

The Gutter Gospel

The Road to Redemption

Mike Smith

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Dedication

This book would not have been possible without the enduring love and boundless compassion of my wife, Susan. For more than 30 years, she has been the still and grace-filled waters in the tempest that has been my life. A tenderhearted and patient caregiver and loving mother to our son, she is the cornerstone on which I have built my life. This book is dedicated to her.

Living with mental illness and addiction brings with it several challenges. This is certainly the case for those afflicted, but it is true for those who love and care for them. This love and care have come at a high cost for Susan. It has included pervasive anxiety, relentless uncertainty, and grave emotional distress, all of which have spanned decades. My illnesses have drastically altered the path of her life. They have shattered her hopes and dreams by foisting upon her the unexpected, crushing, and unjust responsibilities of single parenthood, personal caregiver, and sole provider. In the process, they have ripped away and ultimately worn smooth the energies and optimism of her youth. In their stead, they have mandated Herculean inner strength, untold personal sacrifice, and a level of individual selflessness and decency few in this world possess. These are burdens no one person should have to bear. Unfortunately, they are also indisputable facts integral to the story told in the pages that follow, facts that I assure you no degree of shame or regret on my part can ever ease or erase.

I have often felt the sting of inadequacy and humiliation in my life, but never more acutely than when I attempt to convey the profound and eternal feelings of love and gratitude I have for Susan. This work is no exception. When held to the mirror of my emotional reality, it reflects only distant approximations of my true feelings. Unfortunately, further care and effort to rectify these shortcomings only render more distortion until I am ultimately left with nothing more than poverty-stricken representations dancing on the wall of Plato's cave. For this, I sincerely apologize. It's just that I want you, the reader, to understand that despite my significant limitations as a writer, Susan has always been, and will always be, both the grace and salvation granted me in this world. I have known no instance of transcendence in which her presence was not an integral part, and I'm certain I never will. It is for her that I look, and to her, I reach in times of deepest emotional despair. And it is she who, without fail, has always been there.

Susan is the faint light I have seen flickering on the distant shores of my reality in times of profound mental crisis. Through the racing imagery of my mania, her voice, gentle and loving, calls out across the bottomless expanse of darkness, beckoning me home. She is the "Path of Yellow Moonlight" the poet John O'Donohue spoke of in his poem *Beannacht* (Blessing). Susan is to be counted among the many unsung heroes who have sacrificed their lives in the selfless service of others, the nameless people across our planet who each day give form and meaning to the word hope. These individuals have lived Jesus' message in its truest sense, the type of person

in whose presence you instantly feel the need to be better. As Jesus said, “*You will know them by their fruits.*” (Matthew 7:16)

Acknowledgment

I would like to take the time to thank everyone who helped me during my journey in life and made this book possible. First, I would like to thank my family: my wife, Susan, and my son Jordan. I would also like to thank my extended family, both on the Pederson side of the family and my siblings on the Smith side of the family. I would also like to thank the jail Chaplin ministry in Fargo, ND, for all of their support over the years.

I would like to say a special thank you to Steve Halstrom at 1100, the Flag radio station in Fargo, for giving me 15 minutes of free airtime to help me get my message out. I would also like to thank all the podcasters for helping me get my message out as well. I would also like to thank Brooklyn Publishing in New York for doing an awesome job of helping me every step of the way.

Thank you to all the kind friends and family who showed me unconditional love and support. Most of all, I want to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for what he did on the cross at Calvary. Jesus has sustained me through all these tough years.

About the Author

My name is Michael Anthony Smith. I just turned 60 years old this past October 26th, 2024. This book is the result of decades of journaling and overcoming several challenges in my life. I was born with very flat feet, so my parents put me in leg braces when I was just learning to walk. I was born in Aberdeen, South Dakota. When I was just 3, my family moved to Sauke Centre, Minnesota. When I was 12, we moved again to Barnesville, Minnesota.

My dad died when I was 15. That event scared me for life. I am a Military veteran as well as a 2-time suicide survivor. I accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior on September 8th, 1988. However, I still had to endure several challenges in life. I was a homeless Veteran for several months. I also had 2 civil commitments placed on me in Minnesota and North Dakota. I also had to spend 6 weeks in a mental hospital. The only solace I had was that I was always journaling, and that is how this true-life story came about.

I want to give a special acknowledgment to Brooklyn Publishing in New York for all of their great help working with me on this project. Kevin Reed and his team all do excellent work, so thank you, guys.

Preface/Prologue

[Client will be providing details]

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Introduction

Lend me your hope for a while,

I seem to have misplaced mine.

Lost and hopeless feelings accompany me daily,

Pain and confusion are my companions.

I know not where to turn;

Looking ahead to future times does not bring forth.

Images of renewed hope.

I see troubled times, pain-filled days, and more tragedy.

Lend me your hope for a while,

I seem to have misplaced mine.

Hold my hand and hug me;

Listen to all my ramblings, recovery seems so far distant.

The road to healing seems like a long and lonely one.

Lend me your hope for a while,

I seem to have misplaced mine.

Stand by me, offer me your presence, your heart and

Your love.

Acknowledge my pain, it is so real and ever-present.

MIKE SMITH

I am overwhelmed with sad and conflicting thoughts.

Lend me your hope for a while;

A time will come when I will heal,

And I will share my renewal,

Hope and love with others.

***Lend Me Your Hope for a While* by Dwight K. Nelson**

Every life worth living is a story worth telling. This truth has shaped my understanding of the value of sharing my journey, a journey marked by chaos, addiction, and, eventually, redemption. My story isn't just about my battle with severe alcohol addiction or my struggles with mental health. It's about the pain that I carried from a tumultuous upbringing and the ways that pain defined much of my life. But it's also about the hope I found through faith and the transformation that faith brought about in the most unlikely places—after losing everything.

It's a story of finding my way out of the darkness and into the light of God's grace, and now, I want to share it as a beacon for others who feel lost, especially my fellow veterans, who often face their invisible wars long after their service ends.

Addiction wasn't just something I struggled with; it defined me for many years. Alcohol became my way of coping with the chaos that lived inside me. I turned to it to numb the deep-seated pain from my past and to silence the mental anguish that followed me like a shadow. It wasn't long before my drinking

led to a downward spiral—hospital stays, civil commitments in two different states, and manic episodes that shook me to my very core. I reached a point where I was afraid of my reflection, terrified of who I had become, and unwilling to believe that life could ever be different.

Each manic break felt like I was losing more of myself, and each time, I thought I had reached rock bottom, only to find there was still further to fall.

But even in the depths of addiction and mental illness, I still felt the pull of something greater. I accepted Christ into my heart on September 8, 1988. But while I accepted Him in my heart, I hadn't yet accepted Him fully into my life. I questioned whether God could truly make a difference and heal someone as broken as I was. So, I turned back to the bottle, back to the gutter where I had spent so many of my days and nights. Despite my stubbornness, God never let go of me. He allowed me to run, allowed me to reach the very end of myself. And that's exactly where I found Him waiting for me. When I had lost everything—when I was homeless, destitute, and without hope—God was still there.

It's hard to describe what it's like to hit rock bottom. You think you know what it is when you lose your job, home, and dignity. But the truth is, rock bottom isn't a single moment—it's a series of losses that strip you down to your most vulnerable self.

For me, rock bottom was finding myself in a homeless shelter, wondering if life had any meaning left. But I went from that shelter to buying my home within a year. That was nothing

short of God's grace, but it wasn't the end of my story. It was only the beginning of my journey back to Him, to a life filled with purpose.

I'm not sharing this to glorify the pain or to paint myself as some kind of hero for surviving. I'm sharing this because I know I'm not alone in these struggles. Every day, 23 veterans take their own lives. They die alone in their pain, feeling like they have no other way out. I've been there. I know what it's like to feel like the world's weight is too much to carry and that the only escape is to disappear. But I also know there is hope, even in the darkest places.

It took me a long time to realize that God uses broken people to minister to others. My purpose in sharing my story isn't to shine a light on myself but to shine a light on others who are still trapped in their darkness. I've decided to give the first fruits of every day to God. Before I even roll out of bed, I wake up and praise Him, thanking Him for all the small things in life, no matter my circumstances. This simple act of gratitude has changed everything. The more I focus on God's word, the more I see how He blesses me, even in life's storms.

My days are different now. I take long walks and pray, just as I did when I first fell in love with God as a young believer. I read Psalm 40 every day, and it fills me with hope:

"I waited patiently for the Lord; He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand."

These words remind me that no matter how deep the pit, God is always there, ready to pull us out and give us a new foundation.

Looking back on my life, I can see how far I've come. I'm no longer over-medicated or drowning in alcohol. My mind is clear, my spirit is renewed, and I wake up daily with purpose. That purpose was never about wealth or status. As a younger man, I chased those things, thinking they would bring me happiness. But all they brought was more emptiness and more pain. Today, I understand that my purpose is something much greater. My purpose is to share the Good News of God's salvation, especially with hurting people.

Veterans, in particular, are close to my heart. They've fought battles that most people will never understand, and many carry the scars of those battles long after the war is over. Too many of them end up like I did—lost, broken, and searching for something to numb the pain. But I want them to know that there is freedom from their addictions. There is hope for restoration. God is for them, not against them. And even though they may feel like they've been abandoned, all of heaven is cheering them on to finish their race strong.

I want to see veterans—and anyone else who is hurting—set free from the chains that bind them. I want them to heal, to come to know God personally, and to discover their own life's purpose. Every person is unique, a precious child of God, perfectly designed for a purpose they can only fulfill. But they must draw close to God before they can find that purpose. They need to see themselves as He sees them—flawed, yes, but also loved and worthy of redemption.

God doesn't see us as the sum of our failures. He sees us as people needing a Savior, and He's ready to transform our lives if we're willing to be honest about our brokenness. That's what I had to do. I had to admit that I couldn't fix myself and needed God's help to pull me out of the pit I was in. And once I did that, everything began to change.

Now, I wake up every day with a renewed sense of hope. My past doesn't define me, and I know my future is secure in God's hands. And I want others to know that same peace, that same hope. No matter how dark the night, there is always light at the end of the tunnel. And that light is found in the love and grace of God.

"The two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you understand why."

-Mark Twain.

