

## The Grace of God in my Life: From darkness to Light.

It is not my intention to ever glorify the hold that I allowed the enemy to exert on my life for most certainly, I was a living and breathing example of his coming to “steal, kill and destroy.” Instead, my passion is to share my tale with others, that they will witness the work of the grace of Jesus and that they will glorify Our Father. It is the power of God’s divine grace in my life that drives me to serve Him by introducing others to Him.

God is eternally patient. He provides to us the means to come to the end of our carnal selves so that we will conform to the image of His Son. Sometimes the means are met with little resistance and can be a joyous journey through life and at other times the means are met with outright rebellion. In my case, He had to wait almost 40 years until I arrived at a place where He could step in and extend His grace to a willing recipient.

In 1989, I had earned my second college level degree which was in Nursing. My practice of nursing was stellar. My career began in Medical Intensive Care and progressed through a series of outstanding positions that allowed me to gain much notoriety in the nursing professional world. Near the end of my career I had written for several textbooks and journals, I sat on a board that governed the practice of an elite group of specialized practitioners and I was a sought-after speaker at national conventions for transport professionals. By the standards of the ‘world’, I had arrived! Yet my heart and soul were filled with a darkness that would never abate except when I was intoxicated.

My second husband had long tired of my escapades. Our marriage was one of mutual benefit. He was also well-known in the transport community and sat on the board of governance for the paramedics. I was his ‘trophy’. On the outside, I was everything that a man of the world could desire in a wife. Slender, attractive, attentive to my appearance and talented; I was his perfect foil. Little did he know that I entered into that marriage fully anticipating that he would rescue me from the gaping chasm in my dark soul.

In the autumn of 2005, we had our final altercation. By this time I was drunk unless I was at work and I was a vicious and hateful person when I was intoxicated. He bore the brunt of my verbal and physical assaults. On the last night that I spent in our home, we got into a physical altercation where he sustained a scratch on his neck and I sustained multiple bruises and was bleeding from a wound on my head. Because I was intoxicated, I was removed from the home by the police to never return.

In early 2006, I was living the life of a full-blown alcoholic who could barely continue more than 6 hours without having to imbibe to stop the tremors from overtaking my body and preventing me from normal functioning. My nursing license had been revoked due to my having earned several Driving Under the Influence convictions, my driver's license had been revoked for several months and I was reduced to sleeping on the floor in an unfurnished house with only a few pieces of clothing as my sole possessions. I occasionally went to work as a telemarketer to earn enough money to buy more alcohol to keep from going through withdrawal. You see, I had been through the physical withdrawal from alcohol before and I was willing to sacrifice just about anything to avoid experiencing that unspeakable terror and pain again.

The man who owned the empty house also tired of me and sent me to detoxify at the Community Bridges. The first 12 hours there were the beginning of the end of my drinking career. I began to exhibit tremors that rapidly progressed to the point that I could not even hold a cup of water to drink, I lost control of my bowels, my blood pressure reached life-threatening levels and I hallucinated various visions straight from the pits of hell. Soon the staff there moved me from the observation area into the treatment area and my physical detoxification began.

Three days later I was free from the physical need to drink alcohol. I was actively participating in the recovery classes and adhering to the medical regimen from which I would be weaned as my body began to normalize. On day four, I received word that my estranged husband had filed to divorce me. I begged and pleaded

with the staff to allow me to leave the unit to go to the courts to file papers to halt the process and then return. They denied my desperate request and I left the unit much to their chagrin. On the bus ride back from the court house, I bought more beer. I was permitted to retrieve my bag of clothes and dragged them from Mesa back to the unfurnished house in Tempe.

I began to drink with a vengeance. If there was a god who oversaw the world then he most certainly had abandoned me! I dove deeply into the dark chasm and consoled myself with the oblivion of intoxication. Within two days, the man who owned the house returned and had me removed by the police. I was arrested and placed in the Maricopa County Jail in February of 2006.

