

# AREN'T WE ALL ADDICTS?



MITCHELL EASTER

Created by Our Daily Bread Ministries  
in Partnership with Adult & Teen Challenge

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*introduction*

# Aren't We All Addicts?

**W**ith conversations around addiction spreading to nearly every sphere of life—addiction to screens, social media, or caffeine—it'd be easy to assume everyone has a little bit of an addict in them. So what's the point of dealing with our addictive tendencies? In this booklet produced in collaboration with Adult & Teen Challenge, author Mitchell Easter tackles the question, "Aren't we all addicts?" By tracing the biblical thread of corruption that spread to all humans after Adam and Eve's original sin, Easter shows the problem of addiction and its ultimate solution in the person and work of Jesus.

*by Mitchell Easter*

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*one*

# Introduction

**A**ddiction. It's sweeping the globe. Seemingly, you can't escape the reality of its impact on society when turning on the news or in conversations with friends and loved ones. What was once a rare issue for communities several decades ago has become the main battle for city officials, clinicians, recovery support personnel, and clergy members today. It is mysterious in the sense that addiction systematically destroys every aspect of an individual's well-being over time, and yet people continue returning to their devastating behaviors.

Why is addiction such an issue; why can't people stop engaging in such destructive lifestyles? Putting

an end to addiction is not as simple as treating bacterial infections with antibiotics. Instead, it's like trying to untangle several knots in a rope. Each knot is unique, requiring a different approach to unravel the rope at each obstacle. Similarly, individuals struggling with addiction have their own set of experiences, family dynamics, traumas, and circumstances that led to their addiction. For this reason, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to helping someone heal from the effects of addiction. It requires a personalized and holistic approach that considers the individual's physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs.

While it's tempting to jump straight to a dictionary's explanation of what an addict is, let's first remember that individuals struggling with addiction are people; they're humans with intrinsic value, made in the image of God (GENESIS 1:27). The behaviors that categorize someone as an addict do not determine their worth. With this perspective, Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines an addict this way: "One exhibiting a compulsive, chronic, physiological or psychological need for a habit-forming substance, behavior, or activity," or "one strongly inclined to do, use, or indulge in something repeatedly."<sup>1</sup>

For simplicity, we will use the latter explanation. This definition broadens our understanding of what addiction is. It is not merely the use of illicit substances or alcohol. An addict may struggle with

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1 "Addict." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/addict>. Accessed 7 Apr. 2024.

compulsive lying, covetousness, lust, or a negative attitude. These behaviors are concealed and not commonly labeled as an addiction; hence, persons struggling with them avoid the stigma generally associated with illicit substance or alcohol use.

Nevertheless, they are just as deadly. Perhaps not physically, but certainly spiritually. Here, we begin to see the implications of and similarities between the struggle with addiction and sin. We had the opportunity to define an addict. Now, let us examine sin. The topic of sin is popular in church communities, but Christians seldom take the time to understand it beyond an action that fails to conform to the moral law of God. While this recognition of sin is accurate, it is not complete. Let's expand upon this description.

When readers of the Bible are introduced to sin by Paul in his letter to the church in Rome, he describes it as a force or army. The apostle describes it this way: "...Sin came into the world," and "death *reigned* from Adam to Moses" (ROMANS 5:12, 14, EMPHASIS MINE).

Scripture informs us that sin is more than a mere deed separating man from God. It is a plague. The condition of sin corrupts and corrodes the original image that humans were created in. An example is the imagery we find when a beautiful vehicle is stricken by rust. At first, the condition may not appear to present critical damage. However, as time passes, the curse of iron oxide formed on iron or steel by oxidation makes it difficult for an onlooker to visualize the original splendor of the car.

Sin takes root, and its consequences pervert

humans' original design. This is the experience we have with our fellow humans. While we may identify intellectually that the Bible expresses people are made in God's image, it is difficult to allow this truth to be the lens through which we see individuals who are broken and ravaged by the effects of drugs and alcohol. We must also recognize that the stigma surrounding addiction not only affects the perception of non-users towards those who repeatedly use drugs or alcohol, but also significantly impacts the way individuals struggling with addiction perceive themselves.

