

GETTING STARTED

This booklet is a collection of stories by different authors. Some are written in the first person (“I,” “me,” etc). In those chapters, individuals share their own experiences and their reasons for hope and strength in the Lord. Other chapters are written on the basis of interviews or experiences. They tell of persons who have experienced emotional and spiritual troubles. Each chapter concludes with some observations and advice by a professional mental health counselor.

Depression affects many prisoners’ lives. As many as one-third of prison and jail inmates show symptoms of major depressive disorder. The rates are higher among women. One study found that incarcerated women were 50% more likely to suffer from depression than women in the outside world. Prison life is hard on a person’s emotions.

But life anywhere in this world can be hard on a person’s emotions. The people described in this book come from various places in life. One lived a rough life and spent many years in prison. Another suffered sexual abuse as a child. Others had no such problems, yet depression struck them too.

Our minds are fragile. Emotional distress can happen for no apparent reason. This book gathered stories from different types of people. Anyone reading it can see that the problem is not unique to

one type of person. This book is for anyone, anywhere who is trying to find hope and find God in the midst of depression and anxiety.

All the stories in this book are based on real-life events and people. The style differs with each author, but these themes are consistent:

- Depression can overwhelm anyone, including Christians.
- We rely on God's promises. They remain solid and true even when our own feelings are full of chaos.
- God uses people to help us through our distress. It is good to get help when our mind or emotions are spinning out of control. We need to reach out to trusted people when we are hurting.

We hope you will be encouraged by this book. Others have struggled in ways that you may be struggling. Jesus is their help...and yours.

I was patient while I waited for the Lord.

He turned to me and heard my cry for help.

I was sliding down into the pit of death, and he pulled me out.

He brought me up out of the mud and dirt.

He set my feet on a rock.

He gave me a firm place to stand on (Psalm 40:1-2).

Chapter One
Lord, heal the violence in my soul

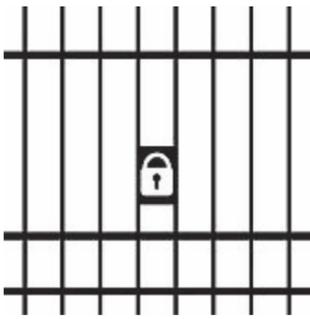
Ryan's father was an alcoholic and a drug addict. He wasn't at the hospital when Ryan was born. He wasn't around much after that either. Ryan's mother had her own problems. She moved from place to place around the country. She was always chasing something, but rarely finding anything good. Eventually, social workers determined that Ryan's mother was unfit to care for her children.

Ryan and his brother were put into the state system of foster homes and group homes. Ryan recalls that his emotional problems began already in those early years. "I took it upon myself to be more of a problem child than they were able to handle," he says. He was shifted from one home to another as a ward of the state. They put him on one medication after another. They started with Ritalin, to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). By the time he was 14 or 15, they gave him powerful antipsychotic drugs such as Haldol.

Ryan's mother got a new boyfriend. She stabilized her life a little. She was able to get her sons back. But that didn't last long for Ryan. His emotions often were out of control. At age 17, he got in a fight with his brother. The police had to come to their home. Ryan was old enough to be charged as an adult.

The police gave his mother a choice. Ryan could be removed from the home. He'd have to live on his own as an adult. If he did not do that, the police would arrest him. Ryan's mother chose to let him be set free from her care.

Ryan bought a bus ticket and headed across the country. He went back to a state where they had lived when he was younger. He got hooked up with some other young men who took bad paths in life. Four of them, ages 15 to 21, robbed a store. One of them shot and killed the store clerk. Ryan drove the getaway car. But they didn't get away with what they had done. Ryan was charged with aiding and abetting an armed robbery. He was sent to prison at age 17.



Over the next 12 years, Ryan saw the inside of many prisons. He started in a super-max prison. Then he was moved to maximum security. Next was a medium security prison, where inmates could be out of their cells most of the day. But then his journey went backward. Ryan reacted violently when a correctional officer accused him of something he hadn't done. He was sent back to maximum security. He had to work his way through the system again by good behavior.

He earned his way to a minimum security facility. They trained him to do construction work. He and other inmates were given work clothing and tools. They went out to build houses in the city during daytime hours. They were paid \$1 an hour, which was a big wage for prisoners. (For jobs inside prison, starting pay was 25 cents an hour.)

In the end, Ryan left prison early as part of a work release program. "I shouldn't even have been able to apply for the work release program, due to the nature of my crime," Ryan remembers. "But by the grace of God, I was approved for release from prison seven months early." He found a job and did well at it. He met someone, got married, and began a family. He now has two young sons. His life has turned around.

Now Ryan wants to help others. He wants to share his perspective on how God helped him. He feels remorse about his crime. A man lost his life. But forgiveness in Jesus has allowed Ryan to live a new life.

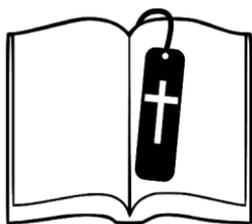
What brought about this change? During his years in prison, Ryan kept looking for "that thing" that would help him and sustain him. He tried religion. He researched things from Catholicism to Buddhism. For a while he considered himself a pagan. He even practiced witchcraft as a Wiccan.

