

God's Faithfulness and Our Perseverance

by Noy Sparks

I hardly know where to start. Things build up over time. For my wife Lynda and me it's been about eight years since our middle son Mark began to have some problems. We've been married 32 years. We were married right out of high school. God in His grace has kept us together. We have three children. The oldest is 32. He and his wife have been married eight years and live in Denver. Our youngest, a girl, is 22. She and her husband just gave us our first grandson about three months ago. They live in Ohio. Mark, our middle son, is 25 years old and he's the one we have been down this road with.

I'll never forget the day I came home from the office and got a phone call from the assistant headmaster from Mark's Christian school. He said, "I'm sorry to have to make this call. But I have it on good report or I wouldn't call you. I haven't caught Mark but I understand he's using marijuana." And he said again, "I have been careful to do all that I can to make sure that what I'm telling you is fact. I really wouldn't alarm you or make the call if I didn't believe this was the case." That just really shattered me. It was the furthest thing from my mind. We had a good family. I never in my wildest imagination thought we would go down this road. My initial reaction was really one of rage. I was enraged. I couldn't believe it.

I let Mark know in no uncertain terms that this would not happen ever, ever again. I gave him some very strict boundaries. I look back now and I realize I was doing everything I could just to keep things in control. In retrospect I don't know how I could have handled it any differently. I was just grasping for something.

Things seemed to be okay for a few months. Again, it was his junior year of high school. He was 16 years old. At the end of the year he and I went to Africa on a short-term missions trip. I thought it would be good for him to be on the mission field together with me. This was going to be a shot in the arm. We had a great time. Then he came back from that trip, completed his senior year and graduated from high school. During that period of time, there were a couple of times he didn't come home at night. That was pretty traumatic for us but things had settled down. In September he said, "I don't want to go to college." I didn't really push. I wanted him to go but I thought, "Okay, nothing says you have to do this." He said, "I just want to get a job right now and work a little bit." I said, "That would be fine."

The day he was to go for his job at Eckard Drugs, I went to the office. I came home at noon for lunch. I came in and his truck was gone. I assumed he had gone for his first day at work. I went in the house and happened to go by his room. The room was a little different from normal. I walked into the room and there was a note he had left. He had taken almost all of his clothes. I couldn't believe it. I can't tell you really what the note said exactly but it was very clear that he was gone. I got on the phone with his older brother who lived in Jacksonville, Florida at the time. "Listen, I got this note. Mark is gone. He may be on his way to your place just to get away. Do me a favor. If he gets there will you disable his truck? Take off the distributor cap. Do whatever you can so that I can get up there to him."

My older son said, "Dad, I can't do that."

"What do you mean, you can't do that?"

"That's not right. Mark is 18 years old. I don't agree with what he's done but I can't disable his truck." And right after that it was the strangest thing. It was a "God moment" when he said, "Dad, where are your guns?"

I was brought up hunting in Texas. I've been hunting with my father since I could walk. I've had guns for many years. I put the phone down, went back to my room and all of my guns were gone—my handgun, my rifle and my shotgun. I went back to the phone and said, "The guns are gone."

He replied, "I'll disable his truck."

He didn't go to Jacksonville. We didn't know where he was. Needless to say we were shattered; we were broken. This was on a Thursday. We didn't hear anything Friday. I have a good friend who is a private investigator. Formerly, he was a policeman. I called him and told him what happened.

He asked, "Is the truck in your name?"

"It's in my name."

"You can call the authorities and they'll stop him. They'll find him somewhere. They'll stop him but you have to be willing to do two things. Number one: you've got to be willing to press charges. If you don't press charges, they're not going to get involved. Number two: you've got to tell them that he has weapons in the truck."

I thought, "I can't do this." I said, "Jack, if they pull him over and he turns the wrong way in the cab then they shoot him."

"You've got to do that if you want them to stop him."

I can't really communicate to you all that was going on with us. One day led to the next. It was a Saturday and here comes Sunday. I didn't know how I was going to preach. God got me through it. At the end of the message, I told the people that my son had left. Spontaneously, all the men in my church got up and came down and gathered around me, put their hands on me and prayed for me.