Chapter 1

Born into Chaos: Little Joe

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

-Jeremiah 29:11

Life doesn't come with a map, and most start with no real sense of direction. But I've come to believe that, even in the most chaotic moments, God has a plan for each of us. My journey started in Aberdeen, South Dakota, where I was born as the fourth of five children in the Smith family. Being part of a large family had its joys and challenges, but I often felt somewhere in between as the middle child. Not the youngest, not the oldest—just in the mix.

I didn't realize it then, but those early years laid the groundwork for the person I would become, for better or worse.

When I was three, we moved from South Dakota to a small town in central Minnesota called Sauk Centre. Sauk Centre is best known as the birthplace of the famous author Sinclair Lewis. To me, it was just where my childhood memories began to take shape.

After the move, my parents bought me corrective shoes, and I remember how much they hurt. They were designed to

help my weak ankles and flat feet, but they made me feel awkward and different from the other kids. Running and playing wasn't as easy for me as for my siblings or the neighborhood kids. Still, my brother Pat never seemed to care about my clunky shoes or that I couldn't keep up as well as the others. He just wanted to play and always ensured I was included, no matter what.

Our first home in Sauk Centre was beautiful. It sat on a hill that gave us a panoramic view of the town below, and for a while, it felt like an ideal place for our family. Mom loved that house because it reminded her of the home she grew up in back in Sioux City, Iowa, with its wide-open spaces and room for a few horses and cattle. Mom had always been a farm girl at heart, and this house gave her a small taste of that life again. Moreover, it was a paradise for us kids—so much room to run, play, and explore. We had a dog we adored, and even though my shoes held me back, I remember feeling a sense of freedom there that I hadn't felt before.

One of my fondest memories was visiting my Grandma McNally, my mom's mother, in Sioux City. Grandma was everything a child could hope for in a grandparent. She was sweet and gentle, always making me feel loved and welcome. Every visit to her home was like stepping into a warm embrace, and I carry those memories with me to this day. The last time I saw her, I was ten years old, and she was wearing an eye patch over her face where a cancerous tumor had been removed. It was hard for me to see her like that, but even then, she was as kind and loving as ever.

Not long after that visit, my mom received the heartbreaking news that Grandma had passed away. The cancer had spread too far, and it had taken her life. I'll never forget how my mom responded to that loss. She fell into a deep depression that seemed to consume her for months. She would stay in bed for days, crying, and there was nothing my dad or any of us kids could do to bring her out of it. Mom had lost her mother, and it was as if a part of her had died along with Grandma. At that time, I didn't fully understand what depression was, but I could feel the weight of it in our home.

Even before Grandma's death, things weren't perfect in our family. The house on the hill, as beautiful as it was, was a rental, and we couldn't afford to buy it. This was a constant source of tension between my parents. Mom loved that house and wanted to make it our permanent home, but Dad's job as a store manager at JC Penney didn't pay enough to make that dream a reality. With five kids to feed, there wasn't enough money to go around.

Mom and Dad fought a lot, and the fights were usually about money. Dad's way of coping was to go fishing and drink—sometimes alone, sometimes with friends.

Looking back, I realize now that my dad was struggling with his demons. Long before we moved to Minnesota, when we were still living in Aberdeen, my dad had attempted to take his own life. I didn't know about this until I was much older, but he had tried to hang himself.

Afterward, he was hospitalized and given electroshock therapy, which was common at the time. But even with

treatment, his depression never really went away. Dad drank to numb the pain, and fishing was his way of escaping the stress and pressure of life. When he was sober, Dad was distant and cold. It was only when he was drunk that he seemed to relax and open up, but even then, it wasn't the kind of warmth a child longs for from their father.

Dad often took Pat and me fishing with him, and while those trips should have been bonding experiences, they were overshadowed by the knowledge that my dad wasn't fully present. He was lost in his world, and we were just along for the ride. During one of those fishing trips, I earned a nickname that would follow me for the rest of my life— "Little Joe."

Everyone said I looked just like Dad, and Pat would joke that there must have been five different milkmen visiting our house since none of the other kids looked alike. But I looked exactly like my dad, and as I got older, I realized I was acting like him, too. The drinking, the escapism, the depression—it all became part of my story, just as it had been part of his.

Eventually, we lost the house on the hill. The financial strain was too much, and we had to move. This time, we ended up in a large, old house in downtown Sauk Centre. It was closer to Dad's work and, unfortunately, closer to the bars he frequented. His drinking got worse, and the tension between him and Mom continued to grow. I'll never forget one night in particular. Dad didn't come home, and when he finally did, the fight that followed was more intense than anything I had seen before.

They promised it wouldn't happen again, but I knew better. Things were falling apart, and none of us knew how to fix it.

Not long after, my parents made a decision that seemed like a fresh start—a chance to rebuild. They decided to build a brand-new house on the other side of town, near the high school. But before moving into our new home, we had to spend an entire winter crammed into a two-bedroom cabin by a lake five miles outside of town. That winter was one of the toughest times for our family. My siblings took to ice skating on the frozen lake, but I couldn't join them. My weak ankles and flat feet made skating impossible, so I spent most of my time watching from the shore, feeling more isolated than ever.

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”

-Psalm 34:18

Despite the difficulties, we made it through that winter and eventually moved into our new home. For a little while, things seemed to stabilize. Mom and my sisters opened an ice cream stand near the Interstate, converting an old mobile home into a shop. It was hard work, but it gave Mom something to focus on besides her depression. We attended church every Sunday, but I'll be honest—it wasn't for the right reasons. We attended a small church where the priest mainly spoke Latin, and the services were quick. We called it “drive-thru church” because we could be in and out in time to catch the start of the NFL Today show on TV.

Religion, for us, wasn't something deep or meaningful. It was just another part of our routine. I was an altar boy, but I spent most of the service playing with my wristwatch, shining

reflections into people's eyes to see if I could wake them up from their naps. I guess I was trying to make a boring service a little more interesting for myself. Looking back, I realize how much I was disconnected from anything spiritual during those years. Church was a chore, not a source of comfort or guidance.

We hadn't been in our new home for long when Dad came home with another bombshell. It was Christmas of 1976, and he had just been fired from his job at JC Penney. He had disappeared too many times during work hours to go fishing and drink, and the final straw came when the morning staff found him out in the store's display window. It was a humiliating end to his career, and Dad's solution was to uproot the family once again.

He had a plan—one that none of us were excited about. Dad wanted to take our savings and move us to a tiny town in west central Minnesota called Barnesville. None of us had ever heard of it, and we weren't thrilled by the idea of moving to such a remote place. But Dad had a dream of starting his family clothing store, and he was determined to make it happen.

So, we packed up everything we owned and headed north to Barnesville. As we drove toward our new life, we joked about the town's name—Barnesville. We made cracks about the whole place being filled with barns instead of houses. Little did we know that humor would become our lifeline as we adjusted to life in that small town. Barnesville wasn't the fresh start Dad had hoped for, and it became the place where the cracks in our family's foundation would deepen even further.

THE GUTTER GOSPEL

But through it all, I've seen how God was working, even when we couldn't see it. Every challenge, every painful experience, was part of a larger plan—a plan that was about more than just survival. It was about healing, redemption, and learning to trust in something greater than ourselves.

“He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.”

-Psalm 40:2

Barnesville was just another chapter in a long journey that eventually led me to realize that God is always there to lift us no matter how far we fall. Even in our darkest moments, He is near, ready to set our feet on solid ground and give us the hope and future He has promised.

Chapter 2

My First Bloody Gutter: Sad Eyes

“The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

-Nelson Mandela.

The winter of 1976 was a turning point in my life, although I didn't fully realize it then. I was twelve years old, just starting to find my way through adolescence, when my family packed up and moved to Barnesville, Minnesota, during Christmas break. We had left behind the life we knew, and for what? A brand-new house, sure, but one that came with a hefty price tag and even heftier monthly payments.

My father's dream of owning a family clothing store was on the line, but the cost of that dream was steeper than any of us could have predicted. We'd borrowed money during Jimmy Carter's presidency, when inflation was through the roof, and the interest rates were so high that even a steady income wouldn't have been enough to keep us afloat. But none of us knew that yet. For now, we were just trying to settle into our new home and get the store ready for its grand opening.

Once the holidays ended, the harsh reality of our new life hit me hard. I started at a new school, and I hated almost every minute of it. The building was small, with three classrooms on each side of the gym for grades one through six. I was a sixth

grader, and my little sister, Paula, was in fourth. My older brother Pat was already across town at the high school. It felt like we had been uprooted and planted in a place that didn't quite fit, and I struggled to adjust. I didn't know anyone, and the few friends I had left behind in Sauk Centre felt a world away. Thankfully, I only had to endure half a year at that school before moving on to Junior High.

By the fall of 1977, I was starting seventh grade. It wasn't much better than the school before, but eventually, I made a friend. His name was John, and he was a bit of a loner like me. His family had moved around a lot like mine, and we bonded over that shared experience. John had a twin sister, Julie, and through her, we began meeting other kids and even started attending high school dances. For a little while, it seemed like things were beginning to settle down.

Meanwhile, my dad was facing his challenges. His lifelong dream of running a family clothing store wasn't turning out the way he had hoped. Barnesville was only thirty minutes from Fargo, North Dakota, and that's where most people in town went to buy their clothes. Dad couldn't compete with the big stores in Fargo, and the stress of trying to keep the store afloat weighed on him. He reverted to the only things that had ever brought him comfort—drinking and fishing. Since his old fishing buddies lived two hours away, he started taking me along more and more. After all, I was “Little Joe,” and he seemed to need the company.

There was one spot he took me to first and most often—a beautiful lake bordered by a state park. It became a sanctuary for us, a place where the rest of the world faded away, and it

was just the two of us, side by side, fishing and talking. Years later, I would take my wife there on one of our first dates, and we would later bring our son there to watch the leaves change in the fall. But back then, those fishing trips were bittersweet. Dad would drink, and by the time we were done, he'd be drunk. He'd drive us home in that state while I sat beside him, listening to his slurred words and watching the road pass beneath the tires. It was a strange bonding experience, but in those moments, I could tell that fishing was more than just a hobby for him. It was his way of coping, of trying to escape the depression and stress that were slowly consuming him.

Seventh grade came and went without much fanfare. By then, I had started listening to music, and I remember the first album I ever bought—Jackson Browne's *Running on Empty*. One of the tracks on that album, "The Load-Out," still brings back memories of that time. It was a last taste of innocence and sobriety before I would take my first sip of alcohol—a decision that would have disastrous consequences.

