (James 4:10). Just as the opossum who seems to "give up" in the face of his attacker survives through an act of surrender, so we find that we are not helpless when we surrender to the reality of our powerlessness.

It's important to look at the difference between being powerless and being helpless. In living with our addictions, dependencies, or problems, we are probably very familiar with the feeling of helplessness. It's a feeling of despair that threatens to overwhelm us. We think there is nothing we can do that will help—all hope is gone. But when we come to the Twelve Steps, we find that we are *not* helpless. There *is* hope. We can begin to work the same Steps that have changed other people's lives. Help is available! But to experience that help, we must change the *feeling of helplessness* into an *attitude of powerlessness*. In other words, we can't do it alone; but help is available!

When we look at Job's experience in the Bible, we see him arguing his innocence before his friends time and time again. "It's not me," he says over and over. He not only argues with his supposed comforters, whose religious advice totally misses the mark, but he also argues with God. It's interesting to note that when God finally responds, in Job 38, he never answers Job's questions. He simply asks question after question of his own, all of which are designed to reveal Job's powerlessness.

Finally Job surrenders. He says, "I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers? I will cover my mouth with my hand. I have said too much already. I have nothing more to say" (Job 40:4-5). In effect, Job says, "I give up. I will shut my mouth and stop trying to defend

myself.” In the presence of God’s absolute power, Job came face-to-face with his own powerlessness, and his arguing with God ended!

That’s exactly where Step One is designed to take us. Our arguments and denials are finished, over with, done. Our explanations and defenses have run out completely. We stand before our problems and finally admit that we cannot, by ourselves, defeat this enemy. We put our hands over our mouths and say nothing more.

Think of the life of a child, who is totally dependent on his or her parents for food, shelter, and protection. There is a similar, childlike feeling in being powerless and defenseless before our addictions or problems. Like a child, there is nothing we can do on our own to defend ourselves or to be “in charge.” Regardless of how unmanageable a child’s life becomes, he or she can do nothing to bring order and sanity to the situation. Likewise, we may think we have power over our circumstances, but like a little child, we are powerless. It takes someone more powerful than the child to handle the child’s life circumstances. Jesus speaks directly to this when he says, “The Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn’t receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it” (Mark 10:14-15). In our case, we can say that anyone who doesn’t begin recovery like a powerless child will never truly experience it.

That’s where our recovery begins. Wholeness and healing belong to those who become just like a child, and those who can admit to themselves that they are powerless. If we don’t begin our recovery as powerless children, we will never get to the place of wholeness. The demons of our dependencies will continue to battle with us until we learn to “play possum.”

Marianne’s Story of Recovery: My Father’s Helper

To paraphrase Revelation 12:11, “We overcome our enemy by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony.”

I did nothing to deserve being saved by Jesus’ blood; that is an

unmerited gift. My testimony is a different story. Actually, it's not my story, as someone pointed out to me—it's God's story *about* me. And what an awesome God he is. He transformed my life.

Due to circumstances at home, I became my father's helper at a young age. Taking care of my brother and sister and my alcoholic mother was my responsibility. Every day, I tried hard to keep things running smoothly. As a Catholic school student, I did all I could to hide my home life from the nuns. My parents sent us to church but did not attend themselves.

Despite nights filled with chaos and days filled with anxiety, I earned good grades. When we read the Bible at school, I just thought of it as homework and that none of it applied to me. I found solace in the empty church building, often going there alone to enjoy the peace and quiet, but I had no relationship with God. I felt too ashamed.

Dad was controlling and protective, so it wasn't easy to make friends. He always drove us to school and took us along to run errands. My siblings and I learned helplessness and dependency rather than self-confidence.

In my teen years, I became resentful and rebellious. I began to drink and instantly felt good. I could forget about being responsible for everything and everyone. Alcohol was a way to escape, but it eroded my emotional and spiritual potential.

I started to find ways to stay away from home as much as possible, and I felt as if I was leading a double life. At school, I was angelic to the nuns; at night, I was outside the house, drinking with newfound friends. My father and I fought constantly, and I was always afraid I was going to be found out. I felt ashamed and guilty in front of God and often thought, *I can't imagine what he thinks of me*. And I was right; I couldn't imagine what God thought of me. He loved me!

Before long, I couldn't look at myself in the mirror without feeling pain. I became self-destructive. My distorted thinking led me to make bad decisions. I married, gave birth to two premature babies, and divorced by the time I was twenty-one. Life got harder.

