

Learning to Live One Day at a Time as Parents

by John and Susan Vawter

SUSAN: As I was thinking about this talk and preparing for it, I was asking myself, why is it so hard to live one day at a time? I realized that this pain and this fear that we've lived with in regard to our daughter and our son also is probably the worst pain and fear that we've ever experienced. So I am going to share some of the reasons for that pain and fear and then go on to share some things that have helped me to deal with it one day at a time.

When I think of both of our children, Stephanie and Michael, they received Christ as young children about five and six years old. Being their mother was one of my favorite things. In those younger years it was just delightful. I thoroughly enjoyed it. The first signs of rebellion in our daughter were in early adolescence. This began to be some very tough times. Then, of course, the more serious problems of the drug use. Also in their teen years they both walked away from the relationship they had with Christ. This rebellion and this rejection of their faith and then the beginning of the use of drugs was so hurtful because all that we had tried to teach them, all that we had done in raising them, in trying to set an example, in trying to impart faith to them seemed to be rejected. Of course, I couldn't help but take that rejection personally to some degree so that was part of the pain. Then there was the fear for their eternal salvation. The fear that maybe they never would come back to Christ and walk with Him. Then there were also the fears that I had about the choices they were making. Those teenage years and those early 20's are the years when young people normally make the decisions that chart the course for the rest of their lives: their choice of education, of job, career, of choice of a marriage partner. I was very fearful about choices they might make during this period of time.

There was great sadness. I looked at both of them and what they must have been going through, there was this sense that they must be experiencing a complete lack of peace in their lives. The turmoil, depression, all of the things that they must be feeling and the fact that they had, at least as children, touched or felt touched by God's love and grace and then now at a point where they no longer felt that love and grace, it brought me to such compassion for them for what they must be going through as they experienced this separation from God.

So then, how can I cope with these sorts of fears and hurt and pain and how can I live one day at a time and learn to put this pain and worry and fear in God's hands and live a victorious life. First of all, it is, this is a matter of facing the realities. This is their choice, the choice that they've made to turn their back on Christ, the choices they make to use drugs or alcohol. These are their choices. God gives all of us a free will. Later on I am going to refer to a book but I'll introduce it now. It is called The Prodigals and Those Who Love Them by Ruth Bell Graham. A little quote that I found in her book talks about this matter of choice. She relates an episode when a guest at their table, a pastor, was sharing about his own son and his son's rebellion. I'll just read from her book. "'Dad, I'm not at all sure I can follow you any longer in your simple Christian faith' stated the clergyman's son when he returned from the university for holidays with a fledgling's scholar's assured arrogance. The father's black eyes skewered his son, who was lost, as C.S. Lewis put it 'in the invincible ignorance of his intellect.' 'Son,' the father said, 'That is your freedom, your terrible freedom.'" I had to accept the fact that they were making these choices. They're not my choice but I can't make them change their minds. Only God can affect what is happening in their lives and affect those choices. A passage of scripture that is very meaningful to me in relationship to this idea of choice is Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son. As you remember from the story, the prodigal takes his inheritance, goes off to the far country, squanders it all, comes to the absolute bottom and recognizes that this is just not going to work and heads back home to try to throw himself on his father's mercy. As the story unfolds, the father is watching and waiting for the son. When he sees him from afar off he runs to him and embraces him and with forgiveness and compassion brings him back into the home and into the family. It's the father like that who allows the choice and yet is waiting and looking for the son, to welcome

him back and to bring that forgiveness that gave me hope about this terrible choices our kids were making.

Other scripture has helped me get through many days, as I felt hopeless. I often put passages of scripture that have been very meaningful to me on cards. I love to take walks in the morning. It's a time when I look at my day. I talk things over with the Lord. It's a time of prayer. Sometimes I take these little cards and meditate on these verses. I'm just going to share a few that have been helpful. Psalm 103, verses 8-13, "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His loving kindness to those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as the Father has compassion on His children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him." And just the fact of God's compassion reaching out not only to me in forgiveness and accepting me but the fact that I know He reaches out to my prodigal, to my son, and to my daughter. An example of God's compassion and a way that I know He reached out to our Stephie happened in the midst of the time she was using drugs. She told us during her time of recovery that often before she was about to shoot up would think of her two deceased grandparents, John's dad, Harry, and my mom, whom she called Nana. She said she would think, "I wonder if Nana and Grandpa Harry are sad in heaven as they see me doing this?" God was making Himself known to her in reaching out to her and reminding her of the love that she had known.