The summer of 1978 was filled with motorcycles and reckless adventures. John had a bike, and his older brother, Steve, had just bought a brand-new off-road motorcycle. Steve was a senior in high school, a football player with his whole future ahead of him. But that fall, everything changed. Steve was killed in a head-on car crash, hit by a drunk driver. The loss devastated John's family, and I found myself spending more and more time at their house, trying to be there for John in the only way I knew how—by being present. His family was always kind to me, and I think they appreciated that John had a friend during such a difficult time.

It was in the spring of 1979 that I took my first drink. John and I convinced one of Steve's friends to buy us a bottle of blackberry brandy. We drank it straight until the bottle was gone and then tried to walk home. At some point, I stumbled up the steps of the high school's driver's education simulator and fell face-first onto the pavement, cutting my chin open. I was bleeding everywhere, but somehow, we managed to make it a few blocks closer to home before my brother Pat drove by and saw me lying in the gutter, puking my guts out. Pat tried to sneak me into the house and down to the basement bathroom, but I don't remember much of what happened after that. I had been screaming at my mom, telling her she wasn't my mother. The following day, Dad came downstairs for "the talk." He told me I owed Mom an apology and that I should tell him when I was ready to go to Fargo to get my chin stitched up. I still have the scar to remind me of that night.

After that, things with Dad became more complicated. He had bought a pool table for the basement, which he loved playing on, but it was next to my bedroom. Many nights, I would lie in bed, trying to sleep, while he cracked pool balls late into the night, drunk. I remember crying out to God, begging Him to kill my dad so I could finally get some rest. But my prayers weren't answered in the way I expected. On 14 May 1980, my dad died in his sleep from a massive heart attack. I was fifteen, just finishing my freshman year of high school. His death left a hole in our family that we couldn't fill, and with him gone, there was no way to keep the store or the house. Mom tried to keep the store going for six more years, but eventually, we lost the store and the home to the bank.

In the immediate aftermath of Dad's death, I began to drink heavily. I was also smoking pot regularly, trying to numb the pain of losing him. John and I spent most of our days drinking, and it wasn't hard to find local bums who would buy us booze. Mom worked all day at the store, and when she came home, she would find me out with John. I'd crawl back into the house late at night, and she'd scream at me, calling me a worthless drunk just like my father. There was truth in her words, but my grief, too, consumed me to care.

By the time I started my senior year of high school in the fall of 1982, I was hearing voices. I was convinced that I was caught in some cosmic battle between heaven and hell, and I felt like I was losing my grip on reality. One night, I decided I couldn't take it anymore. I drove out into the country, determined to end my life. I found a spot where a country road intersected with a U.S. highway, and I backed up about half a mile. I floored it, driving straight toward the highway at 90 miles an hour, planning to fly over the stop sign and into oncoming traffic. But when I jumped, the highway was clear in both directions. I tried again. And again. But no cars were coming. Eventually, I stopped and sat there, wondering why I was still alive.

A few weeks later, I skipped school with some friends, and we spent the day drinking at my house while Mom was at work. I had the urge to jump on the highway again, so I convinced my friends to come along. I didn't tell them what I planned to do, but as we got closer to the highway, I floored it. We hit the jump, lost control, and crashed into a ditch filled with snow and water from the spring melt. We were all cold, wet, and

scared. After that, no one wanted anything to do with me. I had crossed a line, and I was now completely alone.

I graduated from high school a few months later with no friends and no plans for the future. In the fall of 1983, I tried to start college at a small community college fifty miles from home. The town had a state hospital that housed severely mentally ill patients, and as part of a work-study program, college students could live in the hospital's dorms. I took the opportunity because my family didn't have money to send me to college otherwise. However, I quickly became distracted by the parties and the freedom of being away from home. I flunked out within one semester. By the spring of 1984, my student loan money had run out, and I had to return home and face my mom with the truth.

With no other options, I made a decision that would change the course of my life—I joined the United States Air Force.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

-Psalm 23:4

That decision began a new chapter that would take me far from the life I had known in Barnesville and eventually lead me to face the demons I had been running from for so long. But as I would soon learn, the darkest valleys are often where we find the greatest light, and in those moments of despair, God was still walking with me, guiding me toward a future I couldn't yet see.

Chapter 3

The Swamp Life: Unleash the Beast

“Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.”

-Isaiah 40:30-31

I left home on July 17, 1984, to begin my Air Force career. I was just a kid, barely out of high school, but already carrying the weight of many mistakes and burdens. Mom saw me off at the airport, handing me a personal grooming kit as a going-away gift. Despite everything I had put her through over the years, I could tell she was proud of me at that moment. Her hug was warm, tight, and filled with unspoken worry only a mother can carry. I wished I could have felt more excitement, but instead, I was filled with a strange mix of anxiety and relief.

I knew I was running away from my past, but I had no idea what lay ahead. The stories about basic training terrified me, and the thought of failure was never far from my mind. I boarded that plane bound for Texas, hoping that maybe, just maybe, this was the fresh start I so desperately needed.

The flight was uneventful until I boarded the leg from Minneapolis to Dallas. I found myself seated next to a very drunk, very chatty woman who poured out the tragic story of her life to the poor priest sitting on the other side of her. I couldn't help but listen as she recounted every miserable detail—failed marriages, infidelity, and oil money that seemed to bring her more heartache than happiness. She kept ordering drinks, each one loosening her tongue a little more.

By the time we landed in Dallas, she was sobbing uncontrollably. The priest had done his best to offer comfort and advice, but it was clear she couldn't absorb any of it. Watching her fall apart, I couldn't help but think of the road I had been on. Maybe that's what I had to look forward to if things didn't change.

Basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio was grueling, but I did so without too much trouble. The rigid structure, the physical demands, and the constant discipline were exactly what I needed at that time. It kept me focused and kept me moving forward. After six weeks at Lackland, I was transferred across the city to Brooks Air Force Base for my technical school. I was training to become an altitude chamber observer, which meant I would be responsible for instructing pilots in survival techniques. The work was physically draining, and even though I had made it through basic without drinking, the moment I had money and freedom again, I fell back into old habits. There was a bar beside my dorm, and I didn't take long to become a regular.

At Brooks, I felt comfortable—maybe too comfortable. I started drinking heavily again, and soon, the bar became my

second home. My drinking didn't just affect my free time, though. It seeped into everything, including my work at the altitude chamber. The physical demands of my job, combined with my growing alcohol consumption, made it harder and harder to keep up. My trade school lasted only a month, and before I knew it, I was being transferred again, this time to Sheppard Air Force Base in the Texas Panhandle, just south of the Oklahoma border.

Before heading to my new post, I took a few days of leave to visit home. I hadn't seen my family in months, and I figured it would be a good way to recharge before settling into my permanent base. When I arrived at the airport, Mom greeted me with a look of disbelief. She couldn't get over how much I had changed in such a short time. I took it as a compliment, but deep down, I wondered if she saw beyond the uniform and into the cracks starting to form again. We drove home, and Mom first showed me a picture she had framed—a side-by-side of my dad's Air Force photo and the basic training picture I had mailed home to her. For the first time, I saw what everyone else had told me all those years: I looked exactly like my dad. Little Joe is a mirror image of Big Joe, right down to the uniform. I wasn't sure what to say, so I nodded and agreed. The resemblance was undeniable.

Later that day, I went down to the basement to shoot some pool, just like I had done so many times with Dad before he died. It was strange being back there, surrounded by all those memories. I felt a deep sense of loneliness as I played, even though I was home. Mom was proud of me, but I felt like I was drifting. I heard voices again that whispered that nothing

had changed, that I was still on the same path as my father. I didn't stay long. A few days later, I was back on a plane heading to Sheppard.

When I arrived at Sheppard, I was stationed with another graduate from Brooks, a guy named Chris. At first, we did everything together, but as time passed, we drifted apart. I started making new friends, but more importantly, I found a liquor store only a short walk from my dorm. I stocked up for the week, transforming my room into what I called "The Swamp," modeled after the infamous tent from MASH. I even had an artist friend paint a mural of a swamp scene on my wall. The place was decorated with fake moss, netting, and every kind of alcohol you could imagine. It wasn't long before The Swamp became the go-to spot for drinking and watching football games. Even my commanding officer stopped by from time to time for a drink. My neighbor, a sweet girl named Deb from Alabama, would often pop in to check on me. She'd invite me to church every Sunday, but I always had the same excuse: *"I have more important things to do."*

Deb couldn't understand why I needed to drink, but to me, it was simple: it relaxed me, and besides, I wasn't hurting anyone. Or so I thought. The truth was, my drinking was already spiraling out of control, but I was too far gone to see it. The group of people I fell in with at the base didn't just drink—we used drugs, too. Some were officers, others were enlisted like me, but we all shared the same dangerous habit. We took trips to a lake in southern Oklahoma, where we would jet-ski, drink, and use drugs, all while trying to escape the pressures of military life. It was risky, especially knowing that

getting caught meant a certain discharge, but the more we used, the more chances we took.

“The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”

-Psalm 18:2

One night, my buddy took me to a rough part of town to buy drugs. We ended up at a small house in the middle of an all-Black housing project. I remember feeling nervous the moment we walked up to the door, but my friend assured me everything was cool. As soon as we stepped inside, though, things went sideways. The owner of the house came out from the back, pressing a gun hard against my temple. *“Why did you bring this big ugly cop here? Give me one good reason I shouldn’t blow his fuckin’ head off right now,”* he shouted at my friend. I was frozen in place, my heart racing as my friend tried to talk him down. Eventually, we left the house unharmed, but I promised myself I would never return to that part of town again. And I didn’t.

The holidays were the hardest time for me. Everyone from the base would go home to see their families, but I never took leave. I didn’t want to face my family or my failures, so I stayed on base, drinking by myself. One Christmas, I walked across the street to check my post office box for mail from Mom, only to see a giant tumbleweed rolling down the road. It felt like a scene out of a ghost town, and I couldn’t shake the overwhelming loneliness. I would call home sometimes, but Mom always knew when I was drunk or worse. I tormented her with my calls, feeding her lies to stir up drama. One time,

I told her I had been on a plane that crashed at the Dallas airport, then hung up. I don't know why I did it, except that my addiction had taken complete control of me.

