

## **Persevering when You Feel Debilitated**

by Jim Smoke

There is a verse in the Bible that says, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is 95 he will not depart from it." That is the *real* authorized version of it. Carol and I have been delivered for about two years now from a twenty-year war of drugs and alcohol. All of that started when my oldest child Todd was in high school and started doing drugs while maintaining a relationship with the church and youth ministry group. He also had his friends outside of that circle. Slowly but surely, the strength of the group outside of the church began to pull him in their direction. He graduated from high school and decided he was going to take the summer off to have fun and surf. Our confrontation at that moment of time was, "No, you really can't take the summer off. You have to do something and be productive." At that time he was involved again with the wrong type of people. We had a lot of suspicions of what was going on but like a lot of you, we didn't want to believe.

It is interesting because I worked in Youth for Christ for twelve years in the 60s when there was a lot going on in the drug culture and the drug world. We ran a coffeehouse in our ministry and were working constantly with kids who were picked up off the curb and hauled to the hospital. So this was not a foreign thing to us. However, there was that thing in our heart and mind that said, "Well, this is not really happening to us." That's called denial. You sense it. You feel it. You think it, but you don't want to believe it and you don't want to accept it.

When my son was 16, he was picked up for the first time and found to be in possession of drugs. I had to go to juvenile court with him. I remember sitting in Orange County Juvenile Court with him waiting for his case to be called up. I thought this was not right or fair. I had spent a lot of years in Youth ministry sitting in juvenile courts building into somebody else's kids and trying to help them with our program called Life- Line.

He was called up before the judge and the judge read the riot act to him. He said, "Son, we're going to try to teach you a lesson. We are going to lock you up in jail for three to four days, for a long weekend, and see if that will bring some consciousness to you."

I will never forget that experience of that morning in juvenile court when the sheriff's deputy came and took him. He said, "Give your father your watch, your ring, your wallet."

Todd did that. Then he hauled him off in one direction and I walked out the door alone in another direction. From the Orange County Juvenile Court you could see the church where I was working. That church is known today as the Crystal Cathedral.

That was on a Friday morning. On Sunday I taught two singles classes in the church. That Sunday was our time to bring all the classes together, which meant 800 singles. Knowing I had to teach that Sunday morning, I thought I had one of two choices: I can forget what had happened in the Juvenile Court, just plod my way through and fake it, until I am finished. Or I can tell the people what's really going on inside of me.

I thought, "Okay, how do I do this, God? I just go the denial route and be cool, calm, collected, teach the lesson, and go home. Or do I share the pain inside of me?" I decided I was just going to rock through the teaching that morning, go home and everything would be fine. I thought, "What they don't know won't hurt them or me." Toward the end of the teaching time it was as if God ignited something in me and said, "Share your experience with them."

That Sunday morning after I finished teaching, I said, "I need to share something with you. In essence, we're family here. I want to tell you what happened to me on Friday morning, what I have gone through this week, and what I feel in my heart." There was a holy hush over that auditorium. You could have heard a pin drop. As briefly as I could, I shared what was happening and how I felt. Then I said, "I want to pray and you're out of here." I prayed; I dismissed them and nobody moved. I thought this is really weird because singles move at the drop of a hat. Nobody moved. A few started to get up and move in my direction. I thought, "What's going on?" They came up and almost everyone in that room that could get close formed a circle around me and said, "Hey, we want you to know we love you, we care about you and we're with you.

We're praying for you." There was a viable teaching that Sunday morning of the authenticity of a thing called community in the family of God. I've experienced that over all forty years of ministry in anything and everything I've ever done, but probably never more profoundly than that Sunday morning.

