

Keeping Faith While in the Valley of the Shadow of Drugs

by **Bill and Margaret Hansell**

Bill: *I am a farm boy.* I grew up on a farm 2.5 miles north of Athena, a small farming community in northeast Oregon. I am the fifth generation of my family to live in this area.

In the fall of 1957 when I was in the seventh grade, something took place that was to have a profound impact on the rest of my life. I wanted to play football on the grade school team. My Dad said it was fine, but I would have to walk home since I would miss the bus, because of the after school practice. Even though I did not much like the walk, I wanted to play football, and I turned out.

Part way through the season one day after practice, an event took place in the locker room that caused me some real concern. One of the eighth graders had smuggled into school some hard liquor, in a Vitalis hair oil bottle. He had snuck into his dad's liquor cabinet and filled an empty Vitalis bottle with the hooch.

The older boys thought it was real macho, as they passed the bottle around taking a suck. My reaction was one of real repulsion. It was wrong and evil, and it bothered me greatly. I might also add that both of my parents drank, and it had not been too long before that my Father had told me anytime I wanted to have a drink, to let him know. So the repulsion was not because of my upbringing. In fact, I do not know where it came from at that time, but it was there.

On the walk home after practice, I made a covenant with God. In fact, I can show you the spot where I was on that road, over 40 years later. I told God, and I was but 12 at the time, that I would never drink or smoke. And to this day, I have never broken that vow.

All through high school, into college and fraternity life, I never touched alcohol. In fact my nickname at the Sigma Chi House was "Dry Bill."

This standard was not completely a result of my conversion. I grew up in a mainline Protestant church, but it was not until my freshman year at the University of Oregon, that I trusted Christ as my Lord and Savior. Joe Aldridge, later to become President of Multnomah School of the Bible, was on Campus Crusade Staff that year, and he shared the Four Spiritual Laws with me. It was over seven years after I made that vow that I became a Christian.

My point is not to pat myself on the back or say I am better or holier than someone else. This is what happened to me. I grew up in a home where my parents drank, I have been around friends who did and do, but I never did. In over 32 years of marriage, Margaret and I have never had any alcohol in our home. . . no beer, no wine, no liquor, of any form. So when we learned of our son having a drinking problem, it was a shock and a surprise. It was totally foreign to what we had done and had taught in our home.

Margaret and I were married spring break of our senior year. We both graduated from the University of Oregon in the spring of 1967, and joined the staff of Campus Crusade that summer. We were on staff for the next 12+ years, serving at Berkeley, Sacramento, and the last five years in Sydney, Australia. We have six children, one son and five daughters. We have one married daughter, and they have given us our one grandson.

We returned from Australia in 1979, and moved to the Athena area, to raise our six children in a rural environment, and to be near my side of their extended family. I worked on the family farm until 1983. The previous year I ran for County Commissioner and was elected. I took office in 1983. Presently, I am in my 17th year, the first year of my fifth term.

One other item of background has to do with sheep. On our farm we have a flock of several hundred ewes. I have been involved in all aspects of raising sheep, and I will draw upon these experiences as I continue with my thoughts. Sheep are interesting critters, and it is not an accident the Bible is full of sheep illustrations.

It is our oldest child, son Bill, which is our prodigal. He is 29 years old, single, and has multiple addictions, or at least addictive behavior. He has trouble with drugs, alcohol, and gambling. We had no idea the extent or depth of his problems until the spring of 1992. I won't go into details, but he was a student at Willamette University, and through a series of events, we learned of his usage. In the fall of 1992, he went through a month-long treatment program, and was diagnosed as an alcoholic/addict. He was clean for about nine months, and then began using again, and has done so until the present.

One of the questions I asked was "*Lord, how did we get here? What happened?*" All of a sudden we were in the valley of the shadow of death, having no idea how in the world we ended up there. It was almost instantaneous. Our journey was quick, like a parachute jump, into this valley. And I believe we will be in this valley as long as our son continues to make these choices.

So how did we get there and what can and should we do? For me the Shepherd's Psalm 23, has been very helpful, particularly the 4th verse.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Thou are with me."

This verse has an interesting background. It refers to a practice in Palestine, and most every other sheep raising area in the world including the Western part of our country. It was the practice of moving sheep from winter quarters to spring and summer pastures.