My worst fear came true in the summer of 1986 when I was brought up on suspicion of drug charges, along with everyone else I was involved with. One of the guys we used with had been arrested trying to bring weed onto the base, and in an attempt to save himself, he named names. We all lawyered up, trying to figure out who had snitched. The stress was unbearable. I was drinking more than ever, and one night, after hearing that someone down the hall had turned me in, I snapped. I grabbed a baseball bat and stormed down the hall, pounding on his door. When no one answered, I kicked the door in and destroyed everything in sight. The base police showed up minutes later and threw me in jail for the night.

The next morning, I was hauled into my sergeant's office. *"You don't remember anything from last night?"* He asked. *"Then how do you think you got all those cuts on you?"* I didn't have an answer. The stress and the alcohol had pushed me to the brink, and I was falling apart. My sergeant referred me to the hospital for a psych evaluation, where the doctor looked me square in the eyes and said, *"Mike, if you keep going down this path, you're going to die young. I'm admitting you to a residential treatment program in San Antonio."* It was the wake-up call I needed, but even then, I wasn't sure if I could pull myself out of the hole I had dug.

Once I arrived in treatment, I was assigned to wake up the ward each morning and get everyone ready for breakfast. I used the extra time to run around the hospital grounds, watching the recruits march in formation. There was

something peaceful about it, something that reminded me of the early days of basic training before everything started to unravel. I attended AA meetings and group therapy sessions and followed the treatment plan as best as I could, but I still wasn't fully committed to getting better.

One day, I went to the lab for a blood draw, and there, I ran into an old roommate from Sheppard, Glen. He was a Christian, always kind and soft-spoken, and his face lit up when he saw me. *"Mike, I've been praying for you,"* he said. *"God has a plan for you, Mike. I know it."* I nodded, not sure what to say. Glen had always been one of the good ones, and I knew he meant well, but I wasn't ready to hear it. Still, his words stuck with me.

Another moment that stood out during treatment was when an elderly retired officer's wife came to speak at a family session. She stood before the group, crying as she talked about how her husband's drinking had destroyed their marriage. *"I think about leaving him all the time,"* she sobbed. *"But we've been married forty-seven years. I just don't know what to do anymore."* Her husband was unmoved, and I wondered if that would be me someday. Would I be so far gone that even the tears of someone who loved me couldn't reach me?

I was discharged from treatment, but not before I had a chance to go out into San Antonio for a day with my girlfriend, Wendy. We walked along the River Walk, saw the sights, and had dinner at the Towers of America. As the sun set over the city, Wendy asked me what I was thinking. Without hesitation, I said, *"I'm thinking I want a drink."* She couldn't believe it. After everything I had been through in treatment, I was already back

to my old ways. That night, I ruined any chance of a future with her.

When I returned to Sheppard, the punishment phase of my ordeal began. I was stripped of my rank and assigned to wax ambulances in the hot Texas sun. One day, while taking a break, an old woman approached me with a Bible tract about salvation. *“God doesn’t want anything to do with me,”* I told her. *“I’m an alcoholic, and I’m being kicked out of the Air Force for drugs.”* She smiled and said, *“Thank God you know that. You’re closer to salvation than you realize.”*

Looking back, I can see how God was reaching out to me over and over again, but I kept turning away. I ignored every sign, every opportunity for redemption until it was almost too late.

“The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.”

-Psalm 34:17

By November 1986, I was driving a U-Haul back home, strung out on drugs and filled with panic. I had failed. I had been kicked out of the Air Force and had no idea what awaited me at home. When I arrived late one night, I could barely recognize my mom. She looked like she had aged a decade since I left. The house was nearly empty—she had sold everything of value to keep the store open, but it hadn’t worked. The store was gone, and now she was losing the house, too. I was nothing but a burden to her, and I knew it. Staying with her wasn’t an option.

After a few weeks, my sister Julie and I got an apartment together in Fargo. It didn't last. Julie was in the middle of a custody battle for her daughter, and I was too wrapped up in my addiction to be any kind of support. I found a job in Moorhead, working with mentally disabled clients, and for a while, I lived with one of them, a sweet man named Fred. Fred loved me like a brother, always asking, "*We're brothers, right buddy?*" We played softball together and cooked together, and for a brief time, I felt like I had some stability. But like everything else in my life, my addiction got in the way, and I began looking for a way out.

By the summer of 1988, I had moved out of Fred's place and into a rental house with my old college buddy, Don. We spent our days growing hydroponic pot and getting high, sinking deeper and deeper into the pit that I had been falling into for years. It seemed there was no way out, but even in those darkest moments, God still reached for me, waiting for the day when I would finally listen.

The question was, would I? Or would I continue to run from the only thing that could save me?

Chapter 4

Do You Know Your Enemy? Catch My Fall

“The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?”

-Psalm 27:1

The morning of July 31, 1988, seemed like any other. I woke up groggy, the remnants of sleep clinging to me as I flicked on the TV. My roommate, Don, was already off to work, leaving me alone. I didn't feel like getting high yet, which was unusual, so I just sat there, mindlessly watching whatever was on. It was quiet, the kind of weird calm that creeps in before something terrible happens. Little did I know that morning would change my life in ways I couldn't yet comprehend.

Little whispers began creeping into my mind as I sat there, subtle at first, like quiet suggestions. What if you stood up right now and fell backward? What would happen? The thought was strange but came with an odd sense of peace. For a fleeting moment, I believed it might work—whatever “it” was. So, I stood up in the living room, wearing nothing but my underwear, and let go. I fell straight back, crashing to the floor. That's when it all hit me.

Out of nowhere, a torrent of voices flooded my head, their commands loud and vicious, each one more horrifying than the last. I couldn't make sense of what was happening. It felt like my mind had been hijacked. And then, in the chaos, I saw my father. His voice, unmistakable, cut through the noise. *"Mike, you're worthless. You've always been worthless. No one loves you. Kill yourself. Right now."* I was paralyzed with fear. My father had been dead for years, and yet there he was, his image and voice as clear as day, pushing me toward the unthinkable.

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

-John 10:10

My dad's words echoed over and over. *"There's no hiding. Your fate is sealed. Get the shotgun and blow your head off. Now."* I was so terrified that I could barely breathe. My mind was racing, trying to find some way out of this nightmare, but there was none every time I looked for an escape. I glanced out the window, and in the grip of my madness, I saw familiar faces—people I knew, getting out of their cars, laughing. They were coming to watch, to witness my end. I could hear them whispering, taunting, saying, *"Let's go see this worthless pile of shit kill himself."*

I ran to the kitchen, frantic, but the doors wouldn't open, and the phone seemed useless in my hands. It was like I was trapped in my mind, unable to break free from the horror closing in around me. I heard my dad again, louder this time, more urgent: *"Grab the gun, Mike! Do it now!"*

I started to move toward my bedroom, knowing what I was about to do but powerless to stop it. That's when something

extraordinary happened. It felt like a great wind pushed me out of nowhere toward the front door. A quiet voice, gentle and reassuring, whispered, *"This is how people's lives are saved."* The force pushed me out of the house, and the demonic voices that had been attacking me began to fade, though they still chased me as I ran down the street—barefoot, half-naked, and in a panic.

I ran as fast as I could, desperate to escape the torment. The farther I got from the house, the quieter the voices became. After what felt like an eternity, I finally stopped several blocks away and realized where I was. Cars drove by, and people pointed at me, probably wondering why a grown man was running through the streets in his underwear. At that moment, I didn't care. I had to get home, but I dreaded what might be waiting for me there.

When I finally returned, the house was quiet, eerily so. I was sweating, and my heart was still racing, but the voices stopped. I walked to the garage, grabbed the shotgun, and hid it where I couldn't reach it. Then I just sat there, not sure what to do next, still shaking, still terrified.

Not long after, there was a knock at the door. It was my friend, Heath. The moment he saw me, his eyes widened in shock. *"Jesus, man, you look like you've seen a ghost. What's wrong?"* How could I explain it to him? How could I tell him about the hell I had just been through? There was no way he'd believe me. So, I gave him a weak smile and said, *"I don't know, man. I think I need to get to a church or something."*

Heath immediately shot down that idea. *"Wait a minute,"* he said, holding up his hand. *"I didn't come here to go to church or get preached. I came over to get high, so if you're not cool with that, I'll leave."*

I wasn't in any state to get high, but I told him he could do whatever he wanted. Heath sat down and smoked a bit, but clearly, he could tell something was seriously wrong. After a short time, he left, leaving me with the weight of everything that had just happened.

I sat there for what felt like hours, too scared to move, too shaken to think clearly. I didn't know who to call or what to do. A few hours later, Don came home from work. He took one look at me and immediately knew something was off. *"Man, you look like hell. What happened?"* I didn't want Don to think I was losing my mind, but I didn't have anyone else to talk to. So, I gave him a watered-down version of what I had just experienced. He didn't look at me like I was crazy. Instead, he nodded and said, *"Mike, I know someone you need to talk to. He's a powerlifter at my gym and a Christian. I think he can help."*

Don set up a meeting with Wayne, but my schedule was so busy that I didn't end up meeting him for five more weeks. In the meantime, I tried everything to distract myself from the terror of that day. I stopped drinking and using drugs cold turkey. I threw myself into working out, pushing my body to the limit to keep my mind off the nightmares that haunted me. But no matter how much I tried to escape, the voices stayed in the back of my mind, tormenting me at every turn.

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze."

-Isaiah 43:2

The days turned into weeks, and the fear never left. Every time I closed my eyes, I could still hear my father's voice, telling me I was worthless, telling me to end it all. I didn't know if I was losing my mind or if something truly evil had taken hold of me. All I knew was that I couldn't go on living this way.

Finally, after an eternity, the day came to meet Wayne. I didn't know what to expect. I wasn't sure if he could help or if I was beyond saving. But I was desperate, and I was willing to try anything.

Wayne was different from anyone I'd met before. He wasn't preachy or judgmental. He listened, really listened, as I poured out everything that had happened. The voices, the visions, the fear. He didn't tell me I was crazy. Instead, he told me about his struggles and battles with the enemy. He shared how his faith had carried him through the darkest times in his life and how God had pulled him from the brink.

As I sat listening to Wayne's words, something in me shifted. For the first time in weeks, I felt a sense of hope. Maybe I wasn't alone in this. Maybe there was a way out. Wayne encouraged me to keep fighting, to hold on, and to lean into my faith. It wouldn't be easy, but he assured me I didn't have to do it alone.