From that Sunday morning on people would say, "How is Todd doing?" Sometimes I would have to say "Not good," and other times, "Well, right now, okay," but they would always say, "We're praying for him." The years rocked on. When he moved out of the house at 18, he moved into a culture that was pretty much a drug culture. Watching kids live in that culture, they always band together. We never knew quite where he was living or what he was doing. He pretty much dropped out of church when he made that choice. He would go to church with us when we asked him to on Christmas and Easter. He would come to family gatherings, but his life just sort of peeled off into oblivion. A lot of things began to build. In the twenty-one years of his addictive processes, we have gone through about anything and everything that a parent can go through. We've been in court; we've been in jail; we've been in the sheriff's office; we've been in counselors' offices; we've been in drug rehabilitation programs. You name it; we've been there. I want to mention endurance. Although, I have no secrets about endurance because, in fact, we lived a marathon and that marathon just ground on. We went through different stages. We almost felt like we went through Kubler-Ross's stages of death and dying. We came to that final stage of acceptance, but acceptance wasn't, "I like this and I'm not concerned about this." Acceptance almost is a "*Whatever*" and giving it up to God.

We would get calls periodically. One time we got a call from the sheriff's office. He said, "I think you need to know we picked up your son; he overdosed and he is in the hospital. He is not in very good shape. You better go see him."

We thought as we went to the hospital, "This may be the end of it."

Early on, we resigned ourselves to the fact that he may lose his life by an overdose. To accept that is difficult. Acceptance is taking something you don't like and/or are fearful of and giving it to God. It is very painful. It saddens you deeply. It's saying, "God, I have to give this to You and trust You with this; that's all I can do."

One of the encounters happened when he was about 21. He had borrowed my car for something and was supposed to pick his sister up at church in the evening.

His sister called and said, "Where is Todd? I've waited at church an hour."

We said, "He was supposed to have picked you up."

"Well, he didn't come."

I said, "I'll come and get you." I brought her home. She went to bed. At 1:30 in the morning the doorbell rang and my son was standing there. He had been in a fight some place. He was battered, bleeding, and had no shoes on.

"What happened?"

He said, "It's a long story, Dad. Can I spend the night here?"

I said, "Okay." We bunked him down. The next morning he got up and I asked, "Where is the car?"

He said "The car? I don't know where the car is?"

I said, "You've got to know where the car is. You had it last night."

He said, "Dad, it's a long story. It sounds silly but I don't know where the car is." It took us three days running around Orange County to find our car. We look back on that now and as in every

tragedy there is a little bit of humor and a little bit of bizarre and whacko. He looks back on it now and says, "That was really dumb, wasn't it?" Yeah, that was really dumb.

We lived through the faith of close friends and the fact that I started doing divorce recovery back in 1975. I realized as I did that what the recovery process is really about. Recovery is no more than one person hanging on to another person, saying it's going to be harder to make it alone than with a group. If I can share my struggle, my story with you and you share yours with me, there are now two of us that are in this together.

My best friend is a psychologist. It's always good to have a best friend as a psychologist; you don't have to pay. He is a great psychologist; if I mention his name, most of you would know him. His son also got involved in drugs the same as our son did. We used to sit together in restaurants and share "the most bizarre story of the month" with each other. At some of them we would cry and shed a lot of tears. At some we would laugh. We two couples had met in college and had a close bond. We would laugh, cry and struggle together. But we knew we were in the struggle for probably a very long haul. Now like a lot of you have shared, you learn a lot when you're in it. You gather all kinds of bits and pieces of information and you go through all those stages and all those struggles.

You do come to a place, I believe, where you say, "God, we dedicate our kids to You. We have given them to You. We gave them to You, but I think we repossessed them along the way. Now, God, I think the only way we are going to live with this problem is to give this child back to You, in totality. You be God in his life." As we struggle with that, it helps us to be patient parents.

In 1987 after we had spent sixteen years in Orange County, we made a move to Tempe because we felt as if we wanted to get away from some of the memories, some of the pain and hurt. We also had some good friends in ministry over here. I had done a lot of workshops here. We thought it would be a good place to live for a while or maybe permanently. Consequently, we got disconnected from some of the stuff that went on in his life. Periodically, we would hear things from our girls. It's good having siblings because they talk to each other even if they don't talk to their parents. Our two girls protected us from some of the stuff we didn't want to hear.