During the fall and winter months, the flock would be kept at the home facility, where lambing and shearing would take place. There is no pasture to graze so hay or grain needs to be fed. But in the spring when the grass begins to grow, sheep are moved to other pastures usually at higher elevations. In order to get to the summer pastures, you have one of two routes to travel: either the ridges or the valleys. The reason you usually can't take the ridges, is the lack of forage and water. It is in the valleys where the streams exist, as well as forage and cool shade. But it is also in the valley where the dangers exist, hence the reference to "the valley of the shadow of death." But notice two words: "walk" and "through." We travel through the valley. It is not a box canyon. We do not go there to stay. We are passing through to greener pastures, and God has a plan for us. Sometimes traveling takes longer, but we are always moving through the valley. Let me go back to the farm for a moment. One of the most critical times in the sheep's life cycle is lambing. The little lamb is fragile and it is easy for them to die. You bring the ewes into a holding pen and check them every two hours around the clock. If they show signs of lambing, you move them into what we called a jug pen, and stay with them until the lambs appear. Once born, you need to make sure the ewe takes them, and that they get up and start nursing. There is a lot of time energy and effort in getting the newborn established and going.

Our children are like lambs. They start off very helpless and a lot of time, energy, and love are invested to provide for them. We teach, train, discipline, and love them as they grow. Sheep are always making stupid choices. I think they actually look for ways to get into trouble, often serious trouble. When the Scriptures say "all we like sheep have gone astray" it paints an accurate picture.

One of the primary goals of any parent is to prepare our lambs to be independent. To provide a foundation upon which they can build their lives. For Christians, the foundation is Christ. But each of our children is a free moral agent. They will make choices, and not always make the right

ones. Some of their choices will cause us to end up in the particular valley; I am calling the valley of the shadow of drugs.

I mentioned earlier some of the questions I asked. Let me share with you the answers I believe the Lord helped me to process.

How did we get in this valley? For me the answer is simple. In one respect, it doesn't really matter. The reasons someone chooses to use and abuse usually are many and varied. but ultimately it is and continues to be their decision.

If we look for blame or reasons why we are in the valley, we will never find peace. Was I the perfect father at all times? NO! Did I make mistakes? YES! Is it my fault they made this choice? NO! Is there something looking back I would have done differently? PROBABLY! But so what! All six of our children were raised in basically the same environment, along with two foster boys, as well as hosting 4 international students. Only our son chose the direction he did.

Am I alone in this valley? NO NOT AT ALL! The promise is "Thou art with me." The Lord is in the valley with me. He never abandons or leaves me to face the dangers by myself.

Should I fear? There is a fear or understanding of what sin can and will do to a person, especially substance abuse. It does and will kill. I do not know of anyone who wants his or her child to die such a death. There is that fear. But at the same time we do not need to live in fear. We can fear no evil because of the Lord. He is with us.

Is there a reason I am in the valley? I think so. I did not choose to be in this valley, in fact it is someone else's choices, but God is still sovereign, and He still loves me. This is not the only valley I have ever been through, nor will it be the last. I am being refined, and that sometimes is a painful process. The valley is His way to lead me to greener pastures, to make it to higher ground in my walk of faith. I am more like another farm animal than a sheep. I am a chicken. I do not like pain, I do not like to suffer, and I do not like hardships. I will never enter any valley on my own. I am too big of a chicken.

But I can also say, that when the Lord has taken me through those valleys of life, I am a better person, with a stronger faith. They have been tremendous times of growth, maturity and learning to trust. This valley is no exception. I wish I wasn't here, and I look forward to when I exit the valley, but I am trusting while I am in it.

The real issue perhaps is how do I travel through this valley? How do I react? Will I trust in my Shepherd?

Margaret: Throughout this weekend we have seen how husbands and wives are brought together by the providence of God ... a lot of times two people very unlike the other. Also, we have seen how we are each different in the way in which we handle things. It really became apparent to me as Bill and I were thinking about what we were going to share. My husband, who I am so thankful for, is one who prepares in advance and really thinks out what he is going to say and do. He is very methodical in what he does. I don't happen to be that way. He's been asking, "Well, what are you going to say?" I'd say, "I don't know." And he'd say, "When ya going to know?" ... Well, I guess he'll find out today. It is not because I *don't* think about things, but instead because I think so much about things. A lot of times, things are running through my mind. I am just trusting that the Lord is going to bring out those things. But to assure you I won't ramble, I have written down some things.

On May 23, 1970, Bill and I knelt beside our bed dedicating our first-born child to the Lord, as many of you probably did when your children were born. We prayed and rejoiced that day that God had given us a son to raise. It was especially joyful to us because just the year before we

had lost a child in miscarriage. So this was a great blessing and we had high aspirations for this, our first-born son.

