

Trophy of Grace

By: Miles Leveridge

I grew up in a middle class family, attended Sunday School and Church as a child, but I remember thinking even then that religion was for grown-ups, so I never took it seriously. In our family, alcohol was a part of everyday life. My father would always start drinking when he got home from work.

Whether it was family get-togethers, business or social events, attending sporting events, playing golf or just cooking out in the back yard, everything revolved around alcohol in our family. Growing up in this environment would have an impact on my life as I grew into adulthood.

When I was 15 years old I took my first drink, which would lead me down a path of personal pain and destruction. Like many youngsters, I had dreams. I wanted to be a professional golfer. I went to college, and only after a couple of years there competing in collegiate golf tournaments, it became clear I did not have the skills and talent to progress to the professional ranks. What was I going to do now?

For me the choice was clear; I started drinking more. After I finished college, I went into business with my father. He would die within a couple of years from the effects of alcoholism. The business continued to grow. I was the picture of an up-and-coming successful young businessman. I was married and the father of twins, a boy and girl, active in the community in business and civic organizations, involved in booster clubs at the high school and college I attended, and I coached youth baseball teams. During this period my alcoholism continued to escalate. It wasn't long before my marriage ended in divorce. My business continued to flourish, and I remained active in my children's lives. Within a short period of time I was married

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again. For a time life was good, but it didn't last long. My addiction to alcohol reared its ugly head, and once again I was divorced and back into the fast lane of single life, late nights, women and booze.

I was involved in helping put on charity golf tournaments, and got to meet and become friends with many of the top professional athletes in the Dallas area. Some I drank and partied with, and some were Christians who would remain as friends and have a tremendous influence in my life. It was during this time I got my first of several DWI's. My alcoholism had my life swirling out of control. At first, through the influence of friends and at a high cost financially, I was able to get off with minimal

consequences. I still thought I was in control, and that I had the power to change the course of my life. I would soon find out how wrong I was.

One day I was at my office when two deputy sheriffs came in with warrants for my arrest on a violation of my probation...the last and final DWI. I was taken to Dallas County jail and held without bond based on my prior DWI history. I couldn't get out of it this time. I was now left with just time to think about where my choices and decisions had gotten me.

My daughter was getting married the following weekend, and I wasn't going to be there on the single most-important day of her life. I can't even imagine how disappointed, embarrassed and hurt she must have been by my absence. I was humbled and humiliated. I now truly understood that our lives aren't made of the dreams we dream, but of the choices and decisions we make.

My son had made the decision when he was 15 years old to accept Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. How ironic it was that when I was 15 years old, I made the choice to take my first drink. He was humble and carried himself with dignity and strength of character. As I looked back on his choice and

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his walk with the Lord, he had something I wanted: a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I got down on my knees weeping, and asked Jesus for forgiveness, and accepted Him as my Lord and Savior. What a blessing God had given me in my children. My daughter showed me the meaning of unconditional love, and my son led me to Christ.

But there were still consequences to be faced. At my court date I was sentenced to 2 years in prison. I still had choices and decisions to make. I began reading and studying the Bible, and attending chapel services in jail. When I got to prison (The Gurney Unit in Tennessee Colony, Texas), I continued to read the Bible daily and attend chapel services. I now had access to Bible study courses, which I filled out and completed. After a couple of months there, I was transferred to the Buster Cole Unit in Bonham, Texas. This happened to be one of the educational units in the TDCJ system. Here I was able to attend Christian classes such as Promise Keepers, Voyagers, Experiencing God, Disciple You, and 3 to 4 chapel services a week. In addition to these, I also attended a 12-step program and substance abuse classes. I grew by leaps and bounds in my faith during this time. I can't say enough about the dedicated and unselfish service of the Prison Chaplains, Christian volunteers who teach the classes, and the church pastors and prison ministry groups, many who travel great distances to get to the prison units. I say thanks to you all; you have truly blessed my life.

Once I got out of prison, there were still choices and decisions for me to make. What do I do with my life now? My children had run my business in my absence while they both were attending school. My daughter was in law school and my son was getting his masters degree at the seminary. They did an excellent job at it...a lot better than I. What sacrifices they made personally for me. That's the meaning of unconditional love. They have given me and taught me so much, I'll never be able to thank them enough for the blessing they have been to me.

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My son was interning as a youth minister at a church in Arlington, Texas while attending seminary. I went to church with him before I went to prison. This church accepted me with open arms and made me feel a part of the church family. I was baptized by my son. The son baptizing the father. Here was a case of God's grace working in my life. The weekend I got out of prison, I was in that church for Sunday services. The associate pastor came up to me and asked me to be a part of a discipleship program they were starting. I was stunned, and tears began to well up in my eyes. I had just gotten out of prison yesterday and they wanted me to be a part of and participate in a new program they were starting at the church. Here was a case of God's grace working in my life. I want to thank the pastor and the associate pastor and my entire church family for their love, acceptance and support in a very crucial time in my life. There are so many friends whose encouragement and support meant so much to me then and now. I thank you all.

I was sitting in my office one day talking on the phone with a pastor I came to know from attending his chapel services in prison, and who had become a friend and mentor to me. He mentioned to me during this conversation that a friend of his was starting a prison ministry that was located on the same street where my business was located, and asked me to call him. I contacted his friend and arranged a time for him to stop by my office to visit. At the arranged time he shows up with a friend of his whom I recognized. I asked his friend if he was Pastor Dave of the First Baptist Dallas. He was; I told him my story and how I knew him. I went into an outer office where I kept some of the Christian materials I had kept from my time in prison, and there was a tract that Pastor Dave had written and had the church print up for him to hand out on his prison ministry trips. Here was another case of God's grace at work in my life. Since that time I've become great friends with Pastor Dave. Through his work in the Prison to Praise International Ministry, I have had the opportunity to go with him on prison trips and share my testimony. Every year, his ministry, in conjunction with a local Christian radio station, has a Bible and Christian book drive for jails and prison libraries throughout the state of Texas that I have been blessed

to participate in and work on. I have been privileged to share my testimony at several of the Prison to Praise Ministry Awareness Conferences.

Since getting out of prison, I have been active in my church, I attend a weekly men's Bible study, I participate in a 12-step program, and I've gone on two prison trips with the Bill Glass "Champions for Life" Ministries. Another case of God's grace at work in my life.

I am reminded of the story in the Bible of the Carpenter and his twelve followers. While traveling, they came upon a blind man who asked for help. The Carpenter reached down and picked up some mud and rubbed it on the man's eyes. He then told the blind man to wash his eyes in the pool of water nearby. The man could now see, and rushed into town to tell everyone. The Pharisees asked the man's parents to appear before them. They asked his parents what had happened and they said, "Ask him yourself. He's standing right over here."

The Pharisees asked the man who this Jesus was and what he had done. The man answered, "I don't know. I was blind and now I can see."