In despair, I begged God to help me. I felt as if I were in a dark hole and the lid was about to close over me. I desperately wanted out. I saw history repeating itself, and I wanted my sons to have a better life.

By God's grace, I became sober in 1974. My mother and I went to Alcoholics Anonymous together. Mother enjoyed twelve years of sobriety before she passed away in 1986. Because of the AA program, much healing took place between us in those years.

Each day, I asked God's help to stay sober. It worked. AA talks about God "as we understood him." I got stuck right there. I didn't have an understanding of God. I felt I knew who God was, but I had no personal relationship with him and didn't have time for one. So I told him, "You keep me sober, and I'll handle the rest from here."

At one point, I tried the charismatic movement in the Catholic Church; but when a priest (who was in the AA program) told me that I didn't need that kind of emotionalism, that it wasn't good for my recovery, I dropped out.

I maintained my sobriety, but happiness and contentment eluded me. I was underdeveloped emotionally and spiritually.

I kept very busy, especially with my two sons. I was trying to prove to God that I was good enough. It was an exhausting way to live, always going and doing, staying in the outer world because I could not stand to be in my inner world. I was unable to practice the presence of God.

I thought my happiness depended on other people's behavior. In order to be happy, I felt I needed to control their behavior, just like I felt when I was a kid. That's why it was very difficult for me to let God take care of me and the ones I loved.

At the AA meetings, two brothers noticed me and decided I would be a good match for their other brother, who was widowed. They asked me to meet him. We dated for a while and decided to get married. His children needed a mother—I knew I could do that—and my boys needed a father. I was determined to make it work. I didn't want to be a failure again.

On the outside, everything looked good. We attended church with the children and kept the appearance of harmony. But there was great turmoil at home. We were outside of a relationship with Christ, and we had married for the wrong reasons. Never once did I ask myself if I loved this man. I knew the answer and I felt ashamed. After six years, we divorced.

Single again, I devoted myself to staying sober, raising my teenage boys, and working. I had a willful personality, very self-reliant and fearful. I tried to do everything right.

At this point, I went to a self-improvement workshop. The people there encouraged me to come face-to-face with myself. Believe me, I was the last person on earth I wanted to meet! This was not a Christian movement, but it had a positive impact on me. I think the shell was beginning to crack. I was searching. There were times when I could see a little light breaking through, but it was overwhelming to me—too bright, too exposing. I'd run back to the darkness.

Psalm 34:18 says, “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.” Because of my negative experiences, I unconsciously avoided true intimacy with God and others. I kept God at a distance. This helped me feel safe, but it left me isolated and alone. *How do I get out of the driver's seat of my own life?* I asked myself. *Maybe if I open the door just a little God will do the rest.*

Around this time I met Jim. We dated and became good friends. We had a lot in common and shared similar backgrounds. I wasn't rushing into anything with this relationship. Five years later, we married and settled into a routine life.

Over the years, I'd gone back to Mass, often bringing my grandchildren with me, but I did not feel spiritually filled. In my sobriety, I became desperate again. Just like when I was a child, my days were filled with anxiety and I couldn't sleep at night because of worry and fear. I wanted to feel God's love, I wanted to love others freely—especially my husband—and I wanted to love myself. I began to pray in earnest for this.

At a meeting, I met an acquaintance I hadn't seen in years. Carol

and I became fast friends, and she began to talk to me about Jesus. I watched her, making sure her actions matched her words. Then I asked if I could go to her church. She was happy to take me along.

I loved the warmth of the people at Brookville Baptist Church. I thought Jesus must have made them that way. I wanted to know Jesus.

Romans 10:13 says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.” Jesus respectfully waited for me to ask him into my life.

I started to attend services and Sunday school at Brookville Baptist in May 2006. In September of that year, in the pastor’s office, I asked Jesus to come into my heart and be my Lord and Savior. When I walked out of there, I physically felt as if the pieces were finally fitting together and I was becoming a whole person. I know now I was being filled with the Holy Spirit. I thanked God for his grace toward me. I was so grateful. Membership classes followed, and I was baptized in May 2007.