As we entered into parenthood together, we knew that not only did we want to serve the Lord in our ministry, but we wanted to serve the Lord in our family too. And I, like many of you, did all the reading and went to all the classes because I wanted to be the very best parent that I could possibly be. I strove for that. Bill would ask me, "So, what book have you read lately?" as I tried out new techniques on our children.

When we found out our son was abusing drugs and alcohol it came as a real shock to me. As I processed the feelings of pain and grief that I was experiencing, I realized that essentially what I felt was a sense of betrayal. I felt that God had betrayed me. All of this time I had been giving my best shot for Him. We had served Him and given Him the best years of our life. Yet, our son who had chosen a path that never in a million years would I have ever guessed those many years before as we were dedicating him beside our bed.

So how did I handle this? Well, we confronted our son. We then went through educational groups to learn all we could about what happens to families who go through what we were going through. We wanted to find out how we could best help our son. We also ended up in a treatment center where we went through a week of meetings with our entire family. Yet through all of that, probably what helped me the most was taking long walks in the country where we live. It would be dark and I would just cry, walk and call out to God and ask Him why. Bearing my heart before Him is what helped me. As I looked in the Psalms, I saw that was what God wants us to do. He wants us to call out and let Him know how we are feeling. No matter how awful the feeling is He can handle whatever we are experiencing.

It was there that He revealed to me that I am a fixer. I like to fix things. In my occupation I am in the "fix-it" business. So with our children that is what I would try to do too. With Billy I would look for all these different ways of how I might enter in and maybe if I would do this or that, things would get well. But God revealed to me that that wasn't my job. My job was to let go and to let God. I had to learn that after awhile because I had to try to fix first. It was through His Holy Spirit that He showed me finally that I had to let go and let Him. That He was the Only One who could "fix" Billy.

In Scriptures, it is related that one of the things that Mary did was treasure things and ponder them in her heart. There were certain promises that I felt I could hold onto that God had given me. I could ponder these things in my heart. I needed to constantly believe that God could take these things that my son was going through and bring good out of them. I don't believe that I could experience what our son has gone through if I didn't truly believe that someday God would bring good out of these experiences. I hide that in my heart and continue to think about that. I also ponder the fact that our son is a double-minded man. He revealed that to us as we have had chances to sit around and talk. He shared with us that from an early age he realized that the kind of lifestyle that we had was not the one that he really wanted. He wasn't so sure that he liked our standards, yet he loved us, wanted to honor us and so he lived one way around us and another way wherever else he chose to be. He lived with this double-mindedness all the way through high school. So in actuality, Bill and I have never seen our son drunk or high. Yet that is the kind of lifestyle he was living. That demonstrates how good he became at masking what he was going through and letting us see just one side of what he wanted us to see until he got older and could freely tell us what he needed to tell us.

I guess sometimes I want to process things, look for reasons and try to see what we could have done differently. Yet, I have my husband who keeps me focused and makes me realize that there isn't anything that I can do. I also ponder Billy's life. I really feel that Billy did not, and he still does not, have a goal or something that really motivates him. It is just not there in his life. I think that when our children are directionless then it allows other things to creep into their lives. Of course, there isn't anything we can do about that. We can set goals before them, but it

is their choice to choose the goal that is going to motivate them. This enables me to know how to pray. We pray continuously that God would give our son a burning desire for something that would make him want to live a life that is worthy of the Lord.

Another thing I ponder, and it breaks my heart, is the grief and pain that I know our son must be feeling too. I think he is caught. If you know anything about addiction, and I'm sure you all do, they are caught in something so evil and so wicked and so all encompassing that it is difficult to get out of. Satan makes things look so good and yet is so deceitful and deceiving in the choices that they make. At times, our son has revealed to me a glimpse of some of the pain that he is experiencing by saying, "I call out to God all the time, but He doesn't do anything." You know that he is longing for God to do something in his life. Yet, it is hard for him to understand that God's is willing to do if we are willing to change. At this point in Bill's life, he is not willing to change. What this pondering does for me is that it causes me to turn to God and to remember that my job is to trust, even though it is so difficult and even though I want to fix. I can't do that. I have to let go, instead of continually taking back.