Jeremiah 29:11 says, "For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope." And one of the great deterrents to living one day at a time is hopelessness. And this verse reminds me that there is hope. Shortly after the visit up in Oregon when we had heard our son tell us that he had been smoking pot for a year we came home very depressed and very sad and very shocked at this news. Shortly after we were home, we called a friend of ours in Minnesota who is a counselor. He knew us well but also he had known our son. As we were relating these circumstances and as I was sharing my hopelessness and fear for our son, our friend Terry said, "You know, Susan, if you look at these circumstances, you are going to be hopeless. It is going to look like it's without hope but if you can focus on God, then you can see that there is hope." And so this passage was a reminder to me of the fact that I can focus on Him and that is where my hope comes from.

Isaiah 40:11 says, "He is like a shepherd, feeding his flock, gathering the lambs in his arms, holding them against his breasts and leading to their rest the mother ewes." This is a fairly new verse to me. I have only known this verse for a year and a half. When I first was reading this, it made me so thankful for how God had gathered me into His arms, how God had brought me to Him and would hold me against His breasts, the personal, loving image of God. Then I began applying it to my children. I may not be able to do anything about this situation but God is working to gather them to Himself, He wants to hold them against His breasts, that they might hear His heartbeat of love. And then there is that last little phrase that says, "and leading to their rest the mother ewes," and boy did this mother need rest. That was just the reminder that God wanted me to leave the job to Him. He is the Shepherd and that I could sit back and rest and watch Him accomplish His plan for them.

Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. As the rivers of water, He turns it where ever He will." And here again, there was a little explanation of this verse in Ruth Bell Graham's book, The Prodigals and Those Who Love Them. I loved the explanation that she included. It says, "And how does God deal with the stubborn will, especially when that will is the object of loving concern, even desperate prayer. I found encouragement in Matthew Henry's commentary on Proverbs 21:1. Henry writes, 'God can change men's minds, can turn them from that which they seem intent upon, as the husbandman by canals and gutters turns the water through his grounds which does not alter the nature of the water nor put any force upon it any more than God's providence does upon the native freedom of man's will but directs the course of it to serve his own purpose.'" This was such an encouragement to me because I know God won't violate our will and yet I know He can use the circumstances of life to draw them to Himself, to

bring them to the bottom of whatever it is that they are dealing with and to hopefully allow them to turn to Him.

Ruth Bell Graham's book, The Prodigals and Those Who Love Them, deals not only with historic prodigals who through history had turned from God and yet were brought back but intersperses those historical accounts with her own writings, her poems, her prayers, passages of scripture, writings of other people that were meaningful to her. She knows what she's talking about because she and Billy Graham have two sons who were prodigals. Of course, now they are walking with Christ and serving God. One little excerpt from her book is called, "What makes the trials easier?" She makes four brief points: 1, It helps when I know who is in control and God is in control. 2, I know He is sovereign. 3, It helps when I know I'm not alone in my suffering. 4, And thankfully God walks with us through this hard time.

I've been so privileged to have my husband John to walk through this time with, to share with, not that we always agreed but that we could depend on each other. Support groups such as NARANON and friends that were trusted and were helpful. I knew I could relate my feelings to a Bible study group in my neighborhood. This group of women has prayed for me for about six years. We cannot go it alone knowing we have others to share and help us along the way. It helps when I know the purpose of God behind it. God does have a plan. He does He will bring His glory out of these things. It helps because I become more compassionate and understanding of others. And I think going through this painful experience, I'm not so quick to give advice to other people but rather I want to listen and hear what they are going through and try to just come alongside them. I hope that I am more empathetic and compassionate for other people that are going through pain.

Another author that I have discovered in the last couple of years is a man named Brennan Manning. A couple of his books I have read several times. One is called Abba's Child and the other is called Ruthless Trust and as you can tell from the titles, and also from Ruth Bell Graham's title, these books don't have to do with drug addiction, they don't necessarily tell us how to cope with it or how to fix it or what recovery is all about but rather they deal with the love of God, and how God's love, God's compassion, God's forgiveness reaches out to us. It's that love and forgiveness and His strength that gives us the ability to trust and to take that next step, to get through that next day and to remember how much He not only loves us but loves our addict children and is reaching out to them as well.

JOHN: In the world of addiction we hear the phrase, "One day at a time" for the addict to stay clean and sober. We often think this applies only to the addict but it applies to those who are parents of the addict, too. In the Bible we are told to live lives of faith. "That which is not of faith is sin. Without faith it is impossible to please God." But when our child is abusing or addicted to drugs or alcohol and ruining his/her life it is difficult to live one day at a time. It is difficult to live by faith. It can be difficult to trust God. Fear can consume us. Concern for our child can cripple us. Life looks bleak; life is bleak. The future looks bleak; the future may be bleak. It may not turn out well. We parents can feel hypocritical at worst or at least inconsistent because we know our faith in God is weak. We have taught, "The joy of the Lord is my strength." We believe that Jesus was telling the truth when He said that the peace He gives is better than the peace the world gives. He also said that His peace in us flows as a river. Yet, with drugs and alcohol in our family, we may not be experiencing that peace. The relationship with God is not all that it was cracked up to be is what we may be thinking.