Monday came and I told the Lord, "If I don't hear something tomorrow I'm going to have to call the authorities." He'd taken his passport and he had talked to a few friends. He had talked about going to Mexico. I thought to my self, "A few days in Mexico with these guns and we may never see him again." He wasn't streetwise. He's very sensitive and very bright. He was editor of his high school yearbook. He's just an exceptionally gifted young man, but he is gone. We found out he left with a girl he had met three weeks before.

On Tuesday I said, "If I don't hear something by the end of the day I'm going to have to call the police." I got a call about 2:30 in the afternoon from the Pueblo, Colorado Sheriff's Department. They asked, "Are you Mark Sparks' father?"

"Yes."

"We've got your son. He's in a pawn shop. He's not done anything wrong. He's 18; he's of age, but he's trying to sell some guns. We just want to know are these his guns or are they your guns?"

"They're my guns."

"We'll take them away if you'd like us to."

"Would you please do that."

"Okay, but he's not done anything wrong."

"Let me talk to him."

"We will let you talk to him if he wants to talk but we can't make him. Again, we're not holding him. He's not done anything wrong."

"If he'll talk with me let me talk with him."

They told me, "You go down to your police department, so they can teletype us that these are your guns. We'll take him to the station. If he'll talk, we'll do that."
I said, "Good."

To make a long story short I did talk to our son. The first thing I asked him was if he was okay. Before I could say that, when he heard my voice, the first thing he said was, "Dad, I love you."

There was a measure of emotions. I said, "Are you okay, Son?"
"I'm okay."

I said, "Son, what are you doing?"

He said, "Dad, we want to get married."

I thought things were insane enough as it was and now he's telling me he wants to marry this girl. We don't even know her name. And he doesn't even know her. I said, "Son, why don't you come home and we'll talk about it."

He said, "Dad, don't make me come home." I said, "I can't make you come home but I would appreciate it if you would come home."

I said, "I'll tell you what. I'll put the truck in your name. I won't keep you, I won't hold you. Just come home and face your mother." I was grasping for straws. "Face your mother and at least tell your mother what you want to do."

He said, "Dad, please, please don't make me come home."
So I said, "I tell you what. If you would just stay there, let me go get your mom at work and I'll call you back."

I picked up Lynda from work. We called him back. He maintained this is what they wanted to do. I said, "Okay. A couple of things. Number one: if you're going to get married, that's your business; but realize that you are stuck with whomever you marry. You better make sure you know what you're doing. Number two: do you have any money?"

"I have \$35. That's why I'm trying to sell the guns."

I said, "I'm going to wire you \$300."

He said, "Thank you, Dad."

We wired him the money.

He told me, "We're going to go to San Francisco."

I said, "That should be enough to get you there until you can get a job or something."

About four days later he called us. He never left Colorado. He stayed there for three months. He would call us periodically. I would think, to be a good father, I've got to tell him that, "You're in sin. God's going to deal with you." I did that a couple times. Then I had this realization that if I tell him something he already knows every time he calls, pretty soon he's not going to call at all. I'm going to destroy any lines of communication. He would call and I would want to say something but he would talk about how beautiful the mountains were in Colorado. Or, he would ask if I had seen the Dallas Cowboys playing or whatever. I would try to make conversation just to keep the door open and God in His ways kept the door open.

Four months later he called and said, "Would you mind if I moved back home?"

I said, "Please do, but understand, Mark, that if you come back home there are some boundaries. You're not going to use drugs. You're not going to use alcohol."

He said, "I know that." So he came back home.

For the next year things were up and down. When I found out he was using again, I would make him leave. He wouldn't have anywhere to go. He would live in his truck sometimes. He would live with a friend. And then he would come back home and say, "I know what the boundaries are. May I come home?"

I would say, "This is your home. You're welcome; but again, we're not going to enable you. You cannot use drugs."

There are times when this would be back and forth. I can't tell you how many times. There would be times we'd find out he had been using. I would say, "You know you've got to leave." I'd see him. I would sit in the front room. I could see down the hallway. He'd go in his room. I'd see him open the door and pack his stuff. He'd come out. He'd stand in the front door and say, "I love you guys, but I'm gonna have to leave."

I'd say, "I don't want you to leave but you cannot stay and do what you're doing." And he would leave.

This went on for several months. Then one day after he had come home again he said, "I really would like to go to college." So he went to Liberty University. He was there 11 months. I got a call one day and the Dean of Men said, "Pastor Sparks, I hate to say this but we found marijuana in your son's room. He's going to have to leave the school. We ought to call the authorities but we're not going to do it. But we can't have this on campus." So Mark was made to leave Liberty University and he came home.