I was severely intoxicated during the intake process and barely sobered up enough to realize that I was going to be spending a significant amount of time in custody. As I sobered, my twisted and darkened mind began to work. I angrily blamed my husband, my parents, society, the church, the law, anything but myself for my current situation. I made many phone calls to my family in Florida; first begging them to bail me out of the jail and then demanding it. My mother advised me that I had 'made my bed and now was going to sleep in it'; alone. Then they stopped accepting my collect calls.

I was truly alone for the first time in my life. Never have I experienced such total and complete isolation. I had alienated every person who loved or cared about me. If you've never been to the County Jail, you may not understand. As an inmate, you are given used clothes to wear, fed garbage twice daily, have no privacy even when showering or using the toilet and you have to sleep inches from a total stranger that might or might not be odiferous. It was a far cry from the lifestyle that I had previously led. It's a noisy place that is never completely dark or peaceful. There are fights, assaults and continuous verbal abuse from the Officers that are assigned to oversee your well-being.

And I was so very deeply angry. I was angry with my husband for how low I had sunk, I was angry with my parents for not rescuing me, I was angry at a god that didn't exist for putting me in such a deplorable place. I was angry with everyone

but me. I blamed everyone but myself for where I was and what I had become. I was filled with darkness deeper than black itself, anger so bitter that no words could touch it and a hate towards myself that no one would ever be able to relieve me of.

During mail call, I received no letters. If I placed a collect call, it went unanswered. I chose not to speak to the other inmates because of who I was and didn't they realize how very important I was? I was so much better than them and I most certainly did not deserve to be in jail. Despite the repercussions, I chose to continue drinking and as a result the only support that I could depend on was coming from inside of the dark chasm inside of me.

Existing in such lowly means, I began to seek diversions to occupy my mind. Reluctantly, I began to join the women who were going to the various church services that are brought into the jail. All I wanted to do was get out of the dorm for a while and be by myself. Instead, I was about to embark on a journey that would first identify the darkness that I had become and then introduce me to the Light. God's grace was about to manifest for me.

The people that come into the jails are tasked with a wonderful and onerous burden to bring the light of Christ's grace and redemption before an audience of hardened, broken and bewildered women. Their smile and the sense of peace and joy about them is physically perceptible. At first, I was blinded and could not understand how they could be so happy to come to such a place filled with stink and just stand there and proclaim that Jesus would forgive us if only we would ask Him to do so. Who could believe anything as ridiculous as that? Surely not!!

And yet, after a month or so of attending the services, I finally began to open my ears and hear what was being shared. The Holy Spirit began to work on my black heart and I was beginning to feel convicted of my need to repent and be reborn. I so very desperately wanted this forgiveness and grace that I was learning about. I had nothing left inside of me and my options had all been exhausted. The choice was mine to make; continue to remain lost in the darkness or become a child of the True Light. One afternoon, I got down on my knees near my

assigned bunk and began confessing and repenting. Many tears later, I crawled onto the bunk and slept peacefully for the first time in many years. That was April 24, 2006.

The following day, I attended a service and publicly declared Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. Instantly, the darkness in that deep chasm was removed and the Light came to take up residence inside this now willing vessel. Empowered with His Light, I began to talk with the women surrounding me about Jesus. We studied the Word with a hunger that only a starving person can identify with. I prayed with a conviction that surpassed my addiction to anything. As the fruits of the Spirit began to take over my heart, I began to accept responsibility for the pain and devastation that my behavior had brought into the lives of everyone who loved me. My anger subsided and was replaced with peace beyond all understanding.

After much prayer and seeking the wisdom of the ministers and counselors, I placed a call to my sister in Florida. She accepted the call and I immediately began gushing to her about how I had changed and was walking with the Lord now and would she please forgive me? She responded by sharing that the family had just about disowned me based on what they had learned about the 'real' reason for my incarceration. A source that they considered reliable had convinced them that I was a prostitute and was in jail for drug possession and prostitution. My heart fell and the dark abyss opened its jaws for me. Here I was, a new Believer, forgiven and redeemed, a new creature and I expected immediate forgiveness and understanding from my family. She asked me not to call her home ever again and hung up on me.

