

CLOSE TO HOME



DEALING WITH
alcoholism



A power greater than myself

A true story by "Paul"

I was raised in a church that emphasized regular Sunday attendance, Bible reading, and rules. My teenage years were focused on challenging the rules, which created an inner conflict of remorse and shame when my behavior collided with my values. I dealt with my guilt through numerous "back to Jesus" experiences, but I kept backsliding.

My weekend binge drinking caused me to drop out of university. My parents hoped a stint at a Bible school might straighten me out. During my time at the school, I abandoned my drinking friends, met my wife, and settled down to raise a family. We became active members in our Mennonite church, involved in youth work and music.

My job, however, introduced me to a circle of friends and a work environment that pressured me to drink to fit in. Once again, my behavior collided with the values I professed at church. I was one person during the week and another on Sundays. I became an alcoholic. I was drunk in the delivery room when our second child was born.

Our deteriorating marriage caused my wife and me to seek counseling. Still, I plunged further and further into my drinking. Week after week my wife would lie awake with worry waiting for me to arrive home. We had many confrontations, and I promised her countless times that I would control my drinking. She protected me by making excuses for my absence at family or church functions. She stayed with me because she did not want to be on her own with two children.

My career flourished, and I became vice-president of our national organization. But my alcoholism progressed to a point where I was drinking in the mornings to get through the day. My employees became

concerned. Finally, when I was 40, my boss flew into town and told me he thought I had a drinking problem. My friends and my wife had often told me the same thing, but this time my ears were open. That day I felt a sense of relief and willingly went to my first Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. The first person I met there greeted me with the words, "Today is the day God wanted you to be here."

Alcoholics Anonymous fit perfectly with my faith. I knew whom the "power greater than myself" was. The grace of God entered my life to do for me what I could not do for myself. My obsession with drink ended.

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My challenge now was to live a life of rigorous honesty. I was tired of being a liar and a fake. In the 15 years that I have been sober, I lapsed once by drinking at a party. Even that lapse, however, was a tremendous learning experience, because it made me face my self-centeredness. I have been learning humility.

I continue to be active in my church, and I think the members recognize God's healing power in my life. They have even welcomed AA friends who have asked to come to church with me. All along, my church and extended family have been important supports to my wife (who also participated for some time in Al-Anon, a program for family members of alcoholics).

Still, many church people don't understand the path recovering alcoholics travel. They think of us as bad people becoming good, rather than as sick people becoming well. But I have found that the Christian life is not so much about rules as about being touched with God's healing and forgiveness.

What is alcoholism?

Alcoholism is a chronic, progressive disorder that involves a physical and psychological dependence on alcohol. People who are alcoholics show patterns of excessive or uncontrolled use of alcohol. Often, alcoholism occurs alongside other mental or emotional health problems, which call for additional courses of treatment.

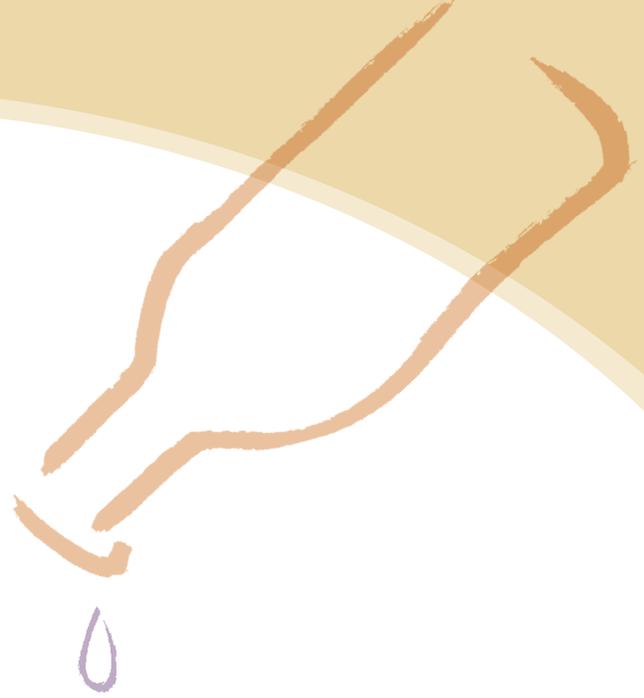
Alcohol *abuse* is serious, but different from *alcoholism*. Abusers may not have lost control of their use of alcohol. Still, their excessive or inappropriate use of alcohol causes serious social and/or health problems.