He was home for a few months and then moved out again. It was back and forth. Finally he came home one more time. He got a job. He was doing pretty well until he met a girl who introduced him to heroin. When I say that, that's the truth. I don't blame her because she didn't make him use heroin but that's who introduced him. I got out the Psalms a few times and read David praying, "Dash their little ones against the stones." I prayed, "Lord, if you have to kill this girl to keep my son clean, do it." That's how angry and afraid I was. "If You have to kill her then kill her." I'm not proud of that prayer and attitude but that's just some of the feelings I had. You're Not Alone has helped many of us fathers understand that it is a very "father-thing" to want to hurt the one who introduces or sells drugs to our kids.

They were arrested a few months later for grand theft. He was given three years probation. While he was on probation he was arrested for marijuana possession. He was sentenced to 18 months in a state rehab residential facility. He stayed in the facility for eight months. He left without permission. He was arrested again and he's in jail today. He was sentenced about a month ago. The state prosecutor wanted to give him the minimum of a year and a half in the state penitentiary. The judge said, "I don't think he's going to get drug help there. That's why I'm going to keep him in the county jail for a year."

I think Mark knows the Lord. I think he's a believer, but I see these highs and lows. I see times when it seems absolutely demonic. There are times where I can't believe some of the things that come out of his mouth. I don't understand it. I just don't understand it. I'd like to stand here today and say that we've handled this with great unshakeable faith. But the fact is, we have not. It's been a spiritual and emotional roller coaster. There's been the shock, the denial and the guilt question, "What have we done wrong?" There has been confusion, anger and fear. I remember praying right before he was arrested. I was lying in bed. I couldn't sleep. I said, "Lord, I don't know what Mark's up to but I ask You to please, please, Father, do not let him get involved in the legal

system.” And I said, “I may not know what I’m asking but I think, Father, I would rather see him dead than in jail. So I beg You, don’t let that happen.” Within a matter of three weeks, he was arrested for grand theft. I’ll never forget the day the police came and handcuffed my son in front of the parsonage, put him in the patrol car and drove off.

We were disillusioned, hopeless, depressed, profoundly sad and grieving. It devastated our finances. We never had a lot to begin with. We had a home that we bought when we were first married in Texas. When we moved here to Florida, my grandmother and aunt moved in to the house in Texas as renters. They lived together until my grandmother passed away. We sold our house in order to get an attorney for our son. Whether that was the right thing to do, I can’t say. There just have not been any easy answers for us. Again, I don’t stand here today and say that we did the right thing. I cannot tell you we did the right thing. I’m just telling you what we have done. Socially there has been humiliation and embarrassment.

The day after he was arrested, before I could get out of bed that morning, a friend of mine called and said, “Pastor, have you seen the morning paper?”

I said, “No.”

He said, “Your son’s picture is on the front page of the inside section of the newspaper. His picture is there along with some girl telling about his arrest.”

So there was great humiliation and great embarrassment.

Spiritually, there were times when I didn’t want to read the Bible and I didn’t. Prayer was often mechanical and repetitious. I didn’t know what to pray. I’d prayed a million times. I don’t know how to word it differently. I don’t know how to use a different phrase. I just didn’t know what to do. You just pray and then sometimes you don’t pray.

But what has God done to enable us to persevere? To begin with, by His grace He’s given me a good relationship with Lynda. We’ve been able to communicate. That has been a lifesaver. We have a good relationship. That is not to say that we haven’t had some heated differences. About the second major legal bump we went over Lynda said, “You’re not going to get an attorney if this happens again.” I said, “I don’t know what I’m going to do.” It has not always been a rosy picture where we have been hand in hand agreeing on everything. There have been those times when we really disagreed but through it all we’ve been able to communicate and stay together. Normally, but not every time, when one of us is down, the other one is up. It’s been so strange. I may be down in the pit and Lynda is maybe not on a cloud but she’s doing well. She’s hanging in there and is able to encourage me. Then there are times when she may feel like there’s no use, there’s no hope; and I’ve been able to encourage her. God is great in that regard. He’s given us seasons of reprieve where there have been periods where everything seems to be going well. God provided good legal counsel. The attorney happened to be a believer. He has been an immense help and encouragement to us. He even prayed with us.