At times I asked my son something about the situation and he said, "Dad, you don't want to know."

I said, "You're right, I don't want to know."

Then he looked at me kind of funny and smiled and said, "In fact, Dad, there is a lot of stuff you don't want to know. I'm never going to tell you because it can't help you." It can't help me now in any way, shape or form.

I think I learned something from having him share that with me. I don't ask for a lot of details about stuff.

We watched all kinds of experiences happen. In '95 we moved back to California because we had eight grandkids and they all said, "We want Grandma and Grandpa to be a lot closer." So we made the move and returned to Orange County. It was interesting because it put us back in his life in an "in your face" kind of way. About every time he came to see us in Tempe he was stoned or drunk, but he had learned how to cover it up pretty well. He smelled rotten but he walked straight. We kind of lived through those experiences. One point in time when we lived in Tempe, he said, "I think I want to move over here." We kind of cringed at that thought. But he moved over into a drug rehab place on the edge of town. He spent about two months down there, came out and nothing dramatic had happened. He was right back into the drugs. Eventually in his journey he got off drugs, because a lot of bad experiences convinced him not to do drugs, but he traded drugs for alcohol. An addiction is an addiction, as most of you know.

The alcohol does a lot of different things to your life. He began to steal and was caught for stealing. Along the way we accumulated a whole string of bizarre stories associated with drugs and alcohol. The more the lies pile up; the more the con jobs take over, and the person is literally transformed, not from the child you once knew, but into this weird person. A lot of you have mentioned you've had children who had been academically excellent. He has a very high IQ, and is very sensitive. He had been training as a hospital technician. He would do his job all week long and do great, and even get rave reviews. Every doctor loved him and said, "What a gifted kid; he should go to medical school." Then on the weekend he would bomb his brains out. Finally, he started doing that during the week. He couldn't hold onto his job and became, basically, unemployable.

Along in the process he began living with a gal. We were not too happy about the situation. She became pregnant and twins were born into his life in this whole panorama of his struggle. We thought the last thing that kid needed is to be a father in this situation. He lived through it and worked along with us. He was in the house, he was out of the house, he was gone, he was lost, he was back, he was here, he was there; it was a ragtag existence. It was very tough on this gal with the two children. Part of the reason for our moving back to Orange County was to help in that situation, as best and as much as we could.

When we had been back about a year, the court system began to catch up with the probation violations, DUI's—the whole thing. It eventually ended up with a finalized time in court. The judge said, "Okay, I'm going to give you a choice. You've either got to go into the Salvation Army program or I'm going to pack you off to prison."

I sat there in the courtroom that day going, *"Thank You, God. At least he is going to be compelled to go into a program."* I remember driving him to the Salvation Army the morning he was going to go in. I said to him as we drove in the car, "I hope this really works for you. We are praying for you. We want this to work."

He said, "Dad, I want this to work, too."

It was a six-month program. For four months he hit home runs everywhere he went. Every time we talked to his counselor, he would say, "This is a great kid; he is going to do great." We said, "All right, great, good, he is doing good." They wanted to hire him there after he was out. Hope began to build in our lives. We thought that finally after all of these years of pain, suffering, anguish, trial and struggle, he is connecting.

Somehow, on a weekend pass, he decided to drink. When he came back, they tested him and they booted him out. That began another part of the journey downhill to the place where in the spring of '97 the judge finally said to him in another court appearance as we were sitting there, "Son, I'm sorry. You just don't understand how things work. When you violate court appointed probation situations and you keep doing that, we send you to a place called state prison." When I was in youth ministry, I was in a lot of different penal institutions visiting kids. When we worked in Youth for Christ in Florida, we visited the state prison there many times. There isn't a worse place on planet earth than that place. When he said, "prison" my heart just about stopped beating. I thought, "This can't be happening." My wife and I talked and shared and thought maybe this was the wake up call. Maybe this is the last chapter of the book. I don't know what you know about prison systems but they are something else to deal with. He was sent to the Orange County jail. He was then processed in a holding place up in the middle of California. From there he went to Ironwood State Prison in Blythe, California. Our prayer was to get close enough that we would have contact with him and visit him.