Perhaps sin's most devastating power on humans is its ability to decompose their self-worth and knowledge of original design as image-bearers. Scripture systematically tells the story of this theme, most profoundly beginning with God's covenant to Abraham in Genesis 17. God commits his faithfulness toward Abraham and sets him apart from other nations. This spectacular scene commences an exhilarating storyline of the Lord's establishing the nation of Israel, ultimately marking them as his chosen people (DEUTERONOMY 7:6). What an identity! And yet, while God repeatedly extended his unmerited grace and favor toward Israel, they reverted time and again to unfaithfulness.

God's loving and gracious character is revealed in the Old Testament when Israel frequently turned its back on the Lord or doubted his promises. One example of this occurrence takes place just after God delivers Israel from Egyptian captivity. When encamped at Pi-Hahiroth between Migdol and the

sea, the Israelites found themselves in a desperate situation. With a mountain range behind them and the sea in front of them, the people of Israel found themselves geographically landlocked with the Egyptian army closing in quickly.

With emotions running high and inconceivable fear infiltrating the hearts and minds of the Israelites at this moment, many of them began to doubt, saying, “It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness” (EXODUS 14:12).

It happened that quickly. God had just provided a divine way for the Israelites to escape slavery. For the first time in 400 years, the Israelites were free! However, in the first moment that required them to trust wholeheartedly in God’s miraculous intervention, they failed to remain confident in God’s plan and in their identity. God would surely not have allowed his chosen people to be decimated. He is faithful in completing the work that he has begun (PHILIPPIANS 1:6). Of course, it is easier for us to review this event on the Israelites’ behalf in hindsight. I have no doubt that we would have found ourselves fearful and doubting God if it were you or I trapped by the landscape with an army chasing us.

If we are honest, life throws us moments when we feel trapped. Unexpected events and circumstances occur. A job offer was not extended. A terrible diagnosis was given. A friend betrayed confidence. A church or church member causes hurt. A vehicle breaks down. A marriage falls apart. Life has its way with us, and all of a sudden, when conditions build up and become overwhelming, just as it was for the

Israelites standing on the edge of the sea, feelings of doubt and fear creep in. The question is, how can we become like the psalmist when declaring, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (PSALM 23:4).

Human nature tends to shy away from taking the next step away from bondage. In the same way that the Israelites cried out, “Let’s go back!” We, too, shy away from growth, which involves discomfort. The title of this booklet is *Aren’t We All Addicts?* Sure, it is meant to catch the eye, but it is true. The story of the Red Sea crossing reminds us that humans are inclined to indulge in fear, forgetting Christ’s deliverance and his ability to shepherd us through difficult seasons of life. When individuals forget God’s sovereign works and allow fear to direct their decisions instead of faith, they slip into seasons of neutral (lukewarm) living or outright rebellion toward the Creator.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul observes, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (ROMANS 3:10–12). It is essential for individuals to not only know but also acknowledge the sinful nature we have inherited after mankind’s fall in the Garden of Eden. No one is righteous. No one does good (ISAIAH 64:6). Maybe you have attempted to live a virtuous life and do good works but have seasons where your actions do not align with the Word of God. As in the title of this booklet, like a person

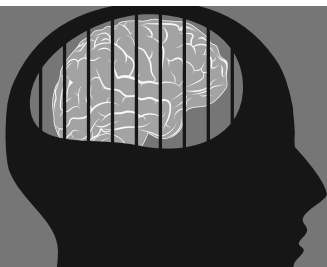
dependent on drugs or alcohol, you go back to a lifestyle not pleasing to God.

The issue with attempting to live a moral life is that you will run out of energy to do so at some point. Why is it so difficult to be good? It is simple—it is because humans, by nature, are *not* good. Persons who have not experienced a regenerated spirit cannot please God (ROMANS 8:8). They cannot engage in enough good works to live a fulfilling, peaceful life. This truth brings up an important question. If good works, including living a sinless life, do not grant people access to freedom or a sense of peace, what must they do? In the most counterintuitive fashion, to access freedom and leave behind a life of inconsistency, humans must do nothing else except place their faith in Jesus. When the Israelites faced insurmountable odds, their flesh instructed them to run. They were quite obviously not delivered because of their faithfulness toward the Lord. Just the opposite, despite their unfaithfulness, in their doubt, God extends his righteous right arm to divide the Red Sea, providing safe passage away from the Egyptian army.

