

*Putting Hope Within Reach Through the Power of Jesus Christ*

### **Faith, Science and the Struggle in Recovery: A Biblical Response**

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Kelsey grew up in the perfect middle-class family, or so it seemed. Exposure to physical and emotional abuse from both parents led Kelsey to drink excessively and then “graduate” to heroin and meth. Her father left the family when she was ten. Her alcoholic mother allowed Kelsey to begin drinking at the age of eleven. As men came in and out of the house, Kelsey was raped by five of them. Despite the alcohol and substance use disorder that now had control of her, she graduated high school, married, and had three beautiful daughters. The loss of her grandmother (her one stable family relationship) caused a mental breakdown, leading to multiple stays in psychiatric facilities, involvement in prostitution, and homelessness. She lost her family as well. No hope, endless pain, and suffering.

However, her story did not end there. Kelsey entered a women’s program run by Adult & Teen Challenge, where, for the first time, she found purpose, meaning, and a new identity. Despite her decisions and actions, Kelsey learned about Jesus Christ and His deep love for her. This love was so strong. She asked Jesus to be her Lord and, over the coming months, began to grow in all areas of her life. She dealt with the trauma, learned new life skills, and held on to the Hope found in her Lord. As a result, her life is restored, including her marriage and relationships with her three children. She has a fresh beginning.

With over 48 million people struggling with substance use disorders<sup>1</sup> in the United States, culminating in over 250,000 annual deaths due to alcohol and drugs<sup>2</sup>, we are in a crisis of epidemic proportions. This crisis must be handled comprehensively and collaboratively among healthcare providers, the church, community health organizations, recovery centers, government agencies, and families. Most in the treatment and recovery areas are saying and doing the right things and have compassion for those struggling. But...

#### ***We need to address the whole person collectively.***

Instead, with every passing month, statistical analysis, or research report, we create new focal points that become the new “buzz” terms or phrases within the recovery industry. Organizations shift focus to these new elements until the next “new” best practices emerge. Perhaps we are chasing a trend over a real solution. Is it the problem, the treatment, or the

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<sup>1</sup> SAMHSA 2023 data – 61.3 million people reported use

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohols-effects-health/alcohol-topics/alcohol-facts-and-statistics/alcohol-related-emergencies-and-deaths-united-states> (accessed August 2, 2023); <https://blogs.cdc.gov/nchs/2023/05/18/7365/> (accessed August 2, 2023)

root cause? Indeed, many of the new treatments and methodologies are positive (although some still need more longitudinal data analysis). However, as we interact with the people suffering from alcohol/substance use disorder (A/SUD) and hear from tens of thousands over the years, we begin to understand that critical to the success of sobriety is the ability to address six major areas (questions) in the life of every person struggling. These areas are not unique to those suffering but are amplified when we suffer. Again, we must address the whole person to be as influential as possible using successful evidence-based practices (yes, Christ-centered programs can be evidence-based). This requires a biological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual approach, all four comprehensive elements of a human being.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on spirituality is missing from much of the governmental or healthcare approaches to the treatment and recovery of an AUD or SUD. In fact, in a study done by the White House, that evaluated 138 federally administered programs and identified 35 program areas, only 11% of federally funded grants went to faith-based programs.<sup>4</sup> Faith-based programs do matter and do make a difference in recovery. One study shows up to 82% of clients who experienced a *spiritual awakening* during substance abuse treatment and recovery were completely abstinent at a 1-year follow-up compared with 55% of non-spiritually awakened clients.<sup>5</sup> Another study reveals that in an evaluation of 278 quantitative studies, 86% found that faith reduced the risks associated with alcohol use, abuse, or dependence.<sup>6</sup>

Research also shows that those in recovery seek out programs who also provide a spiritual focus. One study states that 84% of the clients in addiction counseling expressed a desire for a greater emphasis on spirituality in treatment.<sup>7</sup> Adults who attend a religious service weekly are five times less likely to take illicit drugs and seven times less likely to binge drink.<sup>8</sup> Teens who do