He would call us once a week collect. We would write to him and try to keep the contact. It was kind of interesting because he would say; "Boy, I'm in about ten Bible studies at prison." I thought, "Wow, there must be a religious group there." I learned that the one thing everyone gets in prison is religious. He said, "Hey, you go to Bible study because there is nothing else to do." So he was going to Bible studies day and night and asked that we sent him a Study Bible and everything. Like a lot of your kids, he memorized chunks of the Bible, great chunks of it as a kid growing up and could spout it just verbatim. I thought, "This is great. He is in Bible studies in state prison."

He wrote me one day and said, "Dad, would you come out and visit me?" It takes a lot of courage to go where you don't want to go. I found myself on a Friday morning making the long drive from Orange County to Blythe, California, thinking a lot of thoughts.

My wife said, "You go, baby, I can't do this."

I said, "It's okay. No problem. I'll do it."

Driving into the prison parking lot, looking at the place and how ominous it was and realizing somebody you love is locked up here hit me hard. Finally, I got to the place where I would meet him. We spent about three hours together. It was a tough conversation. You don't know what to talk about. You struggle for words. You fill that time and you hug each other.

He said, "Dad, if things work out I'm going to be released about December 21<sup>st</sup>. Can you arrange to pick me up when I get out?"

I said, "Yeah, we can do that."

He was released around the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1997. He said, "I'm going to get a bus ticket. They gave me one hundred dollars to get back to Orange County. Can you pick me up at the Anaheim bus station? Here's when I get in."

I remember driving to the bus station that night and picking him up. When you leave prison, at least in California, they give you a sweat suit and it was kind of cold out. I looked at him and I thought, "Wow, it's been a long, long time, but he's out now and hasn't had any alcohol for five months. Maybe we are on the right road."

He said, "Can I crash with you and Mom over Christmas?" and I said, "Sure no problem." He had been out two days and I found a bottle of vodka in his backpack. Now you live through a lot of stuff through addictions; you live through moments of hope and moments of despair and defeat. I remember finding the bottle of alcohol.

I don't know why I even looked; maybe it was my suspicious nature. I confronted him and said, "Where did this come from?"

He said, "Gee, I have no idea."

I said, "Yeah, right. You have no idea. What's going on?"

He said, "I just had a couple drinks, Dad. It's no big deal. I'll dump it out. Don't worry about it."

I said, "Okay. Rule number one: You can't live here if you are going to drink."

He said, "Okay, I understand that. I'll go stay with my sister."

He spent the next couple of days with his sister. Obviously, we shared a very difficult Christmas together. I thought, "We are back in this all over again."

After Christmas he drifted around a bit; nothing constructive happened.

Finally he calls me one day and asked, "Can you come pick me up?"

I picked him up at a cross street in Orange County. I said, "What's going on?"

He said, "I can't do this any more. I just don't know what to do."

I said, "What do you want to do?"

He said, "I think I want to go into detox."

Over the twenty-year span I had dropped him in detox so many times they knew my car. I knew everybody there. They kind of go, "here he comes again." I said, "Okay, I'll take you."

He said, "Can I spend a night at the motel by the detox center in Stanton? I just want to get my thoughts together before I go in there."

So I checked him into a budget motel and paid his room. The next morning I went to pick him up and take him to detox and he wasn't there. I thought, "Oh boy, this is great." I asked the hotel person, "Do you know where my son is?"

He said, "No, I have no idea."