Faith is the “x” factor in the equation for finding genuine freedom that leads to everlasting peace. In Jesus’s words, “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again” (JOHN 4:14). If the Israelites had attempted to earn their freedom by a good deed, or in their case, fighting the Egyptian army themselves, they would have surely died. However, when God takes care of the battle, he fights it so that the enemy is utterly destroyed. In a moment

of great desperation, Moses instructed the Israelites, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again” (EXODUS 14:13).

For the reader struggling with pornography, an illicit substance, alcohol, ungratefulness, or gossip, how would it feel to experience the freedom that Moses encouraged the Israelites with? In the same way that the sea swallowed the Egyptians, you too can be delivered from the burden of guilt, shame, and the entrapment of addiction. In the next sections of this booklet, we will discover more comprehensively the nature of sin and the deep-rooted implications of addiction. While you may not struggle with what many refer to as classical addiction (the need or urge to do something or use something that can interfere with your functioning in other areas of your life), the practicalities shared will nevertheless offer you a greater understanding of the human condition and what is necessary to embrace to experience freedom.



two

## The Nature of Sin and Addiction

**J**eremiah writes, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (JEREMIAH 17:9). We see this theme also in Titus: “...their very minds and consciences are corrupted” (TITUS 1:15 NIV). Sin is pervasive and permeates through the heart and mind, not only as a deed against God but as a force that continues to denigrate the very way we think, feel, and act. Like a disease, sin warps humans’ original design so profoundly that individuals become slaves to it. This disease entices individuals into the domain of darkness (COLOSSIANS 1:13)

and requires deliverance from an external aid. It is not a disease that can be beaten by willpower or good work. Sin must be annihilated by an external force—a supernatural intervention. Like a car stricken by rust, the vehicle is unable to cure itself. It must be restored by its owner.

As a comparison to sin, we will examine addiction to identify similarities in how its snare lures individuals. We know that addiction is a product of sin, but for the purpose of this writing, it will help us understand sin more thoroughly and recognize the extensiveness of addiction in our own lives. The first and most basic item to understand in this conversation is the link between sin and the brain's reward system. Just as sin can be seen as a destructive force that corrupts the human spirit, the brain's reward system can lead individuals into the destructive cycle of addiction.

For example, the brain's reward system informs us when something is desired, such as when eating candy (a normal reward) triggers a pleasurable experience. Furthermore, candy and other foods can trigger salivary glands, which is a physiological response to learned patterns—a response that scientists refer to as conditioning. In the same way, indulging in certain behaviors or substances can also hijack this system, ultimately leading to classical addiction. When we eat candy, the brain's reward system is activated due to the pleasurable taste and the release of “feel-good” neurotransmitters like dopamine. This reinforcement makes us more likely to seek out and consume candy again. Similarly,

addictive substances or behaviors, such as drugs or gambling, can overstimulate the brain's reward circuitry, leading to the compulsive pursuit of these activities despite negative consequences. Overeating candy could lead to cavities and weight gain. Similarly, drinking too much alcohol could also lead to various health challenges. In both cases, the brain's natural reward response is exploited, leading to cravings and a cycle of seeking out the pleasurable stimulus, even when it is harmful.

In sin, the allure of temptation and the fleeting pleasure it brings can lead individuals into a pattern of behavior that is harmful both spiritually and emotionally. Comparably, the brain's reward system, governed by neurotransmitters such as dopamine, can reinforce addictive behavior by creating a cycle of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. The pursuit of sinful desires can lead to a spiraling cycle of detrimental behavior. The brain's reward system can drive individuals to seek out substances or activities that trigger a pleasurable response, leading to a cycle of dependency and negative consequences.