After drying my eyes, I cried out to Jesus with all of my heart and asked Him to give me the strength to bear up under this mantel of disappointment. This was the first of many times to come when God would send people into my life to teach me more about Him. A minister counseled me to understand that the enemy was not going to give up one of his prize possessions and would do whatever he could to sabotage the good work that God had begun in my heart. Several weeks later, I penned a letter to my sister and encouraged her to seek out the real reason for

my incarceration. And by the power of Divine Grace, she did so. In June she accepted a call from me and we were able to seek and extend forgiveness. We began to correspond by mail and God healed that relationship. It could only have come from Him as I had done irreparable damage to the level of trust, respect and even love that existed in our family. I was sentenced to the prison and in July was sent to Perryville for 9 days. Upon my release, my sister had arranged for me to go to a half-way house so that I did not end up out on the streets. My husband divorced me on the day after I was released and I was truly embarking on the adventure that my new life has become. And now I was to never be alone again.

Two weeks passed at the half-way house and I rapidly learned that it was not the ideal environment for a new Believer or a newly sober person. Of the 35 women who resided there, 23 relapsed during those two weeks. Because I was now a member of His family, His grace was extended to me. A woman from the church that I was attending took me into her home. Quickly I was able to find work at an answering service for physicians and began to earn enough money to live on my own again. The Lord would continue to bless me with all that I needed and more for the next 2 years.

Then it happened. One last desperate attempt to regain the soul that he lost, the enemy attacked with a vengeance. An incident that had occurred in 2005 was brought forth for unknown reasons and I was compelled to return to the courtroom to address another DUI charge. Now, I was guilty as sin of the incident and was willing to admit it and take my punishment. My return into the court system and subsequently into the penal system would in no way resemble my previous experience. This time I had the strength and grace of God to lean upon.

As a result of my compliance with the requirements of probation, I did not have to go into custody as the outcome of this case was determined. This is essentially unheard of to allow a known felon to be free while enduring the process of an additional felony case. The first plea offer was made in February of 2008 and was for 7 years. If I was to plead guilty to what would amount to my fourth DUI in less than 2 years, then this was the appropriate punishment. And this is where

God's grace, His unmerited favor and mercy, would begin to once again manifest in very tangible ways in my life.

For the next 4 months, I would faithfully journey from Scottsdale where I lived on the property of a ministry, to the court house in Mesa to stand up to the charges. Each month I was accompanied by a fellow Believer and we would pass the time reading the Word, singing hymns and sharing Jesus with others who were waiting for their turn in the court room. God's sovereignty resulted in my being convicted as a first-time offender and in June I accepted my punishment of 4 months at the prison.

Normally, under the circumstance, I would have been taken into custody on the day that I accepted my sentence. Yet God chose to exercise His supernatural control of my life and by His grace and mercy, I was to be granted 30 days to prepare to enter the prison. I humbly sought the face of God and He led me as a willing sheep during the time of preparation.

I had been working for a women's ministry called Homemakers by Choice since February of 2008 as their administrative assistant. Here God was using me, a divorced, convicted felon to minister to and be ministered to by Godly women who had chosen to follow His instruction as wives, mothers and homemakers. Although it was a far cry from the fame and prestige that my previous career had afforded me, it was and is the most rewarding position that I have ever served in. The ministry embraced my situation and assisted me on many levels to make my transition from freedom to confinement as painless and as anointed as possible.