But God surprised Ryan by using another inmate to show him the true way in Jesus.

In the same super-max prison where Ryan started his sentence, Michael was locked up for killing his mother and stepfather. He was the kind of guy who didn't care about anything. He was as far from Christian as anyone could be.

Five years later, Ryan ran into Michael again at the medium security prison. Something about Michael had changed. You could tell right away. He wasn't the same hardened man anymore.

More years passed. The two men didn't see each other and were put in different prisons. But as Ryan was moving into the minimum security prison, he saw his roommate's nametag on the door. He couldn't believe it: Michael! He was working on a



forestry and firefighting crew. Walking into the room, Ryan noticed a Bible and family pictures. They were the main things among Michael's stuff. They were things the old Michael hadn't been interested in, but he was very different now. They talked and talked, about life and what's important.

Through the influence of this convicted murderer, Ryan started attending Bible studies. There he met people from the outside who were involved in prison

ministry. Their attitude moved him. “How could they love me? They didn’t even know me!” Ryan says. “It was just like God himself is. These people showed me grace that I didn’t deserve.”

The two friends ended up at the same halfway house on the outside once they were released. It was a Christian-based house, unlike most halfway houses. Again Ryan could see how God was working everything for his good and his salvation, in keeping with God’s purpose (see Romans 8:28).

Through all those years, Ryan struggled with emotional troubles. He still struggles. Psychologists have said he has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from his upbringing and incarceration. He’s also borderline bipolar. He has experienced both manic and depressed episodes.

Depression strikes hardest when he is alone. This is also when other weaknesses plague him – like an addiction to pornography. “It’s always there, luring me. I’ll give in to it, and then I’ll become angry and violent. Those moods are still part of the depression – a very aggressive part before the sadness and guilt take over.”

Ryan can’t ignore his problems. He has to take care of himself. He also wants to be a good husband and father. So his emotional troubles concern him. “I’m by no means in a stable mindset much of the time,” Ryan admits. “The outbursts that seem to come out

of nowhere are scary.” He knows he needs medication and counseling to keep himself in balance. And he asks Jesus to keep giving him hope and strength.

If you ask Ryan what part of the Bible especially comforts him, he’ll tell you, “I resonate with Paul – who he was before, and the mission he had after his conversion. His story speaks to me.”

Paul described himself as someone who had been a blasphemer and a violent man. (A blasphemer speaks and acts in ways offensive to God.) After becoming a Christian, Paul said, “I used to speak evil things against Jesus. I tried to hurt his followers. I really pushed them around. But God showed me mercy anyway” (1 Timothy 1:13).

Paul’s life had been going in the opposite direction of what God wanted. He thought his own way was “really something great” (Philippians 3:7). He even imagined that he was serving God. But then he came to realize that everything else is garbage compared to knowing Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:8). From that point on, he dedicated his life to “making Christ present everywhere and anywhere,” as Ryan puts it. “Paul is the epitome (summary) of my life – not only how it was, but how I want it to be.”

Something else in Ryan's life reminds him of that man of God. Paul had some sort of condition that he described as a "thorn in his flesh." This is how he described it:

"So I wouldn't become proud of myself, I was given a problem. This problem caused pain in my body. It is a messenger from Satan to make me suffer. Three times I begged the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak.' So I am very happy to brag about how weak I am. Then Christ's power can rest on me. ... When I am weak, I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Ryan has his own "thorn in the flesh." He must battle depression and other mental and emotional strains. He knows his own weakness, and it makes him rely on the Lord that much more. Ryan clings to a confidence he finds in his favorite Bible verse. "I have learned the secret of being content no matter what happens. I am content whether I am well fed or hungry. I am content whether I have more than enough or not enough. I can do all this by the power of Christ. He gives me strength" (Philippians 4:12-13).

A THERAPIST'S PERSPECTIVE

This story is a perfect example of how God works in mysterious ways. The Lord uses our experiences in life—some positive, some negative—to open our eyes and redirect our attention to his love and promises.

That Ryan's and Michael's paths crossed so often was not by accident. The Lord is always watching and working for us, even when we are unaware of him, or are ignoring him. This is an important part of healing from anxiety, depression, or other traumatic experiences. Knowing the ever-present power of Jesus and learning coping skills has proven to be the most effective path to healing.

Questions to Review Chapter One

1. True or False: Through Ryan's years in prison, God did not care about him.

2. As Ryan searched for something to help him, God provided the answer through another _____.

3. Prison ministry volunteers showed Ryan grace. Grace is:
 - a. Christian love for undeserving inmates
 - b. God's love for undeserving sinners
 - c. G.R.A.C.E. – God's Riches At Christ's Expense
 - d. All of the above

4. To manage his depression, Ryan needs medication, counseling, and _____.

5. Like Paul, Ryan has learned how to be _____, whether he has much or too little. The secret is to depend on _____, who gives him _____.

Check your answers on page 79