Well, the long and short of it was he went on another drinking binge and called me again in a couple of days and said, "I need to be driven straight to detox. Can you come and pick me up?" Again, I picked him up and drove him to Stanton detox. You come to the end of optimism, I guess. I was born an optimist, eternally so. Except when I took him to detox that day, I thought, "I don't understand this anymore, Lord. This just keeps going round and round like a merry-go-round. Where do we get off of this thing? When does this all end? This kid is in his mid-thirties now. We have been at this a really long time."

I watched him walk into detox. To get into detox you have to smell like alcohol and he was really reeking of it that morning. He walked in and I literally had to walk him to the door. He had his backpack with him. He looked pretty ratty and I patted him on the back and said; "Okay, call me if I can do anything." The door closed behind him and I drove home. I prayed all the way home, "God, this has to end somewhere. We have prayed our brains out over twenty years; we have prayed with friends. Please." The scripture says, "*The expectant fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*" I decided mine wasn't working because I wasn't righteous. But we kept praying and praying. I came home and my wife said, "Here we go again."

I said, "Yeah, I guess so."

An incredible thing happened the next day. It's a three-four-day stint and then you have to leave on the fifth day. The second day he was in detox, some guys came in. They're from a recovery house in Orange County called Bookhouse. They are called that because they work the *Big Book*. These guys decided he's a project that they wanted to take on.

So they said, "When you're released we are going to be here to get you and you're coming to Bookhouse 2." They picked him up and took him to Bookhouse 2.

He called and said "Dad, I am in Bookhouse 2 in Costa Mesa."

I said, "Okay. What is that all about?"

He said, "A recovery house, I guess."

I said, "Okay, I'm glad you're there."

Now, we have been through the in-and-out routine a lot of times. Our prayers were, "Lord, I hope this works." This time, he landed in a place with a bunch of guys who were recovering alcoholics and addicts who were about as gnarly and tough as you probably could find anywhere. He became a challenge to a couple of guys in that house. They somehow decided that they were either going to beat his brains out or get him clean and sober permanently. Days would go by; weeks would go by. He called me one day. He had his two-week high status before he had to get a job.

He said, "Dad, I have got to find work. You can't stay if you don't work."

I said, "Okay. I will call a guy at church that has a company with a big warehouse and tell him I need to get a job for my son."

He said, "You got it. Bring him in, no problem."

He started working there and going back and forth on the bus each day from the recovery house to work. The weeks began to roll by. We began to think, "Wow, he hasn't flipped out yet." We watched something happening in his life. We watched him growing stronger.

I would say, "How are things in Bookhouse?"

He answered, "Man, those guys are really hard on you. If you spit on the floor, you are dead," which was just a way of saying how tough it really was.

I asked, "How do you feel about it?"

He said, "I feel good about it."

I used to work with Robert Schuller. One of his favorite sayings was "*Inch by inch anything is a cinch.*" He said that enough times that I wanted to say, "I don't need your humanism, man." I began to realize something. Todd began to inch his way along. Recovery is a journey; it's not a destination; it's a journey. I began to watch the weeks go by and my friend at the church for whom he was working said, "Man, this kid has the whole warehouse organized. He really knows what he is doing. He is going a hundred miles an hour." Things began to slowly integrate into his life.

Now sometimes people will say, "Where was God in all of this?" My son never ever turned his back on God. Never did that. In all of his experiences he would talk faith and he would talk God, but then there was the other side of that as well. I began to watch the growth in Bookhouse. I began to watch my son return to wholeness. My wife used to pray, "God, give me my son back someday like he once was." I knew what she meant by praying that. He finished a year in Bookhouse. After you do one year and do well they say, "Okay, we need your bed for someone else. However, we want you to remain on our governing board here." So he stayed with that. He goes there Monday night and Wednesday night every week. Now he's out working day and night. We bought him a Volkswagen van, which he always wanted because all real surfers have a Volkswagen van.

I call him all the time and he knows I'm checking on him and the first thing he says is "I'm okay, I'm okay."

I called him last night and I said, "How was your week?"