My eyes were now open to how self-reliant I had become. I knew I still had a lot of work to do—no, *God* had a lot of work to do, and I just had to stay out of the driver’s seat. I tended to stay very busy—a human *doing* instead of a human *being*. And though I have since found out that I can change what I’m doing, I realize that I can’t change who I am. Only God can do that. I ask for lots of help and get strength and encouragement from his Word. Many kings and prophets in the Bible felt inadequate and afraid, so I know I’m in good company.

God invites me to talk to him. He promises to pay attention. He says he will always be interested and compassionate. The Bible tells me Jesus was forgotten, devalued, and distressed and that he asked for God’s mercy. Jesus understands shame. He knows my affliction. When shame comes up, I can imagine Jesus welcoming me with open arms, the same arms he opened for me on the cross. He holds me and tells me I’m okay. He tells me that I am made perfect in his sight.

Second Corinthians 5:17 says, “Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!”

I've been shown God's mercy. I've been shown a way out of my distress. I can be helpful to others who suffer the same affliction because I understand.

I have experienced many miracles, both big and small. I recently read that slow miracles are just as effective as fast miracles. Prayers have been answered. Jim started going to church with me and was deeply touched. He accepted Christ as his Savior a couple of years ago. We have a prayer life together, we read the Bible together, and we praise and serve God every day. It's a great blessing to see the Holy Spirit working in our lives. Jim even plays harmonica on the worship team! I am cochairing the women's Bible study this year and also discipling a fourteen-year-old girl in the youth group.

I have adopted Psalm 143:5 as my life verse: "I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done" (NIV).

When I look back, it feels as if that life happened to a different person altogether. I am amazed at the life I have today. With the Holy Spirit, I have the capacity and enthusiasm to help others in a healthy way, not a codependent way. Pastor Dennis said that God has been very good to me and Jim. This is so true.

As a short person (I'm four feet eleven), I can relate to Zacchaeus. Being a small man, he climbed a tree, hoping to get a glimpse of Jesus. When Jesus spoke to him, Zacchaeus must have felt ten feet tall. He climbed down from the tree and came forward. Jesus has the same effect on me.

I've now learned how to come forward each day. I feel loved, accepted, and part of God's wonderful family. Thank you, Lord. You are the perfect Father.

STEP ONE BIBLE STUDIES

For each Step, there are four Bible studies. You can work on them on your own—perhaps doing one study per week as you focus on each Step for a month. Better yet, do the studies with your recovery group

by having members complete each study at home and then discussing what you've learned. Either way, you will be learning the biblical basis for each of the Twelve Steps, expanding your understanding of what is needed for recovery and what God wants to do for you as you work through the Steps.

Study #1: The Progression of an Addiction

This study is based on Proverbs 23:29-35 (page 812 in *The Life Recovery Bible*). Read the passage several times before working on the study.

1. IT ALL SEEMED SO MANAGEABLE AT FIRST

Things keep getting progressively worse—that's one way to define an addiction. And that's part of its deception—we start out thinking it's not a problem. By the time it becomes a problem, everyone but us can see it. We blindly continue to operate on the premise that "I can handle it." But what started out as manageable eventually manages us. We say to ourselves, "I can handle using this drug," or, "It's not a problem if I watch a little pornography," or, "I can manage my eating," or, "My spending is not out of control." In other words, "I'm not an addict!" It's too easy to ignore the progressive nature of behavioral problems that can become addictions. Addictions can and will take over and run our lives. They progress as Proverbs describes for us:

*Who has anguish? Who has sorrow?
Who is always fighting? Who is always complaining?
Who has unnecessary bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?
It is the one who spends long hours in the taverns,
trying out new drinks.
Don't gaze at the wine, seeing how red it is,
how it sparkles in the cup, how smoothly it goes down.*

PROVERBS 23:29-31

Here the passage is talking about alcohol, but you can easily substitute drugs, food, pornography, gambling, spending, or whatever your dependency might be. For example, it might read like this: *“Who spends long hours in front of the computer, surfing new porn sites? Don’t gaze at those images, seeing how sensual they are, or how well those body images are put together. Don’t dwell on how turned-on you have become.”*

Now it’s your turn to try it. Rewrite these verses based on your own problem, in a way that describes your dependency:

Think back to the beginning—before you were addicted or dependent. What attracted you to your problem behavior?

How did you get started?

How did you minimize any thought of risk at that time?