In the introduction, we discovered that no one is righteous. No one does good. Just think for a moment: Not only do people struggle to make godly decisions because of their sinful nature, they may also have a compounded dilemma where their brain's reward system informs them that the bad decisions they make feel pleasurable. Now we have two issues. The first one is the sinful nature. The second is that the brain has been wired to interpret a pattern of behavior that makes immoral deeds feel good, or at

the very least, give them a sense of temporary peace.

Both sin and the brain's reward system can trap individuals in a cycle of powerlessness, where the pursuit of temporary gratification ultimately leads to physical, emotional, and spiritual harm. The two issues discussed above shed light on the nature of addiction and sin, highlighting the importance of addressing the underlying matters that drive these behaviors and seeking pathways to recovery and redemption. It underscores the need for grace, compassion, and support in breaking free from the destructive cycles of addiction and sin.

Like knots in a rope, people struggling with life-controlling issues must untie the first issue of spiritual lostness due to the sinful nature and also untie the complexity of rewiring the brain's reward system. In rehab communities, this is called recovery. In church circles, we call rewiring the brain discipleship. Paul, the apostle, puts it this way: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what the will of God is, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (ROMANS 12:2).

Interestingly, recent research on the addicted brain indicates that the condition of addiction meets the classification as a brain disease<sup>2</sup>. This label in no way alleviates the personal responsibility of the individual struggling in the same way that a person with eating-induced heart disease has responsibility for their consumption choices. Still, the findings

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2 NIDA. 2024, January 5. Drug Misuse and Addiction. Retrieved from <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugs-brains-behavior-science-addiction/drug-misuse-addiction> on 2024, July 14

of these studies suggest that overcoming addiction, whether it involves alcohol, prescription pain medication, nicotine, gambling, pornography, or any other substance or behavior, is more complex than simply relying on willpower to control impulses.

All too often, we view addiction as only involving hard liquor or illicit substances. Remembering the definition of addiction presented in the introduction, it is necessary to consider behaviors such as doomscrolling—the compulsive behavior where individuals spend excessive time online scrolling content—or drinking caffeinated beverages to stay focused and increase energy, or sharing the latest hot-topic gossip with your favorite chatter group. Many individuals, including Christians, struggle with behaviors that meet the criteria for addiction.

It's clear that both sin and addiction produce depravity—total lostness and hurting. The solution is beyond a person's ability to pull themselves out in their own strength. When Paul's readers were unbelievers, he tells them, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (EPHESIANS 2:1-3). To put it plainly, it would be a remarkable feat to pull oneself out of addiction when dead. As Paul puts it, apart from Christ, we are *dead* in our trespasses and sins. From a biblical

perspective, we know that the first issue of the sinful nature must be regenerated from an external force, namely salvation by Christ alone through faith alone. We also know that it takes a community for proper discipleship to occur (HEBREWS 10:25; ACTS 2:42).

This most basic level of understanding of spiritual lostness and the brain's reward system should inspire the church to action. While addiction presents itself as the most periling topic in societies across the globe today, this knowledge should move us to compassion. Repeatedly, we see individuals who, with much sorrow, are struggling with addiction who fall away from the church because of their habits. These individuals slip through the cracks, allowing themselves to feel the weight of shame, thinking they are not good enough to stick with the crowd. On the other side of the coin, at times, members of the church look harshly towards those who have the smell of cigarette smoke infused into the fabric of their clothing or those who admit to an ongoing compulsion to watch pornography.

How the church responds to scenarios like this will be the success or downfall of our evangelistic and discipleship efforts in our communities. You see, while Jesus takes care of the first knot in the rope, where he annihilates the army of guilt and shame (just as he did to the Egyptian army), it is the church's responsibility to walk alongside individuals needing to rewire the brain, or as the Bible would put it, to be transformed by mind renewal. There is a distinction that is important for us to consider. It is impossible to be an addict-Christian. Addiction cannot and should not govern the lifestyle

or choices of the Christian. However, someone can be a Christian who struggles with addiction. When Christ wipes away our sin as far as the east is from the west (PSALM 103:12), the goal for the believer, at this point, is to learn how to come into line with the original image in which they were created.