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<sup>3</sup> Geyer, H. (2023). *Ending the Crisis: Mayo Clinic's Guide to Opioid Addiction and Safe Opioid Use*. Minnesota: Mayo Clinic Press, pg. 126

<sup>4</sup> United States Ninth Circuit. (2007). *Inouye v Kemna, No. 06-15474. D.C. No. CV-04-00026-DAE OPINION*. Retrieved from [https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCOURTS-hid-1\\_04-cv-00026/pdf/USCOURTS-hid-1\\_04-cv-00026-0.pdf](https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCOURTS-hid-1_04-cv-00026/pdf/USCOURTS-hid-1_04-cv-00026-0.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Lyons GCB, Deane FP, Kelly PJ. Forgiveness and purpose in life as spiritual mechanisms of recovery from substance use disorders. *Addiction Research & Theory*. 2010;18(5):528.

<sup>6</sup> Koenig HG, King D, Carson VB. *Handbook of religion and health*. 2. New York: Oxford University Press; 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Hodge DR. Alcohol treatment and cognitive-behavioral therapy: Enhancing effectiveness by incorporating spirituality and religion. *Social Work*. 2011;56(1):21–31.

<sup>8</sup> The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA). (2001). *So help me God: Substance abuse, religion and spirituality*. Retrieved from <https://www.centeronaddiction.org/addiction-research/reports/so-help-me-god-substance-abuse-religion-and-spirituality>.

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not attend religious services weekly are four times more likely to use illicit drugs and three times more likely to binge drink.<sup>9</sup>

The data simply show that faith does matter in the lives of those struggling with alcohol or substance use disorders. But why? We believe the answer lies in the biblical worldview to six core questions people struggling in substance abuse commonly have.

The six questions or areas within the hearts and minds of those struggling must be addressed are identity, pain, value, meaning, hope, and the future.

*Identity – Will my past define who I am?*

Those in alcohol or substance abuse view themselves through two primary lenses. They see themselves as “always the addict or abuser,” and they believe others will always see them as the “addict” or “abuser.” Helping those suffering from addiction understand the dignity of humanity where self-respect overrides previous choices is critical to long-term success.

Identity and belonging are essential. According to Dr. Shahram Heshmat, a professor at the University of Illinois, identity relates to our fundamental values that dictate our choices. These choices reflect who we are and what we value.<sup>10</sup> People with a positive view of their identity are more likely to find positive belonging. When an individual looks for identity as defined by someone else, they endanger themselves to the possibility of “trying to fit in” or experience a loss of self-worth because they don’t “live up” to someone else’s definition or they see themselves as a “perfect match” for a negative connotation. Character and virtue are foundational bricks in identity to build a sense of self-respect and gratitude for our lives. Once we understand our identity, we transition to gratefulness to our Creator God, who forgives us and gives us the breath we breathe, which begins to dissolve emotional pain.<sup>11</sup>

*The Biblical Response:* The Bible is very clear on identity in humanity. First, those who choose to serve the Lord and have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ forever are called children of God. Secondly, a child of God is a new creation. We begin a new life immediately, even in our mess!<sup>12</sup> This means an individual with A/SUD will still struggle, but their identity is found in a

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<sup>9</sup> The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA). (2001). *So help me God: Substance abuse, religion and spirituality*. Retrieved from <https://www.centeronaddiction.org/addiction-research/reports/so-help-me-god-substance-abuse-religion-and-spirituality>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/201412/basics-identity> (accessed November 22, 2019)

<sup>11</sup> Job 33:4 NLT

<sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17-18

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more powerful source more significant than any addiction they face. They realize that God knew them before they were born<sup>13</sup> and loves them unconditionally right where they are; he is the God of love, the creator of love<sup>14</sup>. Their past is forgiven and forgotten in the eyes of their Creator, and nothing can change that, not even themselves.

