

## **Coping when the Bottom Falls Out**

by **Gene and Norma Bourland**

**Gene:** Shortly before we left to come to the conference I received these words from a Christian who is a worker in full-time ministry. He said, "I'll never forget our first meeting with The Tough Love Support Group. After a short indoctrination, we had a chance to tell the group the story of our son. His grades, as a sophomore in high school, dropped from A's and B's in September to F's and incompletes in January. We told of how he was expelled from school; of how his use of pot expanded to include LSD and who knows what else, of how he stole from us, of his verbal abuse, of his living in and out of our home. As we told the tale, there was not a single expression of shock, nor a single raised eyebrow. If we hesitated a bit, the group filled in the blanks for us. There was no condemnation, only empathy. These folks were going through it, too."

Each of you with your single yet unique experiences that bring you here today could fill in the blanks. I would be enriched, I'm sure, by hearing your story. But here is where Norma and I fill in the blanks with our story.

Our son Steven chose to taste what he believed were the enjoyable delights of alcohol and drugs when he was fifteen years old. We had moved from England, after spending thirteen years as missionaries there with Campus Crusade, to California, and then to Boston in two years. We had left Campus Crusade and began pastoring a tiny struggling church near Boston. At fifteen years old, Steven was a freshman in high school when he began using marijuana and alcohol. Soon he expanded his drug profile to include cocaine, crack and probably whatever else he could find to buy. Steven barely graduated from high school. After several failed attempts at further education and work, several incidents of breaking the law and getting caught, an unsuccessful attempt at a six week in-house drug treatment and half-way house, he left home...without telling us where he was going. Our anxiety was increased greatly over the next two years when we did not know where he was or whether he was alive or dead. Finally, thankfully, Steven contacted us with the news that his girlfriend Cindy, whom he had met on the road, was pregnant and that they were headed back to Minnesota where we were living.

Steven and Cindy came home in December of 1991, with their few worn-out belongings in a beat-up Chevrolet stationwagon. He had not been home long before he was arrested for having previously broken the law. After doing time in jail and paying fines, he was released. But even with the birth of his son, he continued to struggle with drugs and alcohol, unable to keep a job and explosive with his anger. He now lives in Virginia with his wife Cindy and his seven-year-old son Stevie. To our knowledge, he has been clean and sober for two years and is now nearly clear with his police record. Steven will be thirty years old this month.

During this turbulent and soul-searching journey, Norma and I have experienced the full range of emotional feelings. Our hopes and dreams have gone from the heights of seeing clearly who God is and what He wants us to do...to the depths of despairing that anything would ever change. Our coping during this time has often been merely survival. We felt at times as if we had been thrown out of a raft in a raging river and we were doing everything we could to keep our heads above water. We use different ways to cope to survive. We hope our sharing some of these ways with you today will be helpful.

Norma grew up in a Christian home and trusted Christ at an early age. She has always had a missionary mind, a caring heart and a love for children. Her desire was to be a faithful follower of Jesus and a really good mom. Our journey challenged both of those desires. But it matured her into the beautiful, compassionate person that she is. She now willingly, knowingly submits her life to Jesus.

**Norma:** I thought maybe I would start with maybe a joke or a funny story that I could drum up from our past, but as I looked over the last fifteen years even using my hindsight, I couldn't find anything funny. I couldn't find anything to laugh at. Drug abuse, addiction, alcoholism—this is not a funny picture. They are all very deadly serious problems, having the potential of destroying life and faith.

In the early days of Steven's drug abuse, I just thought he was having difficulty adjusting to high school and non-Christian values. I prayed and talked a lot to him about being a good testimony

and an example and influence on his friends. I thought for sure these rebellious moments, broken curfews and drinking parties he was having would be used by God in Steven's life as good learning experiences. Slowly, after time went by I became confused and frustrated as habits and patterns of behavior developed. I tried to make sense of the chaos that was emerging by preaching great passionate sermons, some of my very best, to him. I punished him with endless groundings, sometimes a month at a time. I became desperate. I shamed him with my tears and pleaded with him. I became very angry and I became very very tired.