After that day, I began to pray more. I started to open up to the idea that maybe, just maybe, God had a plan for me, even if I couldn't see it yet. The road ahead was still uncertain, and the voices didn't disappear overnight, but something was different now. I wasn't fighting this battle by myself anymore.

Looking back, I can see that July 31, 1988, was a turning point. It was the day the enemy tried to take me down for good, but it was also the day I began to realize that something greater was fighting for me. I had been saved that day, not by my strength, but by a power far greater than anything I could understand. It wasn't the end of my struggles but the beginning of a new chapter—where I would start fighting back with God on my side.

The question now lingered was: Could I trust that voice that saved me, or would the darkness pull me back in? Would I continue running from my fears or finally confront them with faith? Only time will tell.

Chapter 5

Born Again: Bridge of Forgiveness

“The only real prison is fear, and the only real freedom is freedom from fear.”

-Aung San Suu Kyi

The summer of 1988 was unlike any other. It was a season of transformation, a complete upheaval of the life I had known. Only months earlier, I had been entrenched in addiction, spending my days growing high-grade marijuana in my little house and drinking without any sense of control. My life felt like it was spiraling into darkness, yet something had shifted in me. A new path emerged slowly—one filled with hope, peace, and faith.

On September 8, 1988, everything changed. I had met with Wayne, the powerlifter, in the basement of a small church. Wayne wasn't just a man of muscle; he was a man of God and had an unwavering faith that intrigued me. That evening, I prayed the prayer of salvation, surrendering my life to Christ. But even in that moment of spiritual rebirth, the voices from my past were back, accusing me of everything under the sun. The old demons, the ones that had tormented me for so long, tried their best to drown out my newfound faith, but something stronger had taken root inside me. I was

born again, and I truly felt the weight of forgiveness for the first time.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

-2 Corinthians 5:17

After that night, I bought a simple, easy-to-read Bible, something I could carry wherever I went. It became my constant companion. I started taking long walks down to the Red River, where I would sit, read, pray, and reflect on my life. Those moments along the river were peaceful, unlike anything I had ever experienced. I was no longer running from my demons; I was walking with God, learning what it meant to live a life of faith.

At the church I attended, I met a young man named Jake. He became a close friend, and one night after Bible study, Jake invited me to his apartment. As we talked, I noticed a picture of two young, attractive women on the wall. I asked him about the women in the photo, and Jake explained that one of them was his ex-girlfriend and the other was her younger sister, Susan. Something about Susan piqued my curiosity, so I asked if she was seeing anyone. Jake smiled and said no, she wasn't.

Jake and Susan attended Concordia College, so Jake didn't take long to arrange a meeting. The plan was simple: we would all go to a Christian rock concert in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Susan would drive, and her sister, Beth, would prepare dinner before the concert. I remember feeling nervous when Susan, Jake, and their friend arrived to pick me up. Meeting someone new always carried a sense of anxiety, and Susan later

admitted that she thought I was stuck up because I didn't talk much that night. She said I seemed distant, and maybe I was, but something about her intrigued me. Slowly but surely, we started seeing more and more of each other.

One night in particular stands out in my mind. Susan had invited me over to her apartment for dinner. The meal was fantastic, but what I remember most was the dessert—homemade chocolate chip cookies that her grandmother had baked. I must have eaten every last of those cookies, much to Susan's dismay. I later found out they were meant to last her the whole week!

As our relationship blossomed, my work began to take me farther from home. I was traveling nine hours one way just to reach the job site, and the crew I worked with was made up of hard-core addicts and alcoholics. I would have fit right in with that crowd in the past, but now things were different. One other believer was on the crew, and we stuck together, encouraging each other and talking about faith whenever we could. It was a lifeline, something that kept me grounded in the chaos.

One night, while far from home, I was completely broken. I was homesick and overwhelmed. I took a long walk to a bridge that overlooked the Missouri River. The moon was full, casting its light over the dark waters below. Standing on that bridge, I cried out to God, thanking Him for the new life He had given me. At that moment, I felt His presence more strongly than ever. It was a literal and symbolic bridge of forgiveness, and I knew I was walking into a future I had never imagined.

Later that night, I wrote Susan a letter back in my hotel room. It wasn't just any letter. It was a love letter, pages and pages long, written front and back. I poured my heart out, telling her how much she meant to me and how grateful I was to have her in my life. This was long before email, so handwritten letters were our only form of communication. Years later, Susan and I had forgotten about the letter until we received a call from the couple who had bought an old desk from us at a garage sale. They had found the letter tucked away in a drawer and were so moved by what they read that they mailed it back to us. Susan began reading it to me, and as she did, it felt like the words were written by someone who had long since disappeared. The person I had been when I wrote that letter was lost somewhere along the way.

As fall approached, I returned home to Susan. The separation became more painful each time I had to leave for work. I hated being away from her. Around this time, my friend from the crew shared some good news—a local company had started up, and they were hiring. We both jumped at the chance to work locally, which meant I could spend more time with Susan. The change in my work situation made a huge difference, and that winter, I proposed. Susan said yes, and we began planning our life together.

“Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life.”

-Psalm 143:8

On May 20, 1989, Susan and I were married in a small church in North Fargo. It was a beautiful, intimate ceremony,

but one detail is a painful reminder of my past. While the bride's side of the church was full, my side was nearly empty. The only people on my side were the overflow guests from Susan's family. My brother didn't bother to come, and neither did my sister, Julie. The absence of my family stung, but it was a stark reminder of how far I had come and how much I had left behind. I was starting a new life with Susan, knowing this was where I was meant to be.

Married life began to take shape quickly. Most of our spare time was spent with Susan's family on their farm in North Dakota. The farm had been in her family for over a hundred years, and it became a gathering place for cousins, aunts, uncles, and extended family. Those were happy days filled with love, laughter, and community. Looking back, I realize those three or four years were the only period of true sobriety I ever experienced. It was a time of peace, of building a life and a future with Susan.

But life, as I would soon learn, is full of twists and turns. The challenges of the past were never far behind, and the path ahead would not be as smooth as I had hoped. Still, in those early years, I clung to the belief that I had been given a second chance—an opportunity to rewrite my story, to build a bridge of forgiveness between the man I had been and the man I was becoming.

But now I was wondering, could I maintain that peace, or would the shadows of my past come creeping back into my life? Could I hold onto this new identity, or was I destined to fall back into old patterns? Only time would tell, but for now,

MIKE SMITH

I had hope, and for the first time in my life, that felt like enough.

Chapter 6

Church Satan: Blood for Booze

“The chains of habit are too light to be felt until they are too heavy to be broken.”

-Warren Buffett.

I knew I needed a fresh start right after Susan and I got married. I left the asbestos line of work, determined to get out of that dead-end job. But local work was scarce, and all I could find was another dead-end position as a janitor at a department store in the mall. It was humiliating. Here I was, a newlywed, trying to build a life with Susan, and I was sweeping floors for minimum wage. But it was something. We squeaked by on the income, and I kept my head up, hoping that something better would come.

I also decided to get more involved in church, looking for a place to build a stronger foundation for my faith and maybe meet people trying to turn their lives around. Less than a year into our marriage, however, I discovered that the small church in Moorhead, where I had given my life to Christ, was anything but the “Sure Foundation” it claimed to be. The lead pastor, married with five kids, left his family to run off with another woman—a worship leader, no less, who was also married. The betrayal cut deep, and it shook our congregation. People scattered to different churches, trying to make sense of it all.

Susan and I ended up at First Assembly of God in South Fargo, a massive Pentecostal church compared to the little one we were used to. The size was overwhelming, but I figured getting involved would be the best way to meet people. By winter, I was volunteering for their upcoming spring passion play about the crucifixion of Christ. Pastor Bruce, who was directing the production, asked for volunteers, so I signed up, hoping to find some sense of community.

The night we gathered to pick roles, I realized every part required singing except for one: the role of Satan. I couldn't sing to save my life, so that's how I became the "church Satan." I laughed at the irony but was all in if it meant I could be involved. Two younger guys from the congregation approached me one night and mentioned they'd remembered me from a Sunday school talk I'd given the previous year. Feeling a flicker of pride, I was about to say something, but one of them cut in: "*Honestly, I don't remember anything you talked about—just that your socks didn't match.*" That moment was humbling, reminding me of how fragile our egos can be, even when we're supposed to do something for God.

As the play's opening night approached, my nerves hit hard. Thousands of people showed up each night, and I felt the weight of that crowd. My first scene began with me challenging Jesus in the desert, and as the lights came up, I froze, looking out over the faces in the audience. But then Pastor Bruce's advice came to mind: focus on the exit sign or something inanimate, not the crowd. Once I got through that first scene, the nerves faded, and the performance began to flow naturally.

Two scenes in particular stayed with me long after the play ended. In one, I was pacing the stage as they crucified Jesus, watching with pride as he suffered. In another, I strutted around “hell” while the other actors playing demons circled me. Slowly, the stage lights illuminated the body of Christ, getting brighter and brighter until he rose from the dead. To depict Christ’s triumph over Satan, Pastor Bruce added a special effect: strapped into a harness, he flew across the stage, kicking me in the head. Night after night, hundreds of people came forward to accept Christ at the end of the play. It was a powerful experience, but as much as I enjoyed being part of something that impacted many lives, I felt myself growing colder and colder inside.

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

-Ephesians 6:12

I played the role of Satan for three years, but as time went on, the thrill of it began to wear off. My work situation wasn’t helping. I was still stuck in a miserable job, and each day felt like a new reminder of how far I hadn’t come. I stopped reading my Bible and praying and slowly drifted farther from God. It didn’t matter that I stood on stage night after night, helping lead others to faith. My own life felt hollow. I was just going through the motions.

One day, I couldn’t take it anymore. I quit my job, hoping I could finally find something meaningful. But the reality of my “highly questionable” background came crashing down on me.

There were few job prospects, and I soon found myself unemployed, sinking deeper into depression. The lure of alcohol crept back into my life. At first, I thought I could control it—just a drink here and there to take the edge off. But before long, I was back to using it as my escape, a way to numb the disappointment and frustration that had become my constant companions.