He said, "It's really a busy week. I think I did about eight meetings and I spent a lot of time at detox. I picked up a couple of guys I'm going to be working with that are hard core cases but things are going good." He is back with his family now. He has been back with them since he got out of Bookhouse this past January. His twins are now five and he has another little boy who is now three.

God somehow can work in the lives of children who live in dire circumstances. My wife has always said, "How can they have such great kids when they've grown up with all of his problems?" He has three great sons. He is an awesome dad. He spends a lot of time doing stuff with his kids and for his kids. Something overpowering for us was when he was in prison and getting out for the Christmas season, I wrote each of the three kids. Kids always ask, "What do you want for Christmas, Dad?" I would say I just wanted them to be okay and to do well. So I thought, "Okay, this time I'm going to write a wish list for my children." I wrote letters to each of the girls and one to my son. I sent my son one with four wishes on it. I sent it to the prison in

Blythe. The girls responded to theirs. We talked about it. They laughed. We joked and they made promises and everything and said, "Thanks, that's a good idea." I never heard a word from my son. He never even acknowledged that he got the letter.

He came over Christmas morning to the house. He handed me an envelope and said, "This is your and Mom's Christmas gift." I opened it up. It was the letter of the wishes I sent to him in prison; he had checked each one off. Powerful moment. Powerful moment. Life goes on in recovery. His comment to me is, "Dad, I'm probably going to be in recovery the rest of my life, but it's cool. I want to help other people and I want to keep helping myself." He is a helper kind of person.

I guess I am a helper type of person. That's why I got into divorce recovery twenty-five years ago. You see a lot of pain; you see a lot of hurt in people's lives. Perseverance is in all of this. I don't know any magic formula. I know one of the things that has worked strongly for us is to be with Christian friends who can handle anything. You can dump on them. It does not matter what it is; they can handle it. I would encourage you to ask God, if you don't already have them, to give you some people who can lock arms and hearts with you and be there with you on the mat; that no matter what happens, they are there for you. My friend the psychologist and his wife have done that for some other friends as well as for us. I have had a lot of friends praying for my son over the years.

I run a guys group on Wednesday morning. We have about forty guys meet for prayer and study once a week. Those guys know my life inside out. They know all about my kid and they know all about the stuff that has happened and all the progressions of his growth and everything. They ask all the time, "How is Todd doing?" "Todd is doing great." They say, "Man, thanks to God, that's neat. I am still praying for him." If you have those people around that raise the candle of hope, it makes life a lot brighter. It hurts my heart when someone says, "My church chopped me up because of something I was struggling with." I get letters from divorced people saying their church asked them to leave because of their getting a divorce. I don't know how people can do that because the ministry of the Gospel is a healing ministry, a ministry of hope and healing. Henry Nouwen in his great book *The Wounded Healer* says, "We're all wounded healers; get with it." I look at my son now and say, "Okay, if I had to take a twenty-year block of all the garbage we went through and if what comes out of that is that he is able to impact other peoples' lives that hurt, that is Romans 8:28." That's God taking tough stuff and bringing good stuff out of it. Yeah, there is pain.

A friend asked us about five or six years ago, "How do you guys handle all of this and how do you feel?"

My wife said, "I've gone through all the cycles of everything." She said, "One word summarized the experience: sadness."

I don't know how you describe that word, but sadness is something that happens in your heart. You're just sad; you're not mad anymore; you're not miserable anymore; you're just sad in your heart. I'm not sure that sadness is highly curable. I almost think it is a constant reminder of where you have been and what you've been through.

My son called me a couple of weeks ago and said, "Can you pick me up and take me to work? My car is not running."

I did. I met him at the AA place and I said, "How did your meeting go?"

He responded, "It was a good meeting," which he says all the time.

I continued, "What actually happened this morning in that meeting?"

He looked at me and said, "Well, some people are in there to fake it. They are not honest; some people are in there to bitch and moan and complain even though they are in recovery; and some people are glad there is a meeting that they can go to that enforces what recovery is all about. At every AA meeting, Dad, you have all those kinds of people. However, I am there to receive what I can receive. I am there to get and give and that's what it's all really about."