*Pain – Will the trauma I have endured ever go away?*

Helping people through traumatic events is critical to successful human living. But it must be done through proper expectations and sound counseling. Those who have been through forms of abuse (sexual, mental, emotional, or physical) need individualized treatment and unique care because every person deals with trauma differently. There are behavior patterns, but within these patterns are thoughts, feelings, and actions distinguished by each person.

Helping someone who walks through the pain of alcohol or substance use disorder and who has also experienced trauma requires us to recognize that for the individual to experience well-being, we must help them set realistic expectations during the recovery process and life beyond. The earlier and better we help individuals, the more likely their trauma becomes less impactful over time. We must support the person in building their belief that the physical pain will subside (it may never go away entirely- an expectation we must ensure they understand). When we don't set the appropriate expectations, we could set the person up for future relapse or failure because they thought differently.

*The Biblical Response:* The Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis wrote, "Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free will involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself."<sup>15</sup> In this statement, Lewis implies that suffering is integral to life, whether by unforeseen circumstances or by choice (free will). The response to those who have suffered dramatically is not to find a way to erase the pain but, more importantly, to learn and grow from the experience of pain.<sup>16</sup> The Apostle Peter wrote of the various trials we go through in life and how they test our character and faith. King Solomon wrote that your strength is small if you faint on a day of adversity.<sup>17</sup> Adversity, pain, and suffering all build resiliency if we let them. The biblical worldview acknowledges that pain is inevitable, and we grow and mature when we endure it well.

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<sup>13</sup> Psalm 139:14-16

<sup>14</sup> 1 John 4:7-8

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain* (1940). The Centenary Press. London, England

<sup>16</sup> 1 Peter 1:6-7

<sup>17</sup> Proverbs 24:10

*Value – Will I ever have value as a human being?*

The need to feel valued is part of the fabric of being human. It is in our DNA. How do we help people feel valued even amid their suffering? Philosophers have been actively discussing existential questions, such as the value of life, since Socrates and Plato. What most agree on is the definition of intrinsic value. Intrinsic value has been characterized in terms of the value that something has “in itself,” or “for its own sake,” or “as such,” or “in its own right.”

<sup>18</sup>

Those with any form of A/SUD have lost their view of seeing themselves as intrinsic value simply because they are human. This value supersedes any whiskey shot, needle filled with heroin, and any timeline associated with addictive behaviors. People have intrinsic value simply because they are human. As many government agencies have defined, human life is more than a statistical, economic sum. Human life is more than the sum of our choices, decisions, and actions. Humanity itself, or “in its own right,” has value. As Christians, we believe we have value because the Bible says God loves us. It says, “God showed us how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him.”<sup>19</sup>

When treating and working with this population, we must educate them on the value of their life. If we fail to do this, they may believe their value in life is only a sum of their choices and actions, a dangerous place to be.

*The Biblical Response:* Genesis 1:26 states *Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... This is known as Imago Dei, or the image of God. We are valuable as humans because we are made in the image or likeness of our Creator, God. Our value as humans is inherent because we bear the image of God. As Christians, wholly committed to Christ, our decisions in life do not change our value as human beings. Our poor choices or bad actions do not change our value. These choices or actions may alter our perception or view of ourselves or others, but this does not change the inherent value of a human being. Those in or coming out of addiction may feel their worth or value is compromised, but that is not what the God of the Bible thinks. If someone with A/SUD engages with God and surrenders their life in obedience to the life-changing Word of God, they will see a transformation in their life as he renews their mind and heart.”*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Zimmerman, Michael J. and Bradley, Ben, "Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Value", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/value-intrinsic-extrinsic/>>.

<sup>19</sup> 1 John 4:9, NLT

<sup>20</sup> Romans 12:1-2

### *Meaning – What is the meaning of my life?*

Alcohol/substance abuse dismantles meaning in the lives of those who are living in it. How do we help individuals understand the meaning of their life? How do we help them find a purpose for their thoughts, decisions, and actions?