A friend from church called one day, offering me a chance to take over his courier route. I jumped at the opportunity, grateful for any way to contribute financially. The job didn't pay much, but it was simple and gave me a sense of purpose. Each day, I would load up my van with medical supplies and drive 300 miles, winding through scenic backroads. I enjoyed the solitude, but as the miles stretched on, my thoughts began to drift more and more toward alcohol. I found myself thinking about drinking instead of reading the Bible, craving that familiar escape over the connection I had once felt with God.

One day, a coworker mentioned that he donated plasma for extra money. That diseased part of my mind—the part that was still an alcoholic—latched onto the idea immediately. If I could do that, it would be extra cash that Susan wouldn't know about. I could buy alcohol without her ever finding out. It wasn't long before I was lying on a donation table with a big needle in my arm, thinking, "How sick is this? I'm selling my blood for booze." The realization hit hard, but I couldn't stop myself. The drinking was back in full force, and beer wasn't enough. I started buying whiskey, hiding it in my lunch bag, sneaking drinks during my route, and rushing through my deliveries just so I could get home to drink in peace. We had bought a house

in West Fargo, and I felt comfortable with a rescue puppy at home, as if I had finally built a semblance of stability. But inside, I was drifting farther from God and closer to a dark place I thought I had left behind.

“Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”

-James 4:8

Susan and I began to argue more often, and I grew increasingly agitated. I convinced myself that I was handling things just fine. But then, the news came that my mom and sister were moving back to Fargo from Phoenix. For years, I had lived without my mother’s critical eye, but now she was back, and her disapproval was constant. Nothing I did was ever good enough, and the tension only added to my drinking. Susan became pregnant, and in August 1995, we welcomed our son, Jordan. When I held him in my arms, I noticed his tiny feet were just like mine. He was a clever little boy, full of life. I remember Susan picked him up from daycare one day, and he proudly showed her a couple of carrots he had smuggled in his socks. He hadn’t wanted to eat them but didn’t want to offend the daycare lady, so he’d devise a solution.

Not long after Jordan was born, I ran into Wayne, my old friend who had prayed over me when I first accepted Christ. We were filling up our vehicles at a gas station, and he asked how I was doing. I confessed that my job was wearing on me, so Wayne mentioned that the local city bus company was hiring part-time dispatchers. The thought of something new appealed to me, and Susan agreed it might work out well. So,

in the spring of 1996, I left the courier route and started working as a dispatcher.

The plan was to return to school and work part-time to improve my career prospects. I had a supportive wife, a new job, and a baby boy at home, yet the ache in my soul wouldn't go away. I thought that maybe, just maybe, this new path would be the one to pull me out of the darkness I had sunk into. But even as I tried to move forward, the chains of my past clung to me, heavier than ever, pulling me back toward the very habits and fears I thought I had escaped.

The question that lingered was whether I could break free of those chains or if they would continue to hold me captive. Would I find the strength to draw near to God once more, or was I destined to keep running in circles, forever caught between faith and failure?

Chapter 7

My Tour in Hell: Forever Damned

“In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.”

-Albert Camus.

Starting a new chapter should have felt like a fresh start, a chance to rebuild and redefine. But in May 1996, as I began my job at the city bus company, something dark was already brewing inside me. I took the job with hopes that it would provide stability, and with that, I enrolled as an older-than-average student, feeling a spark of purpose I hadn't felt in years. But halfway through my sophomore year, everything changed. I was offered a promotion to Operations Manager—a demanding role that required managing a team of more than twenty employees and abandoning my college education. I convinced myself that taking the job would ultimately be the better path.

The new role gave me one indulgence: I bought a high-end jet ski, an escape from the daily grind. On high-wind days, I'd load up my gear and head to the lake, where the only things that existed were me, the water, and the horizon. Out there, nature absorbed all my worries. It felt like freedom, but it was temporary, and every time I returned to shore, the restlessness returned to me.

By the fall of 1999, I craved answers—something to lead me to a better life. Late one night, I stumbled across an infomercial featuring Tony Robbins, talking about self-empowerment and success. Desperate to feel in control, I ordered his program, convincing myself this was what I'd been missing. When the package arrived, I dove into the material, consuming hours of his teachings. Robbins's tapes spoke to my frustrations, each one encouraging me to take charge of my life and my mindset. I became consumed, listening late into the night, even at the cost of sleep. I thought I'd found a lifeline.

Thanksgiving was just days away, and one afternoon, I found myself driving back to work after lunch, reflecting on Robbins's teachings. My thoughts wandered to a single question that seemed to echo with every mile: What do you want out of life, Mike? The question grew louder as I crossed the I-29 Bridge, demanding an answer. At first, I thought the answer was money, but that felt hollow. What will bring you peace and true happiness? And then it hit me—acceptance. That's what I wanted more than anything. At that moment, a feeling of complete peace washed over me, and I felt as if God Himself was speaking to me, saying, *"I accept you, Mike. Now go and tell the world."* I was overcome, feeling certain I'd just had a divine experience. God had spoken to me, and I needed to share that truth with everyone.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

-John 14:27

I pulled over to the side of the road, feeling a surge of purpose. Without thinking, I climbed out of my car and walked straight into the oncoming traffic, stopping cars to share what I believed was God's message to me. I'll never forget the horror in drivers' eyes as they looked at me, arms spread, standing in the middle of the road, proclaiming this newfound acceptance. Then, a police officer pulled up, took me to the side of the road, and asked questions to understand what had led to this erratic behavior. He contacted Susan, who arrived at the ER looking terrified and unsure of what was happening.

In the sterile, cold light of the ER, I tried to explain the peace I'd felt, but the doctor's expression grew more serious with each word. After jotting down several notes, he decided I needed to be admitted for observation. What had felt like divine peace on the road was now morphing into something darker. I was led upstairs, where they placed me in a private room on the lockdown ward. The isolation began to gnaw at me, and as the hours passed, peace turned to unease.

The once-warm voices in my mind grew hostile, mocking me, accusing me. Trapped in that cold, sterile room, I felt as if the walls were closing in, tainted by a presence I couldn't shake. I demanded release, growing profane and insistent, pacing and pleading. *"Get me out of this room, or I'll sue every one of you!"* The doctors kept insisting I stay for the night. Exhausted, I finally wore them down, and they discharged me against their orders.

That night at home, I couldn't find rest. The voices grew louder, tormenting me with accusations and threats of damnation. By morning, I was spiraling, convinced that I was doomed to hell with no escape. I began screaming in anguish,

and Susan later told me that my eyes rolled back as I shook uncontrollably. In a panic, she called 911. The paramedics arrived, but somehow, I managed to convince them to leave me at home. Nonetheless, they were back soon after. This time, I was restrained in a straitjacket, taken back to the hospital, and placed in a padded cell.

In that cell, my experience of hell was relentless. Every moment felt like an eternity. The voices hissed and taunted, each dredging up every sin I had ever committed, failure, and shame. I felt demons around me, faces twisted in rage, each reminding me of my inadequacies, each voice amplifying my sense of hopelessness. I was convinced I was the anti-Christ, destined to bring about destruction. There was no relief, no escape—only endless torment and accusations that clawed at my very soul.

“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of suffering.”

-1 Peter 5:8-9

In that cell, I was beyond desperate, beyond fear; I was utterly defeated. I felt trapped in an eternal, spinning cylinder of fire and shadow, and just as I thought I would never escape, a light appeared in the darkness, faint but steady. It grew brighter until it took the shape of a human face. A soft and reassuring woman’s voice broke through the chaos: *“Hi, Mike. My name is Amy. I’m going to be your nurse today.”* I blinked, trying to focus, realizing I was no longer in that fiery cylinder of

despair. I was lying in a bed, my wrists bound, my body drained. Amy's calm voice pulled me back, her presence a reminder that I was still alive.

I couldn't hold back my tears when they allowed Susan to visit. She later told me I was incoherent, mumbling about a world where there was no hope, no escape. This experience became the defining moment of my life, a haunting reminder that would follow me for years. I would see those faces and hear those voices every time I closed my eyes.

Returning to work felt impossible, but I tried to resume life as best as I could. Days passed in a blur as I drank to block out the memories, filling the void with anything that might drown out the lingering horror. I reached out to my brother, Pat, hoping he could help make sense of my pain. I left for St. Louis without much thought, arriving at his doorstep after a grueling, twelve-hour drive. We spent a day together, and I tried to explain what I had experienced, but as I spoke, I felt the same terror rising in me again. Unable to continue, I cut my visit short and drove home through a snowstorm that seemed almost fitting for the chaos I felt inside.

Back home, I tried to bury the trauma beneath bottles and food, anything to numb the memories. I withdrew from life, retreating into a world where oblivion was the only goal. This pattern continued for two and a half years. By May 2001, my employer had no choice but to fire me. My addiction had cost me everything I had left. One by one, the things I valued disappeared. First, I lost my jet ski, car, and every dollar I had saved. When there was nothing left, I still couldn't stop. Even my health began to crumble as I turned to food as a secondary

escape. I ballooned in weight, becoming a hollow shell of the person I once was.

Looking back, it's clear I had been broken beyond recognition, chained to the very thing destroying me. Each day was a fight just to survive, and yet, in the quiet moments, a faint glimmer of hope lingered—a question that refused to be silenced. Could I find a way back, or was I forever damned?

Chapter 8

Cab Confessional: The Suicide Solution

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

-Matthew 11:28

The job hunt was nothing short of humiliating. My condition, paired with my deeply inconsistent past, made finding employment seem impossible. The management roles I had once held were out of reach, and sales positions were a nonstarter—I could barely stand the sight of myself in the mirror, let alone charm customers with my ballooned, disheveled appearance.

After two and a half years of unemployment, I accepted the only job I could get. I became a cab driver—a nighttime cab driver, no less, tasked with carrying drunken, strung-out bar customers from one place to another.

Driving the cab wasn’t the adventure people like to romanticize. Night after night, I dealt with aggressive drunks who spilled their misery into my back seat. Women complained about their men, men griped about their women, and both sexes sought advice from me as if I were some wise advisor. If only they knew how messed up I truly was—a broken man,

barely holding it together. But to them, I was just a driver who would listen without judgment. Sometimes, I think that's all they needed—someone to listen.

Each night was its special hell. Closing time brought a parade of crying women, loudmouth men bragging about their conquests, and countless obnoxious requests to talk on my radio. *"Bet no one's ever asked you that before, huh, cabbie?"* they'd say, smirking as though they were original and unique. I hated every second of it. The worst were the men who insulted me, mocking my size with cruel remarks about my weight. Outwardly, I brushed it off, but I wanted to smash their smug faces inside. Their words cut deep, feeding the self-loathing that had already consumed me.