The nature of sin and addiction both reflect the deep-rooted struggles within the human heart. Sin, as described in the Bible, is not just a series of actions but a pervasive force that corrupts and distorts the original design of humanity, leading to spiritual brokenness and separation from God. Similarly, addiction encompasses not only the dependence on substances or behaviors but also a deep emotional and psychological struggle that affects the individual's entire being. Both sin and addiction reveal the powerlessness and desperation of the human condition, highlighting the complexity and depth of our inner turmoil. Recognizing these similarities can help us respond with empathy, understanding, and a holistic approach to healing and restoration.

Now that we have encountered some similarities between sin and addiction, let us turn our attention to the main question we are examining: aren't we all addicts in some form or another? Whether it is an addiction to substances, behaviors, thoughts, or emotions, the human experience is rife with instances of compulsive, repetitive patterns that we struggle to control. From the allure of social media and technology to the pursuit of success, love, or validation—these rooted tendencies can exhibit

addict-like qualities. While the manifestations may vary widely, the underlying drive for comfort, pleasure, or escape remains a common thread in all of us.

Going back to the story of the Israelites wanting to return to Egypt, it has become more apparent why it would be reasonable for any human to retreat back to what they knew and were comfortable with. Not surprisingly, after having succumbed to slavery for 400 years, their way of life and activities were, without doubt, ingrained into their perceived identity. Despite their hardships under Egyptian rule, the Israelites fell victim to conditioning, which led to their desire to return to Egypt. See, the brain's reward system can create a nostalgic craving for familiar but destructive behaviors, much like the Israelites yearning for familiarity of their past despite its detrimental effects. Before psychology books were written, we see the implications of the brain's reward system in Scripture. The Israelites found it challenging to break free from destructive patterns because of conditioning. Every day, all of us make decisions that will either give into the world's definition of pleasure or trust that God's way of living is profitable for our future (JEREMIAH 29:11).

Recognizing this shared susceptibility to habit-forming behaviors can foster empathy and understanding for those grappling with more overt forms of addiction, blurring the lines between "addict" and "non-addict." After all, at varying degrees, we are all navigating the complex interplay of choice, compulsion, and vulnerability in our daily lives.



three

## The Consequences of Sin and Addiction

**T**hroughout the majority of Christian history, theologians have widely concurred that God created the world with a noble intention, desiring a community of morally upright human beings.<sup>3</sup> After his work to create the world, and after the sixth day, Scripture says, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very *good*” (GENESIS 1:31, EMPHASIS MINE). The Hebrew word used for good in this verse is *tov*. It is a word

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<sup>3</sup> J. B. Stump and Chad Meister, “Introduction,” in *Original Sin and the Fall: Five Views*, ed. J. B. Stump and Chad Meister, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 1.

commonly used to describe something pleasurable or desirable. In other words, not only was the world God had created in its first state good, but it was also something to desire. It was a place of total satisfaction.

After sin came into the world, humans faced a dire situation in which what was previously desirable became a place they wanted to escape. The fall of man is the single most horrific event in the history of the world. While events such as the Holocaust, the Black Death plague, the atomic bomb over Japan, or the Rwandan genocide certainly cause us to pause with repulsion, all these events can be traced back to one incident: the fall. The fall flipped the natural order from desire to escape.

Here, we discover the beginning of the brain's unnatural pursuit to escape that which God created as opposed to embracing it. Unfortunately, now that sin has entered the world, we are faced with the stark reality of a pain and suffering-stricken world. The pursuit of comfort over morality is now our battle, yet in the beginning, the discomfort that humans experience today did not exist. Because of the fall, the brain's reward system seeks to escape discomfort by craving substances or behaviors that provide temporary relief. This is a fundamental consequence of sin: the seeking of relief from discomfort. This discomfort that humans run from is not simply slight pain, uneasiness, or anxiousness; It is a soul-crushing depravity of lostness so deep that it is difficult to identify just what it is that we are running from. The discomfort is this: humans were separated from God.