Four years later a turning point came for me, a point of beginning a bit of sanity, when we finally knew for sure and accepted the fact that Steven was using drugs and abusing alcohol. It was at this point then that we were able to get the help that we really needed. We began addressing the real problem rather than all the symptomatic behaviors.

The year following Steven's graduation, we sent him to a private prep school in Maine with great hopes that he was going to get all straightened out. When he returned home at Christmas to our home in Boston, we determined that he was in really bad shape. He had been using cocaine heavily. He was very depressed. Right away we were able to get him into an outpatient treatment center for teenagers in our hometown there in Boston. But meanwhile, during this same period of time, Gene had decided to take a new position in a church in Minnesota and was making preparation to move. This move had the promise of a new beginning for all of us; in one way, it would give Gene a little break from senior pastoring responsibilities. But it was very difficult on all of us as a family, especially our daughter, who was just beginning her junior year in high school. Shortly after moving and beginning to get settled in, we discovered that Steven's use had escalated greatly. After finding crack cocaine and paraphernalia in our car, we admitted him into a six-week residential treatment program in Minneapolis.

Little did we know that we had just moved into the drug treatment Mecca of the United States. It was the home of Alcoholics Anonymous. One of the requirements of the program was that the whole family had to participate in a week-long family session. This required us as a family to be there every day to engage in drug education classes, seminars, workshops and then sit through painful, very emotional group sessions.

At this same time, our new church was trying to welcome their new pastor and his family into the fellowship. I had received an invitation at the first of every month that we had been in Minnesota to attend a Newcomer's Brunch and I had declined. Finally after the third one, I couldn't say no again. I pushed myself to get ready and drove to this beautiful suburban home of the hostess. I sat outside, not wanting to go in, feeling the heavy burden of the shame of having our son in drug treatment and that our family was in turmoil. I finally got myself out of the car and went into the house. The hostesses were friendly and very warm and I started to relax.

But before I knew it, as I sat down with a small group of women of different ages I heard to my horror the hostess saying, "Norma, why don't we begin with you. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your family, then we will go around the circle and share."

I thought I was going to die. I took a deep breath and smiled as big as I could and said, "Well, my husband is your new pastor of counseling. We have four children. Our oldest son, Peter, is a sophomore at Westmont College; our second son, Steven, is in drug treatment at St. Mary's down in Minneapolis; our daughter is a junior in high school and our youngest son, David will be in seventh grade in junior high."

I turned to the woman on my right quickly, hoping that she would just continue on and nobody would have heard what I had just said. She picked it up quite well and we went around the circle. To tell you the truth, I couldn't tell you any of those women's names. I hardly heard a thing until it came back to the woman on my left.

She looked right at me and said, "Hi, my name is Carol. I too have four children and my second son was in drug treatment at St. Mary's, also."

Then I didn't hear anymore. I thought here was a woman, who was smiling, well groomed and all put together. She was behaving normally and she had been through what I was going through and she was still alive. She was functioning! All of a sudden, I was touched deeply with hope. In fact, somehow the verse in Job ran through my mind: "I know the way I take you, says the Lord, and when you are tried you shall come forth as gold." I saw gold sitting there and hoped for myself.

This woman became a friend to me in a very desperate moment. One of the ways I cope with anything in life, as Gene can tell you, is that I talk about it. I talk it through, and I talk it thoroughly and then I talk about it again and then I talk about it again. I began to talk to everyone I could about Steven. I seemed to need reassurance. I needed long time friends to listen to me and tell me how they remembered what a good mom I was and what a sweet child Steven was. I wanted my friends to remember what a great family we had. I needed to be reassured that the past as I remembered it really happened. That it was real. I guess I was hanging onto some pride. My friends were really patient with me.

Slowly my disillusionment turned to anger, especially when I heard Christian friends saying, "I don't know where my kids would be today if I hadn't prayed for them." Implying that I hadn't prayed hard enough, that I hadn't prayed good enough, that I didn't say the right things made me angry when I realized that God hadn't protected our kids. I stopped reading Christian books, stopped reading Christian magazines, avoided group prayer meetings and turned off Christian music and radio. Even the thought of going into a Christian bookstore upset my stomach and it still does. I felt like I had been kicked in my spiritual gut.

