

I was born prematurely in 1953, with a double hernia. The hernia developed into serious complications and I almost died. I was told I was a sickly child and I became a hypochondriac.

I grew up in several broken homes. My mother was married 3 times before she was 28, so I had three stepfathers before I was in the 2nd grade. My mother divorced my father when I was 3. Alcoholism was prevalent on both sides of my family. My mother died of cirrhosis of the liver when she was only 41.

My sister and I spent most of our time with our grandparents. My grandmother was a cheer-leader for me, and my grandfather was my mentor; they instilled many good values in me. I always attended Sunday school when I stayed with them. This spiritual influence established my faith in Jesus. I believed there was a God and Jesus was His Son, but I did not understand more than that. When I would pray as a child, He brought me comfort from many fears and insecurities.

When I was in the 1st grade, my mother married her 4th husband. He was a medical assistant in the Navy. He wanted me to be a tough kid and fight back when I was picked on, but this was against my nature. He also talked about medical diseases that added to my fears. We moved a lot and at each school I was picked on. In the 5th grade, I discovered that if I would be willing to fight back and hang out with the toughest kids in the school, I would be left alone. This lifestyle began a pattern for me for the next 10 years.

In junior high, I started to smoke cigarettes and experiment with drugs and alcohol. When I was 15, I had a bad trip on LSD and experienced flashbacks and depression. By age 16, alcohol seemed to give me the feeling of security and I relied on alcohol as my way to deal with life's pressures. It also masked

some of the psychological problems that developed from the bad LSD trip. For the next 3 years, I abused alcohol or drugs every day.

During high school, my friend Bob (who used to do psychedelic drugs) became a Christian. He had an inner peace in his life that affected me deeply. I wanted to have this peace but did not know how to get it. I attended some meetings at his church and tried to give my life over to the Lord, but my enthusiasm didn't last. After that, I went back to my old lifestyle for 5 years.

Between the ages of 15 and 21, I was arrested several times for crimes and I spent some time in jail. By the time I was 19, I was smoking 2-3 packs of cigarettes a day and drinking heavily. I also was having back pain from a work-related injury that caused me great discomfort and anxiety. I drank more heavily in an attempt to mask how I felt emotionally and physically.

Eventually, I became concerned about smoking because I had pain in my chest and left arm. Because of my Lutheran background, I said the "Lord's Prayer" every night before I passed out from drinking. I asked God to help me quite smoking any way He could. I was afraid God would give me cancer. Several days later, a friend told me her father had died of lung cancer. The description of his ailments, were close to how I was feeling, so I thought I was developing cancer too. This "healthy fear" motivated me to stop smoking. This was my first experience in seeing God answer prayer in a mysterious, powerful way in my adult life.

After I overcame my cigarette addiction, my lifestyle of drinking and fighting every night began to wear me out. There were some people trying to hurt me, including some members of the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club. As the days rolled by, I

became fearful and depressed, and started wondering if life was worth living. Yet, at the same time, I was terribly frightened of dying. On top of all this, I had a friend who said he was a warlock. He told me that I was going to die when I was 21. I tried not to pay any attention to him, but when I thought more about it I began to experience extreme paranoia.

As my paranoia increased, I thought I was going to die, and saw everyone as a threat. I became so anxious, I could not sleep nor eat, unless I was thoroughly drunk. At the same time, I took note of a young man named David, the youngest brother of a friend. He lived at a major party house where I frequently drank. He had given his life to Christ and I could tell that he had the same inner peace in his life that my friend Bob had in high school. Again, I was drawn to wanting to know how to have this experience, but I couldn't understand what to do to get it.

I thought that if I died I would go to hell, so I wondered if I could prove to God I was serious about wanting change in my life. In March of 1975, I sought the Lord for deliverance from my fears of physical death and eternal hell fire.

In 1975, my friends and I decided to go camping. I played music and sought a spiritual experience. However, I did not seem to find comfort. Back at home, I ended up drinking and watching Cecil B. DeMille's movie "The Ten Commandments" on TV. When the movie got to the part of Moses parting the Red Sea, I prayed in my mind to the Lord that I believed He really did perform those miracles in Egypt. I told the Lord I was very unhappy with my life, and that I needed a miracle of deliverance from all the stuff that was robbing me of my peace of mind.

Suddenly, 3 questions from the Lord came into my mind. The first one was, "Why don't you become a Christian?" and I responded, "Because I would be bored as a Christian." To me, Christians could not wear hippy-style clothing, could not listen to rock and roll, and could not ride motorcycles, all the things that were important to me.

The 2nd question was, "Yes, but what if becoming a Christian would make you happy?" I responded, "Well, if becoming a Christian would bring me happiness, I would go for it, but I don't think I could be happy as a Christian."

Then, a 3rd time the same type of question was asked of me, "Yes, but if becoming a Christian truly would bring you happiness, isn't this what you want?" I responded, "Yes, Lord. I don't understand how becoming a Christian would bring me happiness, but if this is true, then I will give my life to you". I added, "But you'll have to do a miracle, because I don't see how it could work." After saying those words, I knew something had changed in me, but was not sure what. I turned to my drinking buddy and told him that I would be going to church the next day.

That evening, I was severely anxious. But when I thought about sharing God with people, I felt a deep, inner peace. When I thought about my problems, I became fearful. I tried to keep my mind on what little I knew of God so I could experience peace. I felt my life was going to be different somehow.

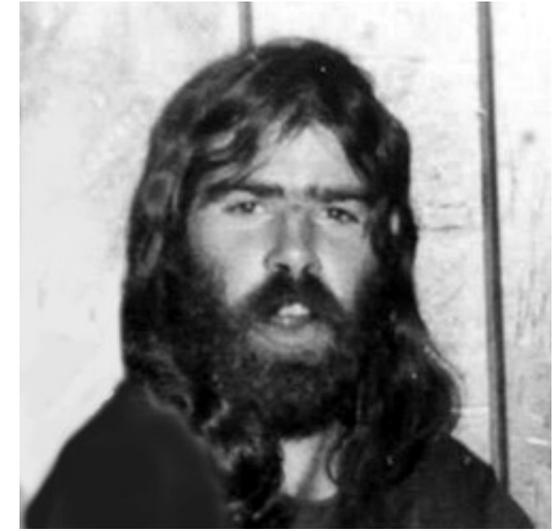
The following week—something miraculous happened—I had no desire for alcohol. Previous to my encounter with God, I could not have abstained from drinking for a single day. There were supernatural changes in my life, but I was still struggling with my fears of death and hell. So I tried to convince God of my sincerity.

The following Sunday, I went to the church my friend David attended. I was absorbing what the preacher was saying like a sponge absorbs water. When he finished his sermon, he invited people to the altar for prayer, if they wanted to show God they were serious about their relationship with Him—that created a dilemma in me.

My prayer all week was, "What could I do to show God I was serious?" but I also was too proud to parade myself in front of people, acknowledging that I was a sinner. I struggled with the decision, but at the same time I felt compelled to go to the altar for prayer. Before I knew what happened, I was at the altar weeping and I felt a giant burden of guilt, shame and sin lift off of me. Then the peace of God came flooding in. I knew that I was in Christ and He was in me. I knew this was the place that I needed to be for the rest of my life.



Art Lyons is the director of Re-Entry Prison & Jail Ministry (RPJM). RPJM provides resources for inmates re-entering society. Referrals are provided through ministries and organizations assisting Chaplains, Pastors, and family members who are working with inmates or ex-offenders.



My Fear of Dying

*A testimony of the
saving grace of God*

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