Just as individuals trapped in the cycle of addiction seek to escape the discomfort of withdrawal or emotional pain through substance use, the fall of man led to a perpetual seeking of relief from the pain and suffering introduced into the world. The brain's reward system and the fall of man both reflect the human condition of seeking solace and relief from the discomfort that plagues our existence. To the question, "Aren't we all addicts?" Yes, we are. Every human suffers from the discomfort birthed by the fall. And it is with this curse we all must decide whether we will run to the ultimate cure, where we will find water that will never lead to thirst, or whether we will choose the things of the world to satisfy us temporarily.

Some individuals exhibit poor coping mechanisms and self-destructive behaviors in the temporary pursuit of satisfaction. In a more practical sense, this is regularly seen in individuals who pursue rebound relationships, hop from one job to another, or self-sabotage—the practice of changing oneself to please others or clinging to someone who is not interested. These are all worldly attempts to satisfy the brokenness of our souls after having been separated from God due to sin's reign in the world. In order for humans to find healing and experience rest from the exhausting searches for comfort, they must come to the conclusion that this world only offers temporary solutions to the discomfort our soul suffers because of our separation from God.





*four*

## The Path to Redemption and Recovery

**I**n the same way that it was discussed that no one is righteous by their own volition and every individual must not only have the knowledge of this truth but also acknowledge it by confession (ROMANS 10:9), persons struggling with addiction must move past denial that often hinders individuals from finding the path to recovery and acknowledge their state of addiction. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines denial as an involuntary “defense mechanism” that aims to ignore negative

or unpleasant thoughts or feelings.<sup>4</sup> As you might have concluded, this step is often the most pervasive barrier for those needing help. After all, if the brain's reward system has created neural pathways that have taught an individual that spiritual, emotional, and physically damaging behaviors are pleasurable, the brain will also communicate to an individual that stopping said behaviors will be uncomfortable or unpleasurable.

The recovery industry commonly discusses topics like behavior modification, neural pathways, and denial. The reality is that these subjects are not only applicable to people addicted to drugs or alcohol. For example, many individuals examine whether they want to give up behavioral choices in exchange for what the gospel message offers. For example, when Scripture confronts a person living a promiscuous sexual lifestyle, their brain's pleasure reward system informs them that giving up that lifestyle for Christ is difficult or unwanted. When it comes to denial, humans naturally seek that which is comfortable. If someone's comfort is challenged, individuals can become defensive, denying that the way they are living is an issue.

Given that denial is such a massive barrier for individuals to find recovery and redemption in Christ, it is better to start the journey not by focusing on how grave the addiction or sin is. The best way to start the conversation is by showing how great God is. Often, addiction or other life-controlling issues have manifested in one's life because of a deeper cause. As

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4 American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Denial*.

an example, researchers have indicated a surprisingly high link between trauma and addiction, some reporting two-thirds of addicted populations having experienced past or ongoing trauma, and other conclusions showing as high as 93% of individuals having this link.<sup>5</sup> All of this to say, whether in our evangelistic efforts or personal discipleship journey, grace is foundational because of the complexity of each individual's life story.

Rarely is the apparent surface presenting issue, such as meth use, gambling, or doom-scrolling, the root cause of destructive lifestyle choices. Persons struggling with addiction have most probably experienced trauma, including, but not limited to, events such as physical assault, sexual assault, domestic violence, emotional abuse, parental neglect, bullying, accidents, or an illness, to name a few. While these lived experiences do not give justification for a destructive lifestyle, they certainly raise awareness and compassion for those who struggle with addiction. And for the individual reading this currently struggling with addiction, our prayer is that you will realize the need for grace for yourself.

Jesus came to offer life, and life to the fullest (JOHN 10:10). In his own words, Jesus provides an exhortation to those struggling: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your

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5 Fuchshuber, J., & Unterrainer, H. F. (2020). Childhood Trauma, Personality, and Substance Use Disorder: The Development of a Neuropsychanalytic Addiction Model. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 11*, 549166. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.00531>

souls” (MATTHEW 11:28–29). Notice in Jesus’s wonderful invitation that he does not require individuals to clean up their act before running to him. Many have the misconception that to have a relationship with God, they must somehow mold their life into the guidelines of Scripture. The opposite is true; the invitation Jesus extends is to those who need a Healer, not those who have already been healed. Jesus says it this way, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (MARK 2:17).