Our family life felt like an unreal mockery to me. I screamed out within myself when I heard the public's view of a drug addict being a loser or a scum bag and the declaration by so many that they should be put away for life. I wanted everyone to know that one of those losers was my son, whom I had nurtured every night with stories and songs of "Jesus loves you. This I know." I was really angry. Things had not turned out like I thought God had promised they would.

My long time friend Susan Vawter listened to my anger. My new friend from the Newcomer's Brunch took me to Al-Anon where I listened to my anger coming from others' mouths. Al-Anon was really painful for me. Every time I left saying I wasn't going there again. I just didn't understand what letting go meant. I didn't know what it looked like. I didn't like sharing my personal story to strangers who would only give me their first names, but each time I went I repeated the Serenity Prayer: "Lord, grant me the grace to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

I listened to others. I read the *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon*, which is part of the 12-step program. I began to realize the decisions my kids made or make are not mine. They do things for their own reasons just like I do things for my own reasons. Even though our decisions affect each other we are not the source of one another's happiness or peace of mind. I cannot change them or control their choices and some days I have to work really hard not to allow their well being to affect my happiness. My well-being has to be my choice every day. This understanding releases me from being enmeshed with Steven's choices.

One day I was sitting in a training workshop and the speaker walked up to the podium without any introduction and said, "He is God. And I am not." He is God. And I am not. I heard nothing else after that as those words sank deep into my heart and freed me. I gave God back His job of saving my children. I took on the job of mom, loving them as best I could and being available to them. Slowly I understood letting go doesn't change the circumstances. They can still be really tough and painful, but letting go frees me not to have to try to fix things or control them. It allows me to experience peace in the midst of chaos. Especially during the two years that Steven was running I felt depressed most of the time. I had to force myself to get up each morning. I cried a lot. I cried every time I talked about Steven. I cried every time I tried to pray. I cried when I heard beautiful music in church. I cried a lot. One of my journal entries during this time said, "Each day I wake feeling the urgent need to do something and then I realize there is nothing I can do. The emptiness just has to be." Steven had been gone almost a year without a word and his birthday was coming up. Sometimes I would sit in my bedroom chair (that was my safe place to go) and beg God to prompt Steven to call.

On August 12, his birthday, he called. He had a lot to say that I don't think he could say. There was a lot of quiet. He was in Florida. He said that he had been thinking about his childhood and how good it was. He thanked us and said he didn't want us to think that we had been bad parents. We were amazed. We were so glad. We were reassured that God was at work in Steven's life. I started baking his favorite cake and I called some friends to have a little party—without Steven, of course. A week later on September 14, I had a very vivid dream in which Steven was bound in chains and surrounded by all of us who were at his party. It was dark and scary, and then light came. Then someone said, "He's free." Beautiful peace and light and soft

music followed and suddenly I realized I was awake and I was saying, "Steven is free." God through this strange dream was assuring me: He was in charge. Not many days later in the mail we received a letter from an old friend of ours who is living in Indiana saying that he had begun praying August 29 for Steven. He prayed for seven days. He prayed Steven would remember his youth and his home and would repent and would call us. Those were his words in the letter. When the seven days ended he decided to pray seven more days and fasted a couple of those days. He finished praying September 14. The same day I had the dream. God used this friend to encourage us just when we needed encouragement. When Steven and Cindy were living in Minneapolis, we watched the roller coaster lifestyle affect their young son's life. Stevie was about three years old. Steven was not working. They had been evicted from their house. They were not keeping in touch with us. We were in the process of moving again. I was concerned about not staying connected to our grandson. I finally discovered where they were and arrived at the apartment building just minutes after Steven had been taken away in a squad car. Little Stevie had withdrawn into his own little play world and Cindy was hysterical. We took Stevie home with us and ended up keeping him for two months. Then again, a year and a half later when they were living in Virginia we learned that Steven had been in jail again. He was not working and once again they had been evicted. Cindy asked if I would come and get Stevie and take care of him again until they could get things sorted out. I went to Virginia and it turned out wonderfully that an old friend of ours lived forty-five minutes from Steve and Cindy's place and she was willing to let me stay there and drive me over to pick up little Stevie. He was thin and bewildered and all of his little mismatched clothes were in a garbage bag. Steven had disappeared because he didn't want to see me. I could not have coped with the sadness of this situation had my friend not been with me. Stevie ended up staying with us this time for three months in Minnesota.