A friend stepped forward and agreed to take my place at the ministry during my absence so that when I was released I could return to that job. My belongings needed to be removed from my little house so that necessary repairs and improvements could be made while I was away. The ministry offered me the use of a storage unit at no cost. My beloved cats would be remanded to the care of a dear friend so that they too would be safe and returned to me after my punishment concluded. The church that I attend added my name to their membership roster so that I would have pastoral visits if needed. A core group

among whom were one of the Pastors and the founder of the women's ministry met with me and prayed for my safety, protection and surrendered me to God to be used of Him while I returned to the realm of darkness.

On July 25, 2008, I re-entered the Maricopa County Jail. Once I had signed the plea bargain, I had to go into custody. God had ensured that I was more than ready to face head-on the adventure, the mission trip that He had planned for me. Ephesians chapter 6 instructs us in how to pray on the armor of God, I practiced that daily and went forward secure in the love and protection that only Our Father can provide.

I spent 42 days in the jail during which time I was able to introduce 6 women to Jesus before I would be moved. My days there were filled with leading Bible studies and counseling the women who were in need of support. All of the women in the dormitory knew that my bunk was 'holy ground'. I tolerated no profanity, no glorifying the use of drugs or alcohol and offered freely the grace and love that I had been blessed with. Many nights, broken and frightened women would wake me to spend time in prayer with them. It was amazing how God chose to use this willing vessel to reach out to women who two years earlier I would never have spoken to.

The transition from the jail to the prison would take a 48 hour period. The penal system does its very best to keep the inmates bewildered and frightened of their surroundings. But the transition did not unfold as 'they' would have it. The 24 hours spent in the freezing holding cell in the bowels of the Lower Buckeye Jail were used to praise God with song and prayer. The nineteen of us that moved to the prison went forward joyfully and full of peace because of the grace that God allowed to fill that holding cell. It was my good fortune to be witness to the powerful hand of God as He moved among us that day and night.

Once at the prison, we were separated and sent to cells in the Reception and Assessment area. In R&A, the inmates are locked in the cells for 23 hours out of the day. We left our cell only for meals which were timed at 15 minutes and to have various tests performed. Showers became rare. The heat in Arizona in July is

uncomfortable even with air conditioning and the prison does not offer that luxury to the inmates. The days were long, hot and miserable and yet I remained the picture of peace and joy. A Bible was given to me and I passed many hours pouring over the Word, allowing it to infuse me and strengthen me with its true meaning. I was used by God as a Light.

9 days later I was transferred from the R & A to a regular yard. My first day I met a woman who would become a trusted friend and we attended church services that evening. I attended not because I was seeking diversion but because I craved the Fellowship of other Believers. This time my attitude was not one of desperation but of sincere thankfulness. Scripture counsels us to praise God and rejoice in all circumstances and when you are filled with His Light and Love this comes as easily as breathing.

I was given a job on the crew that tends the grounds and had the freedom to walk about outside. I felt as if I had been reborn again! After over a month of being quarantined inside a room of one sort or another, I was blessed with being able to breathe fresh air and enjoy the grandeur of this earth that was given over to us. The days passed quickly and I was blessed with a better job as the porter for the Education Department. Each day I would clean the offices and classrooms and was able to have pleasant conversations with men and women who came to the prison to teach. They addressed me as "Miss" and not "Inmate". They all were amazed with my pleasant attitude and apparent humbleness in performing such a menial job. I shared with them that what they saw in me was the joy of the Lord. And it was true! Left to my own devices I might have succumbed to anger and hate and bitterness but being God's child, everything that I do, I do for His glory and not mine. The sincerity and depth of such a life touches everyone that it comes into contact with.

Almost every night there was a religious service to attend. The ministry to those in prison is strong in Arizona and I was privileged to be able to attend charismatic services filled with the presence of the Lord in the midst of a great span of darkness. Along Side Ministries, Follow-Up Ministries, Prison Fellowship and individuals carried the Light into us and we rejoiced! Almost every night I received

mail either from my biological family, my church family or the women of the ministry. I would not stay at the prison long enough to earn the right to make phone calls so the daily contact sustained me. Letters are a life line to those on the inside of the fences and the women in my pod were amazed at the amount of mail that came to me. Almost every night I would tell them that the letters were from other Believers who never gave up on me and the women marveled at it. What a powerful testimony to the results of living a faithful life in subjection to God's will. I still ponder how far-reaching that demonstration of His grace has gone.