While definitions of the meaning of one's life vary in research, a good start is the following: Meaning in life is the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life.<sup>21</sup> Any discussion about meaning should consider Victor Frankl's thoughts in his masterpiece *Man's Search For Meaning*<sup>22</sup>. Frankl suggests that people find meaning by engaging in creative endeavors, through elevated experiences, or by their ability to reflect upon and grow from negative experiences and suffering.<sup>23</sup> As people begin to understand the purpose of their existence, they begin to hope, demonstrate resilience, and overcome challenges they once thought were insurmountable.<sup>24</sup> As we treat and serve those with A/SUD, enabling them to find meaning in their lives deepens the foundation for long-term recovery efforts. They have something to live soberly for.

*The Biblical Response:* Imagine the beauty of the Garden of Eden as described in the book of Genesis.<sup>25</sup> A place of incomparable beauty where humanity interacted directly with all of nature without fear or negative consequence. In the Biblical worldview, humanity was created to enjoy and work in God's creation, work being one fulfillment of the joy of being in the Presence of Almighty God. The Bible is very clear on the meaning of life. God created us to worship Him and in doing so, we are filled with joy, satisfaction, and peace. The depth of these attributes of God cannot be found anywhere else in life except in the Presence of God as one of His children.

The Westminster Catechism (a series of theological/biblical questions and answers to set a foundation for belief) begins with the question, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer given in the document is "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy Him forever." What an amazing promise. As human beings, we can live eternally when we find our purpose of glorifying God and living for Him. For these reasons, Christ-centered recovery programs are very

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195187243.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195187243-e-064> (accessed November 22, 2019)

<sup>22</sup> Frankl, V.E. (1963). *Man's search for meaning: an introduction to logotherapy*. New York: Vintage Books

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195187243.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195187243-e-064> (accessed November 22, 2019)

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, S. (2018) Addiction and a Lack of Purpose. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/out-the-darkness/201811/addiction-and-lack-purpose> (accessed April 24, 2023)

<sup>25</sup> Genesis 2



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successful in helping those struggling find deeper meaning for their lives. It is why Alcoholics Anonymous and Salvation Army have been around so long. The power of the Gospel and its meaning for life drives the success of Adult & Teen Challenge as well. All one has to do is to read Psalm 145 and reflect on what King David wrote as he was influenced by the Holy Spirit. David's writing is filled with worship, and then outlines the benefits and attributes of God. A God that upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.<sup>26</sup> A God who hears the cry of His people and saves them.<sup>27</sup> There is no greater meaning of life than to worship the Lord Jesus Christ and receive His eternal life.

*Hope – Will I ever overcome substance abuse?*

Hope seems lost when someone is struggling with A/SUD or another form of addiction. Their daily struggle to sustain the “high” becomes their only focus. Hope is something they just don't believe in. As a result, many perish without hope. But this does not have to be.

Hope is a powerful tool. Research has proven the value of hope in human life.<sup>28</sup> There's a new addition to the research on hope—a specific kind of hope called goal-transcendent hope. Goal-transcendent hope is built on the idea that one can persevere when the goal seems unachievable.<sup>29</sup> Thus, how do we help people find hope as they struggle with substance abuse? Mayo Clinic calls the type of work done by organizations like Adult & Teen Challenge a residential, modified therapeutic model.<sup>30</sup> Why? Because while we and other programs like ours use the traditional resources available, we also walk individuals daily through finding their identity, minimizing pain, discovering value, worth, meaning, and purpose, and how to dream about their future again. We offer individuals a never-ending form of Hope beyond what mental health literature suggests. Hope in the internal transforming power of the triune God.