Friends were available when I needed them. Friends listened to me. Friends took me to Al-Anon. Friends gave us legal advice. Friends helped us pay fines and treatment fees. Friends prayed for us. Slowly the anger has quieted. I sit still often in the presence of God. I let Him hold me. Sometimes I squirm like a two-year-old, but He doesn't let go. He reminds me from the words in Psalm 103 that He looks upon me with compassion as a Father looks on His child because He knows what I am made of. I find courage, the courage I need to change the things in my life I can change. I find grace, grace to accept the things I cannot change and I find wisdom to know the difference ...and to let God be God.

**Gene:** We are still pleasantly and thankfully surprised at how many friends and even people that we have never met eye to eye who told us they were praying for us, and especially for Steven, Cindy and Stevie.

My own coping was much different from Norma's. I mostly worked at just keeping my head above water. Some of this difference was probably due to male and female differences; some was my own temperament and the way God has wired me; and some was due to our upbringing and responses to life's experiences.

My primary coping was and is perseverance. Don't give up. Keep going. Don't quit. I believe that for one who is a believer of Jesus it's always too soon to quit. But in the process of knowing myself my coping skills were highly affected by my emotional attachment and glaring need to have people like me. I was rarely in touch with my feelings that God had created in me. The words of my mom sometimes colored my somewhat naïve and often superficial approach to life. "Smile. Everything is okay."

I coped with what was going on by thinking it was normal. Steven was simply going through teenage rebellion and testing a parent's love. I had been through it: drinking in high school, sneaking around, breaking rules. It was a part of growing up. We had to just simply ride it out. I had gotten sick and tired of my own life and I had come back to the Lord. It was temporary and normal, and certainly Steven would eventually come to his senses. Besides, Steven was an excellent athlete. He had good caring skills with people. He was sensitive. He had seen many good Christian role models. He would come out of it. God would not fail us. God had changed my life and this same Hound of Heaven would not give up on Steven.

But as time rolled on and there was no change, I realized that there was little that we could do until Steven was willing to get help and know he needed it. During this time I got my issues confused with Norma's issues. I got my issues confused with Steven's issues and I dealt with my

hurt in anger. I got angry with Steven for lying over and over. I think that was the part that I hated most of all. I got angry with him for stealing and breaking our rules. I can still remember physically wrestling with him in the hallway so that he wouldn't leave and go outside and do something destructive. I dealt with my own insecurities by being angry. I often got mad at Norma for demanding that I DO something to get involved and tell Steven what he needed to do. My desperately wanting, needing Steven to change led to extreme disappointment and oftentimes despair. I would spend extended time in prayer. Sometimes I would just drive out to a deserted park and drink a bottle of beer.

But I also had a church to pastor, a sermon to prepare and preach. I needed to give leadership and counsel to a church that was struggling just to exist. So I would often avoid Steven, Norma and my family by over-indulging in the ministry and others' needs. I kept going concluding that since Steven was no longer a child that I could stay in the ministry, that I was qualified. Anyway, no pastor's family was perfect in heart or in action. My example would be to freely share with the church leaders what was going on and to keep going. One helpful rest in the raging river was the occasional story of another family who had or were going through a similar situation. We were not alone. God was there by His grace and some helped us make sense out of our journey that had stretched our faith to the limit.

We were desperate at times to do something, to fix the problem, instead of really seeing Steven as a person. We tried everything to give him a second chance, a new start, a clean beginning over and over again. These myths and false hopes at that time of changing the scenery occupied our time, but proved futile. Drug treatment, counseling, drug testing, changing schools, sending him to work in construction for a summer with a friend in Florida, moving him into his own apartment—all were futile. We were making his choices for him, which led to an inadequate way of coping, since Steven had decided not to change. He was making his own choices and we didn't like them or agree with him.

Listen to Steven's pain in this letter that he wrote while he was a senior in high school.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I want to say I'm sorry for the way I acted today and tonight. I don't know what happened. It is hard to keep a positive attitude about all of the hours, the restrictions, the consequences when inside I'm so frustrated and mad with myself.