To me it was especially painful seeing Billy go through this because I had a brother who died of a heroin overdose and so immediately that is where my "vain imaginations" would begin to go. I would ask Billy to be specific with me because my mind would take me places far worse than what he was experiencing. So if he would talk to me it would help me a little bit. Our son had not been around my brother at all. My brother died at 44, but we had been away in California, Australia and other places, so there wasn't much time for us to be together with him. Yet, there would be times when Billy would sound and act exactly like my brother. It was so hard to understand that. The heredity factor does play a role. God does say that the sins of one generation are visited even to the third and the fourth generation. We do have that to deal with. Our kids need to be aware that it is something that is passed on and hopefully that should cause them to be even more cautious.

What about Billy's siblings? How did the rest of the family handle all of this? I know one thing that we did that we would not do again. When we first went to one of our education groups, we left our two younger children at home. One of our daughters was at college so she wasn't able to go, but then the other two were in high school and the other two were in grade school. We felt like we shouldn't expose the grade school kids to that because they so admired their brother. So in our limited wisdom, we did not let them be a part of those education groups. Later on, they expressed that they wished they could have been a part of that time. So I urge you to include your whole family in the process. Each family needs to do what they believe God is leading them to do, but our children needed to be aware of what was going on right from the very beginning. We did include them later on when we went to the family therapy. They had their opportunity to let their brother know how they felt. Different children have different kinds of reactions. We have one daughter who is very much like her brother in some of the positive strengths and gets very disgusted with him and can't believe the choices he is making. For her it is a very simple thing: just get out of it. Then others feel sorry and are very empathetic. It has impacted each one of them in a different way. One thing that it has done for all of them is to strengthen their resolve to not get involved, at this point anyway. I think it has shown them that just because you are Christian doesn't mean that you are problem free. They understand that very very clearly. Through the years, continuing on parenting for the rest of the children hasn't always been easy. I have my lapses of time where "thinking" gets the best of me and I want to find a reason or a way to explain it all away. I want to be able to point to a time and say: "*If I would have done this differently than this wouldn't have happened.*" Then I can fix that. But like Bill said, there are no simple answers. This process has caused me to continue to depend on the Lord and His promises and to know that God is God and that He is going to do what He wants to do and is willing to do. I cannot dictate to Him.

I guess because I am a thinker and tend to mull things over, I find myself wondering if God is capable of doing whatever it is that He wants ... then why is He waiting so long to bring my son to Him. That is some of the pain that I still wrestle with: Why so long Lord?

I always remember Kay Arthur sharing in her testimony that for a long time she battled the thought of why did the Lord allow her to go through all of the different men that she did and expose her children to some of the tragedies that she saw. Why didn't God save her sooner? God revealed to her the example of the Apostle Paul. God didn't save him until after he had persecuted Christians and challenged the faith in so many ways. God does what God wants to do in His own timing. He is going to bring about a great result in our son's life. And His timing is perfect. That is what keeps me going.

I would like to suggest that you read Psalm 42. I would pray that it ministers to you as it does to me. But the question that I continue to ask myself is: "*Why are you in despair, Oh my soul, Why have you become disturbed within me. Hope in God for I shall yet praise Him. My Savior and my God.*" I know that day will come when Billy will be walking with him and I can trust God for that.

Bill: The last question I had to answer is what and how do I relate to my son? I have tried, and I think successfully, to maintain a relationship of love with him. I have tried to be honest with him in love. I realize the person he has become is not the person that God intended him to be. I do not accept his choices, though I know he has the right to make them. He is a free moral agent, and I can't make the right choices for him. But you know what? I am not sure I would, even if I could. Billy needs to make them, not me.

Another thing I have done is to pray. For years my prayer was "Lord whatever it takes." I prayed this because I did not know what it was that would get Bill's attention. Whatever it would be, I wanted the Lord to do it.

Over the last several months, I have changed my prayer. Some dear Christian friends, whose youngest son was deep in addiction, shared with me what they did. I did some study on their concept, and I have been doing the same. There are four instances recorded in the Gospels, when parents brought their children to Jesus for healing. Sometimes the child was too sick to come, and the parent brought Jesus to the child.

In each case the child had a serious problem that needed healing. It is never recorded that the child ever asked the parent to take them to Jesus. The parent saw the need and took the initiative. In each case the child was healed. It was really the faith of the parent, and not the child, that caused Christ to heal. In fact, there are several instances where friends brought friends to the Lord for healing. It was their faith in what Christ could do.

I have been taking my son to the Lord each night for healing: spiritually, physically, mentally, and every other way. We have seen some progress over the last few months. I believe that some day our son Bill, his mother, and I will pass through this valley together.