2. AT SOME POINT, WHAT ONCE WAS ATTRACTIVE WILL TURN ON YOU

*For in the end it bites like a poisonous snake;
it stings like a viper.*

PROVERBS 23:32

Here the writer of Proverbs jumps ahead. Eventually, what was once so attractive, and appeared to be so manageable, becomes dangerous.

Instead of the pleasure we thought we would experience, the alcohol leads to what the writer describes as a dangerous threat to our lives. Apply this verse from Proverbs to your own situation.

Over time, how did what seemed manageable turn against you?
When did you begin to recognize the danger?

How did it all change in your experience?

What were some of the “dangers” you encountered? Who was involved?

3. THE CONSEQUENCES

*Who has anguish? Who has sorrow?
Who is always fighting? Who is always complaining?
Who has unnecessary bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? . . .
You will see hallucinations,
and you will say crazy things.
You will stagger like a sailor tossed at sea,
clinging to a swaying mast.
And you will say, “They hit me, but I didn’t feel it.
I didn’t even know it when they beat me up.”*

PROVERBS 23:29, 33-35

Now the writer describes the progression of alcoholism. The person being described is where the alcoholic typically ends up—with bloodshot eyes, experiencing blackouts and crazy thinking, fighting,

staggering and not feeling pain when beaten—all experiences common to the later stages of alcoholism. But the same principle applies to any addiction. What happens when your spouse discovers the pornography, or when your weight balloons to obesity, or when you lose everything due to your gambling? Write out your version of these verses and put your personal experience into what you write.

What would be a parallel to “hallucinations” for your dependency?

Describe some of your “crazy talk.”

How have you tried to dull the pain?

4. THE FINAL STAGE: POWERLESSNESS

*When will I wake up
so I can look for another drink?*

PROVERBS 23:35

What was initially attractive has taken control of our lives. We have become obsessed with the next drink, the next website, the next binge, or the next hit. All of our thinking seems to be controlled by a substance or an experience of something that we “must have”!

Describe times when you have been obsessed with pursuing your addiction or dependency.

When you realized that most of your thoughts were about that “next time,” describe the feeling of powerlessness you experienced.

How close to “the bottom” did you come?

Jesus says, “The truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Look back over what you have written. How truthful have you been with yourself as you studied this passage? Is there anything you want to add or change?

Even when we are in the clutches of our addictions and dependencies, we lie to ourselves and think we are in control. But we aren’t in control, and that’s why the concept of powerlessness is so important in Step One of your recovery. When we read Proverbs 23, we see the futility of the drunkard’s life, and we see how powerless he or she really is. Now we need to see this in *ourselves* and believe that admitting our powerlessness is the key to breaking the power of our addictions.

Study #2: Running Away—The Alternative We’ve All Attempted

This study is based on Genesis 16, the story of Hagar, Sarah’s servant (page 23 in *The Life Recovery Bible*). Read the chapter several times before working on the study. (Note: In the biblical text, Sarah is called Sarai and Abraham is called Abram. Their names were later changed by God.)

1. SLAVERY

God promised Abraham countless heirs. He compared the number to the grains of sand on a seashore and to the stars in the sky—both

beyond calculation. But to have that many descendants, Abraham knew he had to start with at least one. And he and his wife, Sarah, were advanced in age and had no children. I imagine that one night they were sitting and talking about this problem, when Sarah came up with a way to “help God” keep his promise. They would have the promised child through Sarah’s servant—a practice that was quite common at the time.

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had not been able to bear children for him. But she had an Egyptian servant named Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram. “The LORD has prevented me from having children. Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her.” And Abram agreed with Sarai’s proposal. So Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant and gave her to Abram as a wife.

GENESIS 16:1-3

But what sounded like a good idea at the beginning turned into a nightmare for Sarah once Hagar became pregnant. The conflicts between them escalated, and Sarah came to regret her decision. Hagar was now in a power position, or so she thought, and she made life miserable for Sarah. But Sarah was still in charge, and the conflict grew to the point that Hagar’s life became unmanageable and she ran away.

In this picture we have of Hagar, we see the frustration and anger of a slave who was being treated harshly. When we are lost in our addictions and dependencies, we are in much the same predicament as Hagar—we’re slaves—and any addiction will eventually turn on us and beat us into oblivion. We really are powerless and faced with a life without choices, but our denial keeps us stuck. We believe the lie that we are not powerless, that our lives are not unmanageable. So we keep running away from the truth, and nothing changes in our lives.

In what ways is living with our dependencies like Hagar's life?