Whether one is an alcoholic or a habitual abuser of alcohol, excessive alcohol consumption can cause or contribute to liver disorders, gastrointestinal or cardiovascular problems, diabetes complications, and other medical issues. It often feeds social ills such as domestic abuse and divorce, poor performance at work or school, or serious accidents while driving or operating machinery.

What causes alcoholism?

Frequent and steady use of alcohol can increase the risk of alcoholism. But there are many other important factors that predispose people to alcoholism.

- **Emotional factors.** Low self-esteem, depression, or other mental health issues are often part of a person's pattern of alcohol abuse or addiction.
- **Genes.** Some families and ethnic groups are more susceptible than others.
- **Age.** Drinking at an early age increases the risk.
- **Gender.** Men are more prone than women to alcoholism and to alcohol abuse.
- **Family history.** Parental patterns of use often influence children's choices around alcohol.



Alcoholism in North America: Sobering facts¹

- Alcohol use is a factor in nearly half of all traffic deaths.
- Alcohol can be especially harmful when used in combination with other drugs, both illicit and prescribed, including acetaminophen (Tylenol).
- In terms of the most physical damage, social harm, and addictive properties, alcohol ranks high among legal and illicit drugs, including nicotine, cocaine, barbiturates, street methadone, and heroin.
- Ten percent of North Americans are predisposed to alcoholism, even if some decide never to drink.
- Each year, more than 100,000 North Americans die of alcohol-related causes, including traffic crashes, heart and liver diseases, or cancer.
- As many as 1% of North Americans suffer from fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), caused by their mother's drinking while pregnant.

¹ See web sites listed on page 11 for more.

AA's spiritual roots

Alcoholics Anonymous is one of several approaches to recovery. Many alcoholics recover through medication, residential treatment programs, counseling, or—often—a combination of these. The story of AA, however, shows how alcoholism and recovery from it are spiritual journeys.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a worldwide association with more than two million members in 100,000 groups in 150 countries. It began in 1935 when a stockbroker and a physician, both recovering alcoholics, gathered with others who wanted to become sober. They and their famous “Twelve Steps” were heavily influenced by the Oxford Groups, a Christian movement that emphasized surrender to God, change of life, and personal witness.

Since its beginnings, the AA approach to recovery has been adapted for other addictions and compulsive behaviors. Some groups have made the approach more specifically Christian and church-based.

Youth and alcohol

- People who start drinking before age 15 are five times more likely to abuse or become dependent on alcohol than those who begin drinking after age 20.
- Since adolescents are still growing physically, their systems are ill equipped to handle alcohol. Still, 20% of teenagers engage in binge drinking.
- Alcohol is a major factor in the three leading causes of death for people aged 15 to 24: car crashes, murders, and suicides.
- Alcohol use is present in most incidents of date rape.

You may be an alcoholic if one or more of the following apply to you:

- Alcoholism has been a problem in your family.
- You drink alone or in secret.
- You wake up craving a drink.
- You are unable to limit the amount of alcohol you drink.
- You experience “blackouts”; you are unable to remember conversations you had while drinking.
- You are annoyed and irritated when your drinking rituals are disturbed, when alcohol is not available to you, or when someone suggests you have a drinking problem.
- You are losing interest in activities that used to bring you pleasure.
- You store alcohol in unlikely places at home, at work, or in the car.
- You become intoxicated in order to feel good or “normal.”
- You need increasing amounts of alcohol to feel its effects.
- You experience withdrawal symptoms (nausea, sweating, or shaking) when you don't drink.

People with a family history of alcohol abuse and dependency are at a high risk of becoming alcoholic themselves. If this description fits you but you have not yet been diagnosed as an alcoholic, talk with your doctor or your counselor about preventative measures.

Alcohol, the Bible, and the Christian story

The Bible was written in ancient cultures where wine was an accepted part of one's diet. Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding party (John 2:1–11). He gave his disciples the wine of the Passover meal as a symbol of his blood, shed for us (Luke 22:14–23). Paul recommended that his apprentice Timothy take wine “for his stomach’s sake” (1 Timothy 5:23).