About a year before I resigned to go back to school, the church gave me a three month paid sabbatical. Sabbaticals are not something our denomination normally does. It was not something I manipulated. It was providential. In fact, the deacons offered me six months off with pay. I took three months that summer. They did what God directed them to do. We’ve always been up front with them. The first situation was the marijuana when he was in high school. I told the deacon board what had happened and said, “If you want me to resign, I’ll resign. If I can’t take care of my own household, how can I take care of a church of God?” They said, “You’ve been here for a long time. We’ve known your children since they were small. We know how you raised them. We don’t think that 1 Timothy 3 would apply in this situation.” There might have been rigidity on my part, but I didn’t see it at the time. There were elements of legalism and self-righteousness, but obviously you don’t see your own self-righteousness. We had a pretty tight ship at the house. Now we look back and think we should have loosened up in some areas. Mark has changed that in a lot of ways. I know there’s been an element of

compassion that God has given both of us. I would sit in my office sometimes and counsel parents about their children. I wouldn't say it but I would think, "Why don't you get control of your own children?" Now, I don't look at it the same. God's taught us about picking our battles. My son loves to smoke. He shaves his head. His nose was pierced. He gave himself a big marijuana tattoo on his leg. After we went through some of these things, I realized I was not going to fight him over smoking. I don't think it's good for him. I'm not advocating that you take my position. I'm just telling you what we did. But I realize there were some battles that I was trying to fight that I don't need to fight, like his music.

God has given us a little wisdom of how to pick and choose some battles. When my son left for Colorado, a lady called and said, "Pastor, I've been praying for you, the family and Mark. I have a Scripture. I don't know if this will help but it's Philippians 4:6-7:

"Be anxious for nothing, but by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God that passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds on Christ Jesus."

I thought about that verse, "*Be anxious for nothing.*" I did all that I could to find some loophole around that verse. In this situation with my son, I can be anxious, can't I? But as I began to think about the verse, "*Be anxious for nothing, [and don't worry about anything] but with prayer and thanksgiving make your requests known to God*" I realized that this one passage has been an anchor for me over the years. I remember, "God, You said this. I guess You really do mean that I'm not supposed to worry."

Mark called us two nights ago. A guy in his cellblock was beaten severely. The guy beat him and beat him. Mark said when he was finished, the young man went into the shower and came back out. The guy who beat him up said, "I'm not finished." And he beat him some more. They had to take him out of the cellblock and put him into isolation for his own protection. Mark is probably the smallest guy in the cellblock. Fear and a lot of other emotions came over me. And I'm thinking, "God, You've protected him this long. Please, I beg You to continue to protect him." Now, part of me wants to say, that's the consequences of my son's actions. But the legitimate consequences do not take away the concern and compassion that you have for your own flesh and blood.

I want to close by saying I really am convinced that God can be close to us during these tough times. How I got to the first You're Not Alone conference is an expression of God's grace. Lynda and I were in the car on a Saturday evening. The cell phone rang. A private investigator friend of mine said, "Noy, there's a guy, a pastor, who's going through it with his daughter on drugs. You ought to hear what he says." We turned on the radio and listened to the last ten minutes of the interview. The pastor said there was going to be a conference at his church in Phoenix. He gave the telephone number. My wife said, "You're going." We men know sometimes how when women say certain things and use a certain inflection in their voice, the decision is already made for us. I said, "You know, Lynda, I don't need to ask them questions. Besides, what are they going to say? What are they going to say to me? There are no pat answers. I think it will be a waste of money that we don't have. I really don't want to go." She said, "I want you to go." So I went as a "*good obedient*" husband. I went there and it was so good for me. I didn't leave with a lot of answers, but God answered my prayer because He drew me closer to Him. Also, it was an emotional release because I could share with other parents in the same predicament with one of their kids.

Now, what does the future hold? I don't have a clue. The statistics for heroin addicts are alarming. Mark sometimes calls from jail and says he has been thinking of us. He says to his mother, "Mom, I want you to know you've got your son back." There is a part of me that is both skeptical and hopeful at the same time. So I don't know what the future holds. I don't have a clue. But I know God holds the future. I know that's a cliché but I know that it is also true that God's doing something. I thank Him for what He is doing. The pain is not fun but what comes out in the end, when you look back at it—God has been working.