We have grown a lot in all of this. I think when God pounds on your heart enough you become really sensitive to the needs of other hurting people. For a lot of years I was involved in a ministry called "Faith at Work" with Bruce Larson and Keith Miller. Those guys taught me something: the Christian leads best when he or she leads from weakness, not from strength. Nobody cares about my strength. They don't give a hoot. However, the minute I mention weakness everybody jumps on board. I don't run around and tell everybody else on the planet that my son is an alcoholic and what we have gone through. But the occasion is there and I can utilize that to help somebody. I identify that and I share it and I find that every time I do people say, "Wow, thank you, man, for sharing. You have no idea how helpful that is to me." There is a point of identity in that and a point of care in that. Do some of you have kids that aren't where you want them to be today? You may be in this for the long haul and in the journey you need to have some wagons circled around you. You need to have some people praying for you and for your child. You need to have some people love you desperately up close. You need to have some people who are there when things are really bad and really hard and really tough who just say, "We love you." My Youth for Christ board chairman from Florida taught me a valuable lesson. His son also got involved in drugs. Saturday morning they had to drive to his son's rehab program, which was on the other side of the state of Florida. All the parents were mandated to be there for this meeting in the morning. It was a long trip. He said the kids were on one side of the room facing all the parents on the other side of the room. The parents and children were to communicate across from each other and say what they wanted to say to each other. When they said what they wanted to say, at the end of whatever it was, they had to look their parent in the eye or the parent would look the child in the eye and say, "I love you."

My friend Tom said, "You know you love your kids and you can throw that away by saying it anytime. But you have no idea how hard that was to say it across the room full of similar struggling parents and kids." He said, "It taught me something valuable in my life that we all need to know: We are loved. We just need to know that and to give and receive that." It has so impacted his life.

We were with them in Florida a couple of weeks ago and when we left he hugged me, stepped back and looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Smoke, I love you."

That's pretty strong and powerful. Somehow we need to get that into being real in the family of God and to let people know there are people who need to know that. We don't need to be the Christian army that shoots its wounded. We need to be the Christian army that's in a healing ministry and helping ministry for people who need our help.

God has been faithful. My son is 36 and grew up in the church. The Bible says, "*Bring up a child in the way it should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.*" It has been a long time but it's been worth the journey; it's been worth the wait. I think one of the things that has helped us dramatically in that process is we have been involved with people in healing ministries and divorce recovery. We've been on the edge of people's pain a lot, and God tenderizes your heart but He brings it around to you. We had our years of being really mad at God; and if my wife were here this morning, she would spit and fuss and tell you that still once in a while today she wonders why she had to go through all that stuff. Well, we know in part and we see in part, but we are called to minister and care.

Last Christmas when we got the envelope from my son, my wife said, "Thank you, God, we got our son back." That's powerful.

Let's pray together. *"Father, I thank You for Your faithfulness. I pray for each man and woman in this room. I pray for the teens present and the children in this room who have walked there and know the pain. Father, I pray that everyone that leaves might leave with healing and hope in their heart knowing that You are a God of restorative and healing power. Father, I know that our journey was a long journey. Thank You for what You have done. I thank You for Your faithfulness and Lord, I guess I could say I thank You for the struggle and pain because out of it You can bring good. I pray for those that are knotted up on the inside this morning and still hurting and still struggling. God, I pray that You would touch them with Your love in a special way. Help them know You have not deserted them and that You really love them as You love their children and the best they can do is to release that child to Your care, keeping and love. Help them to know that You're the God Who cares and will care. Father, I thank You for the opportunity of the mix of what we are doing and have done here. We just ask that You would add Your blessing to that. May we go home rejoicing that You are the God of healing, the God of power and the God Who is, indeed, an awesome God. We pray in Your Son's name, Amen."*