It feels like I have thousands of things to do and it feels like I'm not doing any of them. I feel like my senior year is really beat. I feel like a total failure in everything...the whole deal and then the whole scene at school. I feel like I got nothing out of all of my attempts at soccer, not even the league's most valuable player, let alone any kind of honors from a high school. And then I know I won't get into colleges and I haven't heard from any of them.

Dad and you and I are always arguing. You don't trust me. I know. I feel like I'm so angry inside that I can blow up so easily. I'm sorry that I do it to you and Dad, but I'm frustrated. I feel like when I leave the house and I'm alone I really should make the most of it because I know I'll have to be home soon. I want to do well this term. I want to get my community hours out of the way quickly. I want to pay off my bills. I want to get this thing out of the way. I'm really sorry about being such a letdown always. Sometimes I don't know what goes through my mind. I hate being told when and what to do and I guess I shouldn't. I'll try to do better. I promise.

We all cope, keeping our head above water in a raging current in different ways. God knows just how He made us and matches His abundant grace to fit the contortions of our own needs. Rebellion is real. Steven's choice of how he could have asserted his own identity and deal with his internal conflicts need not have come unexpectedly. The Bible clearly teaches the ravenous parasitic nature of sin feeding on the good. I know only God's grace seen in the hope-filled death of Christ on the cross is greater than the worm of sin.

I felt as a Christian parent, if I did everything right, my kids would turn out good. Often the process is more painful than we think we can endure. I am thankful that I trust God's goodness. It seems to me there are no quick answers or short pragmatic procedures to fix the problem. Because the problem is not a machine, but a person who needs understanding and the experience of God's

amazing grace. Besides, what is so bad about suffering pain in a sinful world when there is the healing freshness of the Good News of Jesus Christ. C. S. Lewis says, in the wonderful movie *Shadowlands*, "Pain is God's megaphone to get the attention of a needy world." My Abba Father, who knows what is good for me, used pain to get my attention. I know it helped me understand myself better. In a group session with the parents of kids that were going through drug treatment, the group facilitator asked me as she went around the circle how I was doing. I replied I was really sorry for the pain that Steven was going through. Her hard-hitting reply woke me up in a helpful way. "What about your pain?" I knew then that I was focusing on the wrong pain and that I hadn't dealt with some of my own issues.

I found that in my own ministry direction of coming to Minnesota to be the pastor of counseling, that in a strange sort of way, the experience of Steven's drug treatment and all that we went through, was probably the best preparation that I had in order to listen and minister to others. The excruciating pain of a child addicted to alcohol and drugs made my heart softer and more compassionate for others. It challenged my own response to God's Holy Spirit, to love others when nothing was coming back, except pain.

I have found in this experience that I have a great grandson, whom I love and really enjoy. I saw God's wonderful healing love and freeing grace in my son's life through this experience and the personal growth of our daughter-in-law Cindy. While Norma and I were in Michigan for our oldest son Peter's wedding, Steven, Cindy, and Stevie had driven out from Virginia to be a part of the wedding. We were staying at the same hotel. Norma and I were at breakfast when Steven came into the room and gently asked to join us. I was not prepared for what he said. He said to us, "I know that I have misused and lost my youth and my teenage years and I know the pain that I have caused you together as my parents. I just want to ask you to forgive me." Neither Norma nor I thought we would ever hear those words. The healing continues in the process of one who has dug a very deep hole and one who needs to see the clearness of God's grace in order to get out. I am discovering that prayer is not a magical lamp that I rub and get three wishes from God, but it is an intimate conversation—yelling out my dependence on Him who is my Abba Father. God is good and purposes good in our lives in and through our pain. Jesus' Good News is for broken lives, for those who have no one else to put them back together again.

Romans 8 probably says it best, for me, in summing up so much of what has been my confidence during this time.

**Romans 8:31-39:**

<sup>31</sup> *What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?*

<sup>32</sup> *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

<sup>33</sup> *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.*

<sup>34</sup> *Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*

<sup>35</sup> *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword—or addiction?*

<sup>36</sup> *As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."*

<sup>37</sup> *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

<sup>38</sup> *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,*

<sup>39</sup> *neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,—not even chemical addition—will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NIV)*