So, in the midst of this pain and fear how do we get back on the road of trusting God for the future of our child? This is a fundamental question in our recovery and maturity as parents of addicts and those who abuse drugs or alcohol. I certainly want to be candid in stating that I have not arrived in this area. But, I can explain the journey that I have been on since July 7, 1997—our 30th anniversary and my first Sunday as pastor of Bethany Community Church—when we discovered our daughter Stephanie was addicted to heroin.

Pat Boris wrote her masters thesis at the University of Minnesota on “Stress in Parents of Substance Abusing Adolescents.” It is no surprise that there is more stress in the home of the family with a child who abuses drugs or alcohol. Boris says, “extreme turbulence” often is present. She says such abuse may be accompanied by irritability, secrecy, lying, skipping school, poor grades and arrest. These are debilitating to family relationships. And, sometimes—just as in the life of Job—our critics and friends alike “encourage” us by judging us and assuming this drug issue in our family is a direct result of bad parenting on our part. All of this stress requires adjustment in our families. But, these adjustments are difficult “when the equilibrium is tipped and a crisis results.” And, I know from personal experience that when the equilibrium is tipped it is hard to make sense out of today and trust God for today and even harder to trust Him for tomorrow.

Boris says resilience and positive behavioral patterns allow the parents to recover and maintain the integrity of the family. This requires flexibility because parenting an addictive or abusive child is far more stressful than parenting a non-addictive child. This is all very confusing, time consuming, energy draining and frightening. And, in the midst of all this turmoil we are to live one day at a time and live by faith. **Thanks a lot, God!**

The issues of faith and one day at a time have been difficult for me. I am an A-type personality. I love to fix situations. I am a good controller. My kids using drugs was the one thing I could not control. I was fearful for the future of my kids. I still remain fearful.

The “one day at a time” principle both bothers me and helps me. It bothers me because it forces me to realize I am doing something wrong. I am focusing on the problem. I am losing my way. I am getting emotional. On the other hand and in a more productive light, the one day at a time principle forces me to rethink where God is in all of my pain over my child’s use of drugs and where He is relative to working in their lives.

In some of our darkest days when Stephanie was an adolescent I was encouraged with Paul’s words in Colossians, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” I realized that my only hope for heaven is my faith in what God says in the Bible. It then dawned on me that I could work backwards from that eternal truth. “Christ in you, the hope of glory” to “Christ in you, the hope for today” to “Christ in you, the hope for Stephanie.” This helped me begin to take my focus off my pain and put it back where it belongs—on Christ Who is our hope.

However, I am afraid that as a minister and teacher of God’s word I sometimes make things too simple. My sermons and my teachings sometimes make it sound as though living by faith is as easy as swallowing a “Jesus pill.” I forget that Paul says, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Faith is nurtured and it grows over time.

But, I found that for my ability to trust God—to grow—I had to be honest. I had to be honest to say, “God, I am scared today. God, I am angry today. God, this is not a good day.” That honesty—when I can achieve it—allows me to focus on four things: 1, the situation; 2, my fear; 3, God; and, 4, His ability to work. Such honesty means there can be no Christian platitudes or “Christianese.” It has to be downright candor.

This honesty allows me to ask God to work today in my children’s lives. This honesty allows me to acknowledge that there is nothing I can do today to help my children except turn them over to the care and love of God Who loves them more than I do.

I also find that when I can and do give God my fears today that the future does not look so bleak because I am focusing on today and what God can do today. The future and my fears for it do not seem to be so big because I am allowing God to minister to me today. And, instead of being held captive by my fear for tomorrow I am asking God to work today. And, when I see Him working today I can thank Him for the good, step-by-step benefits and improvements I see. Pat Boris in her research tells us that our kids’ abuse or addiction can attack or affect us in four areas: physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. I have found that the identification of those

four areas of “attack” can help me as a parent. Stephanie was in Mexico when Susan and I first learned she was on heroin. My first reaction—after catching my breath—was fear—absolute fear. Terror might be a better word. We were fortunate because she returned to her Denver home and was in detox and then treatment within 30 hours of our getting the news. But, a year later—almost to the day—our son Michael told us he was smoking marijuana. Again, that emotion of fear arose...and persisted because he did not think he needed help.