But the Bible also recognizes that abusing alcohol can cause physical harm to oneself and others and can derail relationships with people and with God. In the book of Genesis, following the Great Flood and God’s covenant with Noah, the first story concerns the humiliation and family conflict that ensued from Noah’s drunkenness (Genesis 9:18-27).

The Bible contains a number of other stories and instructions that warn against the dangers of alcohol abuse. “Do not get drunk with wine,” the Apostle Paul writes, “but be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). For a colorful picture of someone overcome by drink, see Proverbs 23:29-35.

If you are alcoholic, you know how enslaving a habit drinking can be. Paul puts his finger on the feelings of many who are addicted to alcohol when he says, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me” (Romans 7:19-20).

The first of the Twelve Steps promoted by Alcoholics Anonymous (see sidebar) also acknowledges the power of alcohol: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.” Addictions go much deeper than the actual

behavior that we can control. Alcoholic patterns that run through families seem to be one example of enslaving “iniquities” that span generations (Exodus 34:7).

In Romans 7, after Paul laments his compulsive behavior, he asks: “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” He answers with conviction and hope: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (vv. 24-25). Paul knew that Jesus came to “proclaim liberty to the captives” (Luke 3:18). As countless Christians know from experience, that includes those who are captive to the power of alcohol. God loves all who struggle with alcohol abuse or addiction, and invites them to a wonderful journey of healing and hope.

A few people may be “cured” of alcoholism through a miracle or through an extraordinary response to treatment. But most find recovery to be a long process that requires the encouragement and support of others, medical or therapeutic intervention, new starts after relapses, much determination, and prayer.

If you struggle with alcoholism, make sure you are in a Christian community where people have accurate information about alcohol addiction and abuse, and who will walk with you in your journey of healing. Don’t hesitate to get help before your alcoholism advances any farther.

If you live with an alcohol-dependent person

You may not be the one addicted to alcohol, but you either know or suspect that your spouse, child, or other loved one is. You could be the key to your loved one’s recovery, especially if he or she denies that there is a problem. You can take steps to intervene. Talk with a counselor who can help you shape a strategy to draw your loved one in to recovery. This will likely also involve some work with your own emotional health and relationships.

Steps toward healing

- 1. Face the truth.** If you are drinking heavily or showing signs of alcohol addiction (see page 7), stop the denial and the hiding. Go to loved ones and spiritual mentors who care and let them know that you want to confront the problem.
- 2. See your doctor.** He or she may run tests to determine your level of dependency, explore links to other disorders, and help you find the right path toward healing. This will involve one or a combination of:
 - medication to help you safely withdraw from alcohol use and/or to control cravings and lapses
 - a residential recovery program or “detoxification”
 - a support group such as Alcoholics Anonymous
 - personal or family therapy to explore the root causes of your addiction and the triggers for your drinking behavior
 - counseling to deal with the stresses or other mental health issues that are associated with your drinking.
- 3. Include your family.** Alcoholism always affects loved ones, often drawing them into their own patterns of denial, co-dependency, and dysfunction. They may need education and encouragement to pursue their own paths of healing through counseling and other supports. Organizations like Al-Anon support those who live with alcoholic family members.
- 4. Form a circle of support** in your church, including your pastor. Let them know that you are getting help. Invite them to remind you of your commitment, pray for you, and ask you how it is going.

5. Seek positive alternatives. The Apostle Paul urged his readers to be “filled with the Spirit” as an alternative to alcohol abuse. It is not enough to stop drinking. Fill your life with the pursuit of good things that flow from the Holy Spirit.

For further awareness

The NSDUH Report: Alcohol Dependence or Abuse and Age at First Use. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2004.

Websites

www.aa.org

www.niaaa.nih.gov/FAQs

www.theantidrug.com

On Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

www.mcc.org/canada/health/fasd

The link has information on brochures the DVD discussion resource, “Can’t, Not Won’t: A Christian response to Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder” (FASD)

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CLOSE TO HOME



**Local resources for help with
alcoholism:**

**For more information on other Close to Home
titles, go to:**

www.mennomedia.org/closetohome



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