*The Biblical Response:* Jesus Christ is Hope defined. This is why He made statements like “Let not your hearts be troubled”<sup>31</sup>, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you”<sup>32</sup>, “I came that

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<sup>26</sup> Psalm 145:14

<sup>27</sup> Psalm 145:19

<sup>28</sup> Bovens, L. (1999). The Value of Hope. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 59(3), 667-681. doi:10.2307/2653787

<sup>29</sup> Rueger, S., et al. (2022). Development and Initial Validation of the Persevering Hope Scale: Measuring Wait-Power in Four Independent Samples. *Journal of Personality Assessment*. doi:10.1080/00223891/2022/2032100

<sup>30</sup> Geyer, H. (2023). *Ending the Crisis: Mayo Clinic's Guide to Opioid Addiction and Safe Opioid Use*. Minnesota: Mayo Clinic Press

<sup>31</sup> John 14:1

<sup>32</sup> John 14:27

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they may have life and have it abundantly<sup>33</sup>, and “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”<sup>34</sup>. Our hope is found in the transforming work of the Holy Spirit through eternal life in Christ. As people accept Christ as their Lord, their Hope floods their lives, newly justified in their Creator’s eyes. This begins the process of sanctification or the transformation of their life to a life lived following Jesus and His teachings. We not only realize the hope in this present life, but eternally as well. In fact, this life cannot compare to the Hope Jesus is preparing for us.<sup>35</sup>

*Future – How will I live a sustainable life?*

Aligned with hope, we must address the long-term ability to live a healthy, everyday life. Emotional wellness refocuses our perspective toward long-lasting physical, social, and mental health.<sup>36</sup> We would add that emotional wellness comes from focusing on our spiritual health. To equip individuals with tools to create a sustainable life of sobriety, we must include practical, developmental training and learning along with peer counseling and long-term community engagement. We’re suggesting more than teaching skills for vocational work, more than cognitive behavioral training. It’s teaching individuals with A/SUD how to believe in their future. It’s teaching individuals how to judge their intrinsic motivations to make confident decisions and evaluate the outcomes of their choices. Their belief in the ability to succeed in the future must outweigh the doubt-filled thoughts of their past.

*The Biblical Response:* As we have described throughout this article, the radical changes made in the life of someone who has accepted Christ as Lord is only the beginning. As people grow and develop with Christ, He brings the resources, skills, and relationships needed to help people flourish.<sup>37</sup> This does mean the individual has no responsibility. In fact, Jesus requires us to live in holiness<sup>38</sup>, and the Bible is filled with scripture on the characteristics and growth development of those serving Jesus Christ. In this development, people begin to believe in their future. They see Jesus at work in their lives and trust that He is able to care for them, encourage them, and lead them throughout their life. Their future is secure because of Christ, and that brings peace that passes all understanding of the human mind.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> John 10:10

<sup>34</sup> Matthew 11:28

<sup>35</sup> Romans 8:18, John 14:1-3

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, S. (2022). Emotional Wellness in Recovery. <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/rehab-guide/emotional-wellness> (accessed April 24, 2023)

<sup>37</sup> Philippians 1:6

<sup>38</sup> Matthew 6:33

<sup>39</sup> Philippians 4:7



### ***A Biblical Response to Addiction***

When considering these six questions, the biblically based worldview provides the broadest and most profound answers to all struggling with A/SUD. The relevance and need for scientific research, clinical approaches, and medical methods remain the same. Science has developed many great treatment opportunities, and we should use what works. The Biblically-based worldview does not exclude the need for clinical counseling or medical interventions. However, science and healthcare can only partially answer these questions. We need guidance from the objective source (God) for the entire answer to each of these questions. Research shows faith and proven methods from science and healthcare can make an unprecedented difference in the lives of those living with A/SUD.<sup>40</sup>

The elephant in the room is yet to be addressed, “Is addiction a moral failure/sin or a disease to be treated like all other diseases?” There is a distinct either/or discussion when this “elephant” raises its trunk in the room. Many in Christian circles believe A/SUD is the direct result of sin/moral failure, and, therefore, the answer is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ, who came to save the world from sin. This group argues that since the substance abuser made the “decision” or “choice” to use the substance first, how can it be a disease? If the substance abuser never took the drug or drank the alcohol, they would not have an A/SUD issue.