Jesus’s invitation is not for those who are well. Whether we realize it or not, or more accurately, whether we are blinded by denial or not, the invitation is for you and me. We are all in need of Jesus, who is the only person capable of serving as the external aid. He is the only person who can bridge the gap between the discomfort we feel due to the separation sin created between humans and God (JOHN 14:6).

The salvation that Jesus offers can be exemplified in this way. It is as if we are stuck at the bottom of a dark and muddy pit, making it impossible to scale our way to freedom. After strenuous efforts to escape, trying to ascend to the top, only to slip back to the bottom repeatedly, we become hopeless. Loneliness sets in, and isolation from community becomes our existence. This state continues, and just like the Israelites, we forget our original design; We forget our Creator. And yet, when there was no sliver of hope, Jesus walks to the edge of the pit and looks down into the abyss. Seeing us lying helpless, tired, and broken, he extends an invitation to grab his

hand, and all we must do is, by faith, grasp his hand. Jesus, in his grace, is not afraid of our mud-covered selves, and he pulls us out of the pit.

This example is limited but describes the dire situation that humans are in due to the curse of sin. However, this imagery is powerfully demonstrated throughout Scripture. One instance is recorded in Deuteronomy, reminding the Israelites, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (DEUTERONOMY 5:15). It was not the Israelites that fought their way out of their condition of slavery. No, it was God’s intervention, an external force, in their most significant time of need.

Do you feel that your struggle with addiction or other life-controlling issues is preventing you from a relationship with God? The answer for receiving spiritual rest from the fight is counterintuitively simple. Reach out and grab God’s mighty hand and outstretched arm. Say “yes!” to the gospel message. Do not be anxious about your struggles obstructing a relationship with God. Jesus forgives and eliminates condemnation from past decisions (ROMANS 8:1). He will assist you on the path of discipleship after your decision through instruction from the Bible. He will also provide you with a community of believers who will teach you all that Jesus has commanded (MATTHEW 28:18–20). One way to put it is this. For the one struggling with alcohol, do not wait to surrender to Christ until you have stopped drinking. Sobriety is not a requirement for

a relationship with Christ. Sobriety is a byproduct or aftereffect of a relationship with Jesus.

This biblical approach emphasizes the need to run to God quickly. Do not wait another minute. Scripture declares, “Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 CORINTHIANS 6:2). God sees that you are in a pit; that is why he offers his hand. Let Jesus provide salvation so that when you are pulled to the top, you can walk alongside him during your lifelong discipleship journey. You may experience difficulty and lapses along the way. Still, it is better to be in a relationship with Christ, who can shepherd you through mistakes, than to navigate errors alone.

Untangling the first knot in the rope, the spiritual knot, is easy to loosen. It is easy because we are not the ones untying it. The second knot in the rope, the one we call recovery, is much more difficult, especially for those with an addiction to drugs or alcohol. When making a decision for Christ, these individuals need to know that while access to God through the redemption of Jesus takes no effort on our part, besides our simple confession of faith and repentance of sins, recovery is tough. This is not to dissuade anyone from beginning the recovery journey. It is, however, essential to give a realistic picture of discipleship for those who need to submit to the process of rewiring neural pathways or relearning behavioral patterns.

For most people about to step into or who are currently in recovery, this process requires professional help. For individuals chemically

dependent on alcohol, opioids, or benzodiazepines, detoxing without the supervision of trained medical personnel can lead to seizures, hallucinations, body temperature fluctuations, extreme irritability, and delirium tremens (DTs). Chemical dependency can be determined if a person displays withdrawal symptoms when abstaining from a substance. These individuals should not attempt to quit “cold turkey” without medical supervision. After detoxing, sober living, residential treatment, outpatient services such as addiction counseling, and community support groups are highly encouraged necessary resources.