What choices does it appear Hagar had about sleeping with Abraham?

Who had the power in this passage, and who was powerless?

2. FAMILY CHAOS PREVAILS

So Abram had sexual relations with Hagar, and she became pregnant. But when Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to treat her mistress, Sarai, with contempt. Then Sarai said to Abram, "This is all your fault! I put my servant into your arms, but now that she's pregnant she treats me with contempt. . . ."

Abram replied, "Look, she is your servant, so deal with her as you see fit." Then Sarai treated Hagar so harshly that she finally ran away.

GENESIS 16:4-6

Notice how everyone seems to be at everyone else's throat in this passage. Hagar treats Sarah with contempt, so Sarah takes it out on Abraham. Abraham opts out of the problem, and Sarah deals harshly with Hagar until Hagar runs away.

What effect has your addiction or dependency had on your family relations?

Describe some of the times when your anger spilled out on everyone else.

When have you felt like “running away”?

There are various ways to run away. How did you run away? Or why didn't you?

3. THE LESSONS LEARNED BY RUNNING AWAY

Hagar didn't have a plan when she ran away; she just wanted to get away from Sarah. Staying would only have reinforced the reality of her powerlessness. At first, being pregnant with her master's baby must have given her a sense of power, and even the act of running away must have felt empowering at first. But once she left the familiar surroundings of home, she was faced with the reality of her powerlessness, for she had no place to run.

The angel of the LORD found Hagar beside a spring of water in the wilderness, along the road to Shur. The angel said to her, “Hagar, Sarai's servant, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

“I'm running away from my mistress, Sarai,” she replied.

The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her authority.” Then he added, “I will give you more descendants than you can count.”

GENESIS 16:7-10

When you've thought of running away from your problems, how did that idea empower you? How long did the feeling of empowerment last?

Notice that Hagar only answered the first question the angel asked. She didn't tell him where she was going, for she obviously didn't have a plan. If she did, she wasn't about to share it. What plans have you had in the past for running away from your addiction?

What is the first lesson that Hagar learns from the angel?

Submit is another way of saying "surrender." How do you think Hagar experienced the words "submit to her authority"? Describe your own response to that phrase.

When the angel left Hagar, Scripture says that Hagar used another name to refer to the Lord who had spoken to her. She said, "You are the God who sees me." She also said, "Have I truly seen the One who sees me?" (Genesis 16:13). What an incredible insight Hagar had about her experience with the angel. She had a new experience of God. As she surrendered and accepted Sarah's authority, she became aware of God's interest in her. This is the paradox of powerlessness, of surrendering: We meet God in a new way, and we're no longer helpless, as we'll see in the next two steps. The all-powerful God actually sees us and is intimately interested in us. That's a life-changing realization.

Based on Hagar's experience in this passage, what new insights do you have about God?

As you admit your powerlessness, can you also open yourself to "the God who sees you"?

Regardless of where you are in the process of surrendering and accepting your powerlessness, the God of the universe cares enough about you that he sees you. And as he looks at you, there is no judgment, nor is there condemnation; there is only the desire to walk with you on your journey of recovery. Be assured that you are loved, just as the Egyptian slave Hagar was loved and blessed by God.

Study #3: The Man Who Had Everything, and Lost It All

This study is based on Judges 13-16, the story of Samson (beginning on page 320 in *The Life Recovery Bible*). The book of Judges gives more space to the life of Samson than to any of the other judges. Read the full story several times before working on the study.

1. A GREAT BEGINNING

Not many people have had an angel announce their birth, but that is what happened with Samson. He had a great beginning. His parents had tried unsuccessfully for years to have a child, and they were old at the time of his birth. They may even have been old enough to have given up on the idea of having children. But suddenly an angel appeared to Manoah's wife (whose name is not given in the text) and made the announcement that she would become pregnant. She must have laughed to herself, but she believed the announcement enough that she went and told her husband. At first, Manoah didn't believe her, so the angel had to return and make a second announcement to the father-to-be. Here's how it started:

The angel of the LORD appeared to Manoah's wife and said, "Even though you have been unable to have children, you will soon become pregnant and give birth to a son. So be careful; you must not drink wine or any other alcoholic drink nor eat any forbidden food. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and his hair must never be cut. For he will be dedicated to God as a Nazirite from birth. He will begin to rescue Israel from the Philistines."