To cope, I leaned harder into drinking. I made sure to stock up on whiskey before heading home, where I would drink myself into oblivion. The irony wasn't lost on me—I hated being around drunks while sober, yet I became one the moment I was off the clock. Night after night, I drowned my pain in a bottle, trying to forget the miserable stories my passengers shared and the insults that echoed long after the shift ended.

By 2002, I'd had enough of the constant ridicule about my weight. I decided to undergo gastric bypass surgery, desperate for a change. Gastric bypass surgery is a medical procedure designed to support individuals with obesity in achieving weight loss and enhancing their overall health.

The pounds melted away quickly, but at a cost—I couldn't keep most meals down, and vomiting became a regular part of

my life. Even years later, the effects remained, but I thought the trade-off was worth it at the time. At least now, I didn't have to endure as many snide comments from passengers.

After a year and a half of driving those miserable souls, I'd reached my limit. I quit, handing my boss a colorful "*Fuck Yourself*" as my resignation. But leaving the job didn't bring the relief I'd hoped for. My options for work were still nonexistent, and my motivation to try evaporated. I retreated into myself, curling up in bed for days on end. Depression wrapped its claws around me, whispering thoughts of suicide that grew louder with each passing day.

The only thing that kept me from ending it all was my fear of death. Deep down, I believed there was no chance someone like me—a drunken, diseased mess—would ever see heaven. I felt trapped in a life of endless pain, unable to move forward but too afraid to let go completely.

My only solace came from my four dogs. Those innocent little creatures, full of unconditional love, seemed to sense my despair. They snuggled with me as I lay in bed, their soft eyes meeting mine with a kind of understanding I couldn't find in people. I remember crying as I looked at them, feeling unworthy of their love. "You deserve so much better than me," I'd whisper. They didn't care. They just wanted me to be okay.

Susan, seeing how far I had fallen, insisted I get help. I agreed to attend outpatient treatment at a local hospital in 2005. It was my third attempt at treatment, and it was there that I met Shelly, the counselor who would unknowingly plant the seed of a lifelong habit. Shelly told us about her father, who

had drunk himself to death when she was just a little girl. Her story struck a chord with me, but I was skeptical when she assigned us homework: write about a painful experience from our past. Specifically, she wanted me to write about my dad's death when I was fifteen.

I thought the assignment was a waste of time, so I half-heartedly scrawled a few lines the night before the group. When Shelly asked me to share what I'd written, I admitted I hadn't done much and offered to just tell the story instead. But Shelly wouldn't let me off the hook. "Write it down, Mike," she said firmly, her tone leaving no room for argument.

That night, I sat down and wrote. For the first time, I allowed myself to relive the day I found my dad lying lifeless in his bed. The words spilled out without much thought, but something inside me had shifted by the time I finished. I didn't realize it yet, but writing had opened a door I'd kept locked for decades.

The next day, Shelly asked me to read what I'd written. As I spoke, the memories overwhelmed me. When I reached the part about finding my dad, a wave of grief hit me so hard I couldn't hold back the tears. I stood there sobbing in front of the group, the weight of years of suppressed pain finally surfacing. Shelly leaned forward, her voice gentle but firm: "That's why I wanted you to write it down, Mike."

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."

-Psalm 147:3

Shelly encouraged me to keep writing and to use it as a tool to process my pain. “You have a gift,” she said. Her words stuck with me, and writing became my lifeline. It didn’t fix everything—far from it—but it gave me a way to make sense of the chaos in my mind.

Still, the patterns of my life continued. Treatment centers, mental wards, and failed attempts to get clean became my new normal. Each time I left treatment, I returned to the same cycle of drinking and self-destruction. Whiskey was my only comfort, the only thing that could burn away the memories I didn’t want to face.

I couldn’t see how far I had fallen, but everyone around me could. Friends and family saw me as a lost cause, a deadbeat leech with no hope of redemption. Their judgment only fueled my self-loathing, reinforcing the lies in my mind: *“You’re worthless. You’re a failure. You’ll never be anything more than this.”*

Suicidal thoughts remained a constant companion, whispering their dark promises as I sank deeper into despair. The only relief came in fleeting moments with my dogs, their unconditional love reminding me that maybe, just maybe, I wasn’t entirely beyond saving.

Looking back, I realize how lost I was and how close I came to giving up completely. But even in my darkest moments, a tiny glimmer of hope remained. I didn’t know it at the time, but that glim would eventually guide me toward something better. For now, though, I was still in the depths, still fighting demons I didn’t know how to defeat, still searching for a way out of the darkness.

Chapter 9

The Richest Man in the World: Caged Madness

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

-Proverbs 3:5-6

By August 2013, nothing had changed in my life. I was still drowning in alcohol and sinking deeper into depression. Yet somehow, I convinced myself I could claw my way out—not through recovery, but through a get-rich-quick scheme. This time, it was real estate investing. I spent hours glued to my phone and computer, obsessively running numbers on imaginary deals, all while pouring more whiskey down my throat.

There was something else creeping back into my life: mania. For those who don’t know what mania is, it is a mental health condition characterized by periods of abnormally elevated mood, energy, and activity levels, often associated with bipolar disorder.

During a manic episode, individuals may feel excessively happy, irritable, or impulsive, leading to risky behaviors, poor decision-making, or financial and interpersonal problems.

Mania can also include racing thoughts, decreased need for sleep, and inflated self-esteem or grandiosity. While it may feel exhilarating to the person experiencing it, mania can have serious consequences and often requires medical treatment and support. Recognizing the signs early is crucial for managing the condition effectively.

I had stopped taking my medications again, and the lack of sleep was fueling my agitated state. One night, as I drained yet another bottle, I became consumed with what I thought was a brilliant idea. In my mind, it wasn't just any idea—it was the one. The plan that would make me the richest man in the world. I was sure everything was falling into place, the pieces clicking together in my manic haze. I rambled on and on to Susan about it, my words tumbling out faster than I could think. Eventually, Susan became so worried that she called the VA for help.

Ironically, we had just been there for an appointment, and they had assured her I was fine. But now, Susan wasn't so sure. She decided to leave me alone that night, probably out of fear or frustration. I didn't mind—I preferred the solitude. It gave me more time to refine my so-called “brilliant” plan.

In my mania, I emailed my brother, Pat, asking him to call me ASAP. I couldn't wait to share the good news about how rich I was about to become. When Pat finally called, it didn't take him long to realize I was spinning out of control. He tried to talk me down, but I wasn't listening. My thoughts were racing, and the alcohol wasn't helping. I hardly slept that night, maybe an hour, before waking up with an idea: breakfast at Perkins.

“Cast all your anxiety on him because He cares for you.”

-1 Peter 5:7

When I called the cab company and got no answer, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I dialed 911 and demanded a police escort to the restaurant. To ensure they took me seriously, I threatened to “*shoot up the entire neighborhood*” if they didn’t arrive in five minutes. Never mind that I didn’t own even a single gun.

The police arrived quickly—seven or eight cars swarming my house. I was sitting on the front steps with my dog, Oscar, calmly waiting for them. When they ordered me to put the dog down, I complied, and they began cautiously approaching. Their tension eased once they confirmed I wasn’t armed, and they started asking questions.

I began explaining my genius business plan, launching into manic detail about how it would make me the richest man in the world. The officers listened patiently before suggesting that what I needed wasn’t breakfast—it was a hospital. I laughed at the suggestion, insisting I was perfectly fine. When they wouldn’t give me a ride to Perkins, I announced that I’d walk to my in-laws to get a lift.

As I marched down the street, the officers followed their voices, a constant buzz behind me. I ignored them, focusing on my mission. I decided I’d had enough when I reached a major street two blocks away. I dropped my pants and mooned them—a move that sealed my fate. The officers tackled me to the ground, wrestled me into the back of a squad car, and drove me straight to the VA hospital.

During the ride, I alternated between lavish declarations and suicidal demands. “*I own all the real estate in the world!*” I shouted as we passed landmarks. Moments later, I was begging the officer to speed up and crash the car, killing us both.

At the hospital, I was handcuffed to a bed while a doctor conducted a quick evaluation. Unsurprisingly, they determined I needed to be admitted to the locked mental ward. When I realized where I was, panic set in. I demanded to be released, insisting I had urgent work to do. I told the doctor he didn’t understand how important I was or how much the world needed me.

But the doctor wasn’t swayed. He calmly informed me I would remain there for observation. My pleas about needing to be home for my son Jordan’s upcoming senior year of high school fell on deaf ears. I spent a week on the ward, fighting every step of the way.

When my court hearing came, I was transported to the courthouse in chains like a hardened criminal. Sitting in the holding cell, I met with my public defender, who offered little more than a pep talk. When it was my turn to address the judge, I laid out my case as best I could, only to watch as the hospital doctor presented his side via video conference. The judge ruled against me, and I was ordered to remain in the hospital for two more weeks.

Those final two weeks felt endless. When the day of my release finally arrived, I was ready to sprint out the door. But the doctor handed me a document to sign before I could leave. “What’s this?” I asked. He explained that it was a stipulation:

if I ever returned for the same issues, he reserved the right to have me institutionalized for at least a year. Furious, I signed it just to get out of there.

I thought, this asshole doctor just had to get one final shot in at me. Even now, I firmly tell anyone who will listen that I would rather die in the gutter than give him the satisfaction of ever returning to him for care.

On the drive home, I begged Susan to stop for booze. She refused, but it didn't take long for me to get back to my old habits. Within a week, I was drinking again, as if nothing had happened.

When I called Pat to tell him I was out, his response cut deep. He told me he agreed with the doctor—that I should be locked away for at least a year, maybe longer. *"You're the sickest person I've ever met,"* he said bluntly. His words stung, but I drowned it in whiskey instead of facing the truth.

That manic episode was a perfect storm of poor choices, untreated mental illness, and addiction. I thought I was invincible that I could outthink, outrun, or outdrink my problems. But the truth was simple: I was lost, and every decision I made only led me deeper into the darkness.

For now, I clung to the only comfort I knew—whiskey—blind to the fact that it was also the very thing keeping me trapped. Would I ever find my way out? Or was I destined to repeat this cycle until it consumed me entirely?