Those who believe A/SUD is a physical/mental disease cite numerous studies where, in long-term exposure to A/SUD, the brain is physiologically changed and follows disease patterns.<sup>41</sup> Neurological connections are radically changed. Chemical receptors in the brain are disrupted, and the expected chemical flow of the brain is significantly altered. This means the ability to make correct choices in the mind is often physically impossible. Anyone is susceptible to A/SUD. National statistics suggest that 8-20% of those prescribed opioids are at risk of misuse.<sup>42</sup> Suppose you study the history of opioid addiction. In that case, you discover the opioid crisis did start with pills prescribed in large dosages and physicians pressured or incentivized to offer these prescriptions to hundreds of thousands of patients who followed doctor’s orders without fully knowing or understanding the consequences. Research shows that up to 25% of people have become addicted due to opioid prescriptions.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Grim, Brian J., Grim, Melissa E. (2019). Belief, Behavior, and Belonging: How Faith is Indispensable in Preventing and Recovering from Substance Abuse. *Journal of Religion and Health*, published online July 29, 2019

<sup>41</sup> Lembke, A. (2021). *Dopamine Nation*. New York: Dutton

<sup>42</sup> Geyer, H. (2023). *Ending the Crisis: Mayo Clinic’s Guide to Opioid Addiction and Safe Opioid Use*. Minnesota: Mayo Clinic Press

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/prescribed.html>

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We suggest a third perspective. A/SUD can be a moral failure and a neurological disease with complexities varying by individual. Let's face it. Many decide to use drugs to escape some of their reality and enjoy the "high" associated with them without ever intending to become addicted. They want to party, feel good, cover up trauma or pain, or "just let their hair down." These decisions have a direct impact, and accountability belongs to the individual making such choices. Still, we cannot dismiss the science in the brain and body that shows marked physical changes due to continued heavy alcohol or drug consumption. Nor can we ignore the growing data and research that shows healthcare professionals were pressured to prescribe opiates and fell into the trap of perpetuating substance abuse. Sometimes, it's not a direct choice; it's disempowerment by our current healthcare systems. My encouragement to all involved is that according to the biblical worldview, Jesus Christ came to Earth to forgive sin and heal diseases. This is excellent news. No matter your view of how an individual falls into A/SUD, Christ is our source of strength and healing for anyone suffering. His redemption is available to all of us.

***Where do we go from here?***

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a story of a Samaritan man who comes to the aid of a Jewish man who has been badly beaten by bandits. The Jericho Road was a dangerous place between Jericho and the great city of Jerusalem. Bandits often attacked the weak, the lost, and the vulnerable. In the story, Jesus tells how a Jewish Rabbi and a Levite walked by the beaten man at different times, intentionally crossing to the other side of the road to avoid him. That's when the Samaritan man enters the picture. This man sees the victim and immediately begins to help him. He pours wine and oil on his wounds (antiseptic and protection) and takes the man to an inn, where he tells the innkeeper that he will cover all costs while the victim recovers. What's fascinating about this story is that, at the time, the Jews and Samaritans hated one another. Religion (priest and Levite) walked by while a hated ethnicity stopped to help.

Jesus closes the story with a question asking who was the real neighbor of the man who fell among robbers. The lawyer replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus then issued a command: You go and do likewise.

Suppose we are to make a real difference in alcohol and substance use disorder and other forms of addiction. In that case, we must work together to go after every person and do so holistically. Let's throw off the stigma, the religiosity, and the fear of reputational impact, and help our fellow humanity see their value as human beings and introduce them to the One who can forever change their lives. Jesus, go before us.