Scottsdale Bible Church had asked what they could do to help me while I was fulfilling my punishment. I asked for a study Bible to be sent to me. Due to regulations at the prison, inmates can receive only soft-bound books. The Bible arrived on October 1<sup>st</sup>. With the amount of free time that I had, I was able to truly and sincerely study the Word and learn what God wanted me to learn. Every morning my friend and I would walk the track at 5am. We watched the sun rise and thanked God for another day. Every evening we were blessed with spectacular desert sunsets that only Our Father can paint. We would pray and thank Him for the safety of our cells and the opportunity for another day in His service. Never once did I feel angry with anyone. I was fulfilling my punishment because I had committed a crime and had earned it. My heart overflowed with peace and joy that may have taken many more years to manifest as I matured as a Believer. Without the noise of the world to distract me, I was able to hear that still, small voice almost daily.

Just before Thanksgiving, I was released. A sweet friend met me at the gate and drove me back to Phoenix. We stopped so that I could make contact with my landlord and when I asked if the little house was open, he replied that the home was ready for the return of His daughter. The first of many tears that day began to flow. Here I was, freshly released from the prison and a man that I respect and admire was welcoming me back into the Family with open arms. It never ceases to amaze me as to how God will provide us with assurances through the words and deeds of others.

We turned towards Scottsdale and my little house. Along the way we retrieved my precious cats and then other friends from the church met me and we retrieved some of my belongings. By nightfall, I had everything that I needed to sleep comfortably in my little home.

I returned to my position with Homemakers by Choice amid tears and hugs. My sisters in Christ welcomed me back with open arms. The church provided me with the means to purchase food and a bus pass so that I had transportation. Almost four and a half months to the day after that core group had met at the church to ask God's protection over me; we reconvened. This time it was to offer Him our thanks and give Him the glory for all that had transpired during my absence. The Body has been used to evidence that what He promises is true. He promises us food for the day, clothing and shelter, anything that we receive beyond that is pure grace!

Going through the fire is sometimes painful. As humans, we can expect to wrestle with the carnal side of our being until we are relieved of these bodies and given our glorified bodies in Heaven. There are consequences to our poor choices and when we choose to resist or decline the offer of grace, the consequences can be severe. As a child of God, we can accept those consequences with grace and dignity because that is what Jesus did. As we become more and more conformed to His image, He lives through us and in us. He took the stripes for all of our sins without resistance because He trusted in His Father's will, grace and mercy. We, too, can trust Our Father to see us through the darkness and bring us into the Light. Just like Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, if we fix our eyes upon the cross and never waver from it being the focus of our life, then we will safely pass through any trials. If we thank God for the grace that is sufficient for the day and trust implicitly in it, we can walk worthy of being called sons and daughters of the Living God.

Darkness was not in the prison but in me, in my very soul. I share this story with the sincere hope and prayer that it will touch just one person who is still enmeshed in the darkness of sin. Any of us can be that "light" that Jesus spoke of. It really is not all that difficult. Submit therefore to God, resist the devil,

rejoice in all things and pray without ceasing: these instructions are very clear as to how to be a Light in the world. We walk our walk with Jesus in a public and committed fashion. In private times, we go to the Word, pray and seek the very face of God before we venture out. Asking Jesus, the True Light of the world, into my heart allowed me to live in His Light in the darkness that surrounds many women in the prison world. I rely on His strength, grace and mercy because I know only too well what I am capable of if I am to assert my self-will. To Him be all the glory, all the honor and all the praise as we lift our voices and offer ourselves daily to His purposes. I can think of no better way to live.