Of the four affects—physical, emotional, social and spiritual—I was and am affected by three of them. **Emotionally**, I went through my new ministry—as the pastor of a church with 2000 in attendance—with a low-grade fear always about me. It never left. **Socially**, I think I withdrew. I did not want to talk about drugs in my family. I did not mind talking openly with close friends but I did not care to talk to others. I was always on guard for the person who would pry, want details, assume I was a bad parent or want to give advice. **Spiritually**, I just felt as though I was running on half my cylinders. Fear was a stronger motivation than my faith.

But in the providence of God, He brought me a veteran of detachment and living one day at a time into my life. I had formed a prayer team of three men at the church who prayed every week for me. One hammered me...and I mean hammered me...that I was not responding but reacting to the drug situation in my family. He forced me to see that drugs had become **the center of my life**. That sounds strange because I am not the drug addict. And, we usually perceive the addict as the one who has drugs at the center of his/her life. What my friend helped me see was that I was not trusting God. I was drug focused rather than God focused. I was circumstance focused rather than God focused. I was not helping the situation. Indeed, I was probably hurting the situation. My friend helped me realize that I needed to let my kids accept responsibility for their actions. I needed to let Michael stumble and tumble if need be. I needed to allow God to work in their lives **and** I needed to let God work in my life. My friend was honest, however. In the midst of his no-nonsense approach, he told me things that I knew and had taught others—but did not know how to apply to the painful issue of drugs. Faith and trust in God are step-by-step developments. How am I doing today? What can I do today to help my kids? What should I ask God to do today? Slowly the blinders on my eyes began to come off. What my friend saw so clearly I began to see with ever-increasing focus.

I now see it more clearly—much of the time. I am learning to be honest today about where my kids are; where I am emotionally, socially and spiritually; is there anything I can do today to help them; is there anything I can do today to turn the situation over to God and ask Him to work in my kids' lives.

Living one day at a time really is the equivalent of recognizing temptation. Paul tells us to flee temptation. But to know what temptation is I need to know the standard of what is correct, myself, the temptation and the result of succumbing to the temptation. About a year or so after she left treatment Stephanie told us about a man who said one night at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, “I am going to drink tomorrow.” I did not get his meaning. Stephanie explained, “He is tempted to drink today. He is not ignoring the temptation. But, he made a commitment this morning not to drink today. So, he is putting it off until tomorrow.” You probably understand it but I did not. So, I asked, “And, what will he do tomorrow?” She answered, “He will put it off again. He lives one day at a time. He does not ignore temptation. But, he keeps his daily commitments.”

Learning the one-day at a time principle has not been easy for me. It has taken lots of work and honesty. When drugs hit I had the tendency to look at the next 30 years and assume the worst. What if Stephanie relapsed? What if her drug dealer called her? What if Michael did not quit smoking marijuana? What if his wife got tired of him? What if he could not get a job? The “what ifs” are similar to looking at the Grand Canyon. You cannot jump across. But, you can start down one step at a time; get to the bottom, rest and then start up the other side one step at a time. But all the way you have to be drinking water and hydrating yourself or there will be internal effects you do not even recognize until you are dehydrated, exhausted and can not go on.

As you follow the analogy I first thought I could jump over the canyon and do my kids' work for them. When I realized I could not, I started the step-by-step, day-by-day process—but I was not hydrating by trusting God on a day-to-day basis. I am now learning how to do that. I get a fair number of calls and emails from parents whose kids are abusing drugs. I see the same reaction in them. They want the "Jesus pill" to make this all go away quickly. I hear their frustration when I tell them it can be a long process and they have to take it one day at a time. If we are honest we recognize that faith does not come naturally. The flesh wars against the Spirit. Godly life and responses do not come naturally. So, why would faith and living one day at a time come naturally? Maybe that is why Jesus told us to have no concern for tomorrow. I would never suggest that what has happened and is happening in our family is an absolute. It may be coincidental. But, nevertheless I am watching our daughter move farther and farther away from heroin. She celebrates 62 months of sobriety today and tells us she thinks less and less about heroin. Michael told us that he has not smoked since his baby son was born. So, I am learning in brand new ways that God can work in my kids' lives without me and that He wants me to focus on Him, focus on His ability to work. He wants me to focus on Him today. He wants me to be honest with Him today. He wants me to remember that it is the Holy Spirit who works in my kids conforming them to the image of Christ...one step and one day at a time. It is not easy but it is worth the journey. I am doing better today than I did yesterday and I hope to do better tomorrow than today.