JUDGES 13:3-5

What is the meaning of being a Nazirite? Look at Numbers 6:2-3 for help.

What do you think was the purpose of someone taking a Nazirite vow?

A person would take a Nazirite vow in order to develop a deeper relationship with God. He or she would typically do it for a period of time—similar to how some people today give up something for Lent. But Samson was *born* a Nazirite, set apart from birth for a special purpose. He was to be a judge and lead Israel in its fight against the Philistines. In the story of Samson, it seems he never really took his vows seriously. He was to be a leader, but he never led. Still, in spite of himself, he accomplished some of God's purposes. He created havoc in the towns of the Philistines and killed many of the enemy. But he never acted intentionally. To him, it was just a lark or something done in anger when he was provoked. His story is certainly not one of success, but God was nonetheless at work.

Are there any examples in your life where God has worked in spite of yourself? Describe what happened.

2. FAMILY ISSUES

Perhaps it was because Samson's parents were older when he was born. Or maybe it was because they were so happy to have a son that they simply gave him everything he wanted. He obviously knew nothing about delayed gratification—he was totally spoiled. His parents really didn't know how to parent him.

Samson was to have nothing positive to do with the Philistines—he was to rescue Israel from them, not become part of their culture. His parents tried to steer him on the right path, but he didn't listen. When he met an attractive Philistine woman, he wanted to marry her! And his determination to do what he wanted set him on a path that would lead to his destruction.

One day when Samson was in Timnah, one of the Philistine women caught his eye. When he returned home, he told his father and mother, "A young Philistine woman in Timnah caught my eye. I want to marry her. Get her for me."

His father and mother objected. "Isn't there even one woman in our tribe or among all the Israelites you could marry?" they asked. "Why must you go to the pagan Philistines to find a wife?"

But Samson told his father, "Get her for me! She looks good to me."

JUDGES 14:1-3

Usually, when we start down the path of addiction, there are plenty of warnings. What were some of the warnings given to you?

How did you respond to the warnings? Why?

Obviously, Samson wanted what he wanted, and his parents gave in. They probably had a pattern of giving in to Samson, for he was so “special.” They were his enablers. Who have been your enablers?

3. BROKEN VOWS

As a Nazirite, Samson was to be set apart to serve God. Instead, he served himself and broke his vows many times. For example, he was forbidden to touch anything that was dead—as a Nazirite, he wasn’t even to be in the presence of something dead—but the prohibition meant nothing to him.

When he returned to Timnah for the wedding, he turned off the path to look at the carcass of the lion. And he found that a swarm of bees had made some honey in the carcass. He scooped some of the honey into his hands and ate it along the way.

JUDGES 14:8-9

One day Samson went to the Philistine town of Gaza and spent the night with a prostitute.

JUDGES 16:1

Describe some of the vows you have made to yourself about your problem or dependency that you haven't been able to keep.

If you were retelling the story of Samson, how would you get him to understand his powerlessness?

4. SAMSON'S DOWNFALL

Samson's wife came to him in tears and said, "You don't love me; you hate me! You have given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer." . . . So she cried whenever she was with him and kept it up for the rest of the celebration.

JUDGES 14:16-17

Then Delilah pouted, "How can you tell me, 'I love you,' when you don't share your secrets with me? You've made fun of me three times now, and you still haven't told me what makes you so strong!" She tormented him with her nagging day after day until he was sick to death of it.

JUDGES 16:15-16

We can say that Samson's downfall was caused by his addiction to sex. He wanted to marry a forbidden woman—a Philistine. That marriage didn't last very long. Later, he slept with a prostitute and got caught in a web of intrigue with Delilah. He couldn't stand up to Delilah's nagging pressure, and he couldn't stop toying with her as she tried to discover the secret of his strength.

What do you think he should have done?

We've already seen that running away doesn't work. What did you learn from Hagar that applies to Samson? How would he "surrender"?

Unfortunately, Samson, through his own addiction to sex and to women, became powerless—literally. He lost his eyesight and his great physical strength, becoming a prisoner of Israel's enemy, the Philistines. Notice what he did next:

Then Samson prayed to the LORD, "Sovereign LORD, remember me again. O God, please strengthen me just one more time. With one blow let me pay back the Philistines for the loss of my two eyes."

Then Samson put his hands on the two center pillars that held up the temple. Pushing against them with both hands, he prayed, "Let me die with the Philistines." And the temple crashed down on the Philistine rulers and all the people.