Chapter 10

2019 The Year in Review: Forgive me, Father for I have Sinned

“God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So, we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’”

-Hebrews 13:5-6

The year 2019 was one of the darkest years of my life, a time when everything seemed to fall apart all at once. It began on February 1, when I had to make the impossible decision to put my beloved dog to sleep. She had been with me through so many tough times—always there, always loving. Losing her felt like I had lost my last bit of comfort, my last source of unconditional love. The grief was like a heavy weight on my chest that just wouldn’t lift. I sank deeper and deeper into depression, and each day, my thoughts became darker. There were moments when the idea of ending my life felt like the only way out.

In my desperation, I decided to check myself into the St. Cloud VA hospital. I knew I needed help. I was struggling not just with the overwhelming sadness but also with my constant reliance on alcohol. I wanted to face my pain, to understand it, and maybe—just maybe—find some way to heal. I joined the treatment program, attending classes with other veterans who

were hurting like me. I opened up, cried during group sessions, and shared things that had haunted me for years. For a little while, I thought I was getting better. It felt like some of the weight was starting to lift.

But the relief didn't last. Slowly, the old patterns crept back in. My thoughts became scattered and obsessive, and I started to think about real estate again. It had always been a fascination of mine, but during my manic episodes, it turned into an obsession. Ideas swirled in my head day and night, convincing me I was on the verge of something big—some kind of breakthrough. I was slipping back into mania, and I couldn't stop it.

It wasn't long before I ended up back in the mental health ward. After just a few days, a county social worker came to evaluate me. She interviewed me, and then she left. I tried not to think much of it, but the next day, I was hit with news that felt like a death sentence. The social worker had recommended that I be placed under civil commitment—at least six months in a locked facility. The moment I heard those words, my heart shattered. I broke down in tears, retreating to my room, asking over and over, *"What did I do wrong? How did it come to this?"*

A patient advocate at the VA gave me the contact information for a civil commitment attorney in Minneapolis. When I called him, he agreed to take my case pro bono. Pro bono refers to professional work undertaken voluntarily and without payment as a public service. Typically associated with legal services, it involves helping individuals or groups who cannot afford to pay. Pro bono efforts reflect a commitment

to justice, equality, and the ethical responsibility to support underserved communities.

I felt a small glimmer of hope for the first time in days. A week later, another case manager from the county came to evaluate me. He walked into the room with a thick stack of my mental health records. He sat down, looked me in the eyes, and said something I'll never forget: *"Mike, I've read through all of this, and I just want to tell you how sorry I am for everything you've had to endure."*

His words broke me. I had been trying to be strong for so long, but at that moment, I couldn't hold it together anymore. All the anger, the hurt, and the sadness spilled out. I cried like a child. I had been carrying so much pain, trying to keep it all in, and hearing someone acknowledge my struggle—see me—was more than I could handle.

Eventually, my court date arrived. I was shackled at the ankles and wrists and transported from the hospital to the courthouse like a criminal. The humiliation was overwhelming. I met my attorney for the first time that day. He was young, almost half my age, but he was sharp and confident. He fought hard for me, but it was clear the cards were stacked against us. During the hearing, I found out that my wife, Susan, had supported the civil commitment. I was devastated. I felt betrayed and alone and didn't know how to process any of it.

The following weeks were a blur of court hearings, each one worse than the last. Each time, I was shackled and treated like a dangerous prisoner. I was angry, bitter, and heartbroken. I remember telling the officers who transported me that I would

never ask for help again. *“Next time, I’ll just kill myself instead of going through this shit,”* I told them. I meant it.

In the end, the judge ruled against me. After five weeks in the mental health ward, I was transferred to a homeless shelter in the middle of nowhere to serve my six-month civil commitment. The shelter was a nightmare. It was understaffed, the food barely enough to sustain us, and the living conditions were degrading. I’ll never forget our Easter Sunday meal, just a small bowl of cereal with half a banana. It was as if we didn’t matter, as if we weren’t even human.

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

-Revelation 21:4

I called my lawyer, desperate for a way out. He told me that if I could make it back to North Dakota, the state of Minnesota wouldn’t be able to enforce the civil commitment. That was all I needed to hear. The next day, I made my move. I managed to hitch a ride to St. Cloud to catch a bus back to Fargo, but I missed the last bus of the day. With no money for a hotel, I walked to a Super 8 and called Susan, begging her to pay for a room and my bus fare. To my shock, she refused. *“I’m not ready to have you back home yet,”* she said coldly. Then she called the police on me.

The cops showed up and arrested me for giving a false name when I checked into the hotel. I spent the night in jail, humiliated and furious. After my court appearance, I was released, but I still had no money and no way to get home. In desperation, I called my old friend Tom. Tom, being the good-

hearted man he is, paid for a cab to take me back to Fargo. I even convinced the cab driver to loan me enough cash to buy a bottle of whiskey for the ride.

When I got close to home, I called Susan to tell her I was coming back. By the time I arrived, she was waiting outside with two police cars. The cops listened to both sides of the story and, showing rare compassion, convinced Susan to let me stay the night. Susan left to stay with her parents, leaving me alone. I drank heavily that night, drowning in my anger and despair. I called Susan repeatedly, furious at everything she had put me through. When she eventually shut off my phone, I called 911 over and over again. It wasn't long before the cops returned and arrested me.

This time, I was taken to the maximum-security area of the county jail. I was spiraling again—off my medications, sleep-deprived, and in a full-blown meltdown. I screamed nonstop, demanding that someone call the FBI, the press, or even the President. The guards stripped me naked and moved me to a different cell to keep me away from the other inmates. They gave me a jumpsuit but no toilet paper. When I got sick and had to go, I had no choice but to use my hands to clean myself. I smeared it on the walls in my rage, still screaming for someone to hear me.

A VA mental health doctor visited me in my cell. She advocated for my release, but instead of sending me home, they transferred me to the state hospital in Jamestown. The transport was another nightmare. Chained and raging, I called the driver Satan, accusing him of being responsible for all the suffering in the world.

At the hospital, they gave me a sedative and placed me on a mat in a four-point restraint. I spent five weeks there as they adjusted my medications, trying to stabilize me. During that time, I made four court appearances, each one more degrading than the last. When the judge finally ruled against me, I knew I'd have to return to jail once my medications were balanced.

No one would post my \$360 bond, so I languished in jail, my dignity in shreds. Finally, the VA stepped in and arranged for my release. I was sent to a homeless shelter for veterans and former convicts, a place that offered little hope but at least kept me off the streets.

Looking back, 2019 was a year of unrelenting pain, anger, and hopelessness. It was a year that tested every fiber of my being and left me questioning if there was anything left to fight for. I had lost so much—my dignity, my freedom, and nearly my will to live. But somehow, through it all, a small part of me still clung to the hope that maybe, just maybe, things could change. That small hope kept me going, even when everything else felt lost.

I'm not going to pretend that things suddenly got better after that year. It wasn't like a switch flipped, and everything was okay. Healing has been slow, and there are still days when I struggle. But I've also found moments of peace. I've found people who care, and I've learned to let them in, even when it's hard. I've learned that it's okay to be broken and that sometimes the best thing you can do is just keep moving forward, one step at a time.

THE GUTTER GOSPEL

I think about the verses I clung to during that time—verses that promised that the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and that He saves those who are crushed in spirit. I didn't always feel His presence during those dark moments, but looking back, I see that He was there, even when I couldn't see it. He was there in the people who showed me kindness, in the moments of unexpected grace that kept me going.

If you're reading this and you're in a dark place, I want you to know that you're not alone. It might feel like it now, but you're not. There is hope, even if it's just a small glimmer. Hold on to it. Keep fighting. One day, you'll look back and see how far you've come, and you'll realize that the darkness didn't win. You did.

Chapter 11

Sea of Tears: The Parable of the Muddy Gutter Penny

“But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds,” declares the Lord, “because you are called an outcast, Zion for whom no one cares.”

-Jeremiah 30:17

After the chaos and pain of 2019, my life felt like a storm with no end in sight. Each day brought new challenges, and the weight of my past seemed impossible to shake. Yet, as I reflect on that dark period, I see how God was quietly working behind the scenes, shaping me through every trial and heartbreak.

The loneliness, the betrayals, the endless cycles of mania and despair—they had broken me completely. And maybe that was the point. It wasn’t until I reached the bottom of the pit, covered in the filth of my choices and failures, that I finally began to understand the depth of God’s grace and the purpose He had for my life.

One night, as I lay in bed, exhausted from the constant battle within myself, I had a dream that changed everything.

In the dream, I found myself standing on the shore of a vast, crystal-clear sea. The water stretched endlessly before me, shimmering with an otherworldly beauty. To my right, a magnificent multi-colored waterfall poured into the sea, its

colors vibrant and alive. I stood there in awe, unable to comprehend the meaning of this place.

Then, suddenly, He appeared—the Son of God. His presence was overwhelming yet comforting, and His voice carried both authority and love.

“Mike, my dear son,” He said, “do you know the meaning of this place?”

I shook my head, my voice barely a whisper. *“No, Lord. What is this place?”*

“This is the Sea of Tears,” He explained. “It is a sacred place in Heaven where every tear shed by the people of Earth is gathered. The waterfall you see represents the endless tears cried out from every nation and every tribe. The different colors symbolize the diverse races and backgrounds of all people, each one suffering in this fallen world.”

I listened, captivated by His words.

“Mike, I want you to understand something. I hear every prayer, every cry for help. Not one tear is wasted. All the pain, all the suffering, is seen and stored here in this sea, where it will one day serve a greater purpose. And you, my son, have a tremendous purpose as well.”

As He spoke, He reached out and placed something in my hand. It was a filthy, muddy penny—grimy and worn as if it had been lying in the gutter for years.

“This penny represents every person walking the face of the Earth today,” the Lord said. “Each one is covered in the dirt and pain of this world, but each one has value beyond measure. Mike, I want you to wash this penny in the Sea of Tears.”

I knelt by the edge of the sea, trembling with the weight of what He had asked me to do. Gently, I dipped the penny into the water and began to wash it. At first, the dirt seemed impossible to remove, but I kept scrubbing, determined to restore its shine.

Time seemed to stand still as I worked, the tears of humanity washing over my hands and the penny. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the penny was clean. It gleamed in the light, looking brand new