Because of the complexity of addiction, as previously discussed, trained recovery support specialists, drug and alcohol counselors, and other professionals can assist individuals to unpack and healthily process the underlying issues behind destructive behaviors. Additionally, depending on the individual’s circumstances, their addiction may have led to one or a variety of the following scenarios: broken family dynamics, legal troubles, physical or mental health problems, issues with employment, or educational struggles. These additional factors in the recovery journey make committing to a sober lifestyle all the more overwhelming. While a person may have a genuine desire to become sober, the pressures of life can become overwhelming, often tempting the individual in recovery to escape the stresses of life once again by resorting back to their substance of choice.

Another matter to consider for someone in recovery and those supporting them is with sobriety,

comes clarity of mind. This can be a blessing and a curse. For such a long season, the addicted person's brain has been in a substance-induced fog, often causing the individual not to be aware of their responsibilities to fulfill essential commitments, such as paying child support, being present for family events like weddings or funerals, staying on top of dental and health appointments, or showing up to a court date. When in active addiction, these missed obligations are regularly forgotten altogether. However, when clarity of mind comes, the person in recovery is forced to face the music—they are confronted with the unpleasant consequences of their actions that, sometimes, have been built up for years.

The recovery journey is not merely about becoming sober, which can be excruciatingly difficult in and of itself; recovery also involves untying the other social, medical, and legal knots in the rope that the addiction lifestyle has caused. Trained workers in sober living, residential treatment, outpatient treatment, and community support groups provide professional advice, encouragement, and access to community while “facing the music.”

Recovery is a challenging, multifaceted voyage. Because of its complexity, individuals who encounter Christ often get discouraged from continuing in discipleship because of judgment, realized social pressures when clarity of mind comes, and the unpleasant experience of learning to do life sober. It is important to note that God's declaration to make sinners righteous is not dependent upon how the new Christian feels emotionally. There will be

ups and downs, but the key is for individuals on the recovery journey to be completely secure in their relationship with Christ. This covenant relationship is not contingent on whether or not the person in recovery is stable emotionally, can pay their child support payments, has healthy self-esteem, or is clear of any legal troubles.

Regardless of what the recovery journey presents for you—whatever makes it uniquely complex, the forgiveness of sins is permanent (PSALM 103:12). Moreover, there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. And when we think this gospel message could not get any sweeter, there is also no separation (ROMANS 8:1; 31–39). This implies that God is with us, even when we may feel he is not. So be encouraged! You may have trouble, but there should be no guilt or sense that you are not worthy enough to be in a relationship with God when the pressures of recovery are seemingly impossible to conquer. If you have placed your faith in Jesus, he has declared you righteous (ROMANS 5:1). That declaration does not depend on how well you are walking your recovery journey.

God not only walks with us on the mountaintop when everything in life goes our way. The psalmist declares that God is present, even in the darkest valley (PSALM 23:4). Isaiah records, “For thus says the one who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose Name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite’” (ISAIAH 57:15). The Bible is clear: God is near to the troubled. The promise of

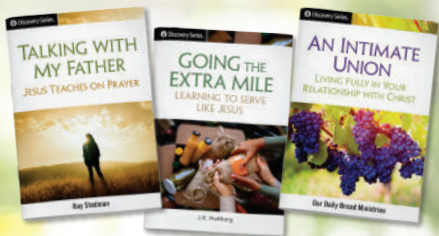
Scripture is the gift of God's son, Jesus, whose name is Immanuel, which means "God with us." No matter the pain you experience, remember that God is with you. And though you may experience speed bumps or lapses along the way, God is faithful in finishing the work he starts in his children. What carries us through the most difficult seasons is believing in the darkness what we have seen in the light; God's presence is with you. Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

For readers who do not struggle with addiction but know someone who does, let the information shared here move you to compassion. Cultivate an environment where the invitation of Christ can shine brightly for those at the bottom of a spiritual pit. Let not someone's struggle disqualify them from God's grace in your mind. Allow understanding of the complexity of addiction and its various knots to inspire patience as you minister first to the most important issue, that is the need for spiritual healing, and secondly, the discipleship process of transformation of the mind.

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# It's easy to assume everyone has at least a little bit of an addict in them.

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**Mitchell Easter** serves as the CEO of an outpatient counseling service and residential program for teenage males. Through his leadership, he empowers teams to provide professional care and inspires clients to break the cycle of addiction.

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