JUDGES 16:28-30

Here is an example of what we mean about powerlessness. By himself, Samson had always been powerless. He believed he was the source of his own power. He believed his own lies. Now, however, he couldn't lie to himself anymore, and he turned to the One who was the real source of power: Almighty God.

Describe some of the ways you have lied to yourself.

Who alone has the power to break your addictions, dependencies, and compulsions?

Why do you think Samson was in denial for so long?

Is there any other source of power that is strong enough to break the lies of denial and heal the broken places in your life?

Samson accomplished God's purpose in spite of himself, but it took tragedy for him to do it. He was called to be a leader, but he never led. He could be called the first sex addict in the Bible—not a great way to be recognized. But in the end, when he faced the reality of his powerlessness, he succeeded. We can only guess what he could have accomplished if he had lived out his Nazirite vow. If only he had done what was right, he could have been one of the greatest examples of a godly man.

Study #4: A Psalm Dedicated to Powerlessness

This study is based on Psalm 116 (page 762 in *The Life Recovery Bible*). Read the complete psalm several times before working on the study.

1. FACING THE REALITY OF OUR POWERLESSNESS

When we finally come to the end of ourselves, it feels almost like a death. Sometimes, just before we hit bottom, it may even feel like we are dying. We become completely overwhelmed with depression and the consequences of our self-destructive behaviors, and we may

even contemplate suicide. But something stops us, and we finally come to the end of ourselves. We accept our powerlessness, and we find there is someone waiting to help us at the bottom. We may be powerless, but we are not helpless or hopeless. We can turn to the One who can help. The psalmist describes what he did when he faced the end, his death.

*Death wrapped its ropes around me;
the terrors of the grave overtook me.
I saw only trouble and sorrow. . . .
I was facing death, and he saved me. . . .
He has saved me from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling. . . .
“I am deeply troubled, LORD.”
In my anxiety I cried out to you,
“These people are all liars!”*

PSALM 116:3, 6, 8, 10-11

When have you felt this hopeless?

In what ways have you experienced the bondage of your addiction as a death?

2. TAKING THE FIRST STEP

Let's look at the rest of the psalm and rearrange the order to see the psalmist's progression as he moves forward after hitting bottom. It begins with an awareness of the kindness and mercy of God.

*How kind the LORD is! How good he is!
So merciful, this God of ours!*

PSALM 116:5

How do you view God? How does it compare with how the psalmist views God?

We have to begin by seeing that God is *good, kind, and merciful*.
What does God's mercy mean to you?

The next step is to call upon the Lord:

*Then I called on the name of the LORD:
"Please, LORD, save me!"*

PSALM 116:4

When the psalmist cried out to God, he gained a new experience of God's character:

*I love the LORD because he hears my voice
and my prayer for mercy.
Because he bends down to listen,
I will pray as long as I have breath! . . .
The LORD protects those of childlike faith. . . .
The LORD cares deeply.*

PSALM 116:1-2, 6, 15

Which of these statements do you have trouble accepting?

Do you feel as if God is listening?

Now look at the psalmist's response to being heard in his cry for help:

*And so I walk in the LORD's presence
as I live here on earth! . . .*

*What can I offer the LORD
for all he has done for me? . . .*

*O LORD, I am your servant. . . .
born into your household;
you have freed me from my chains.*

PSALM 116:9, 12, 16

What does it mean to you to "walk in the LORD's presence"?

The psalmist feels great gratitude and relief that his chains have been broken. Even as you begin to understand the reality of this first step, the chains of your addiction and dependency are being broken. Describe what it will feel like to have your chains broken.

*I will keep my promises to the LORD
in the presence of all his people. . . .*

*I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people—
in the house of the LORD
in the heart of Jerusalem.*

PSALM 116:14, 18-19

The psalmist concludes by reminding us that we can't go forward while living an isolated life. True recovery takes place "in the presence of all his people." What makes it difficult to be a part of the "we" in this first step?

Why is the psalmist so insistent that recovery is experienced in the context of "we, the people"?

Who are some of the people who are part of your "we," who will be included in your growth and recovery?

As you've fought your addiction or dependency, you've probably broken many vows. Vows don't work with problems, addictions, and dependencies. But the psalmist seems to suggest that there is one vow we must keep, and that is to stay connected in the process with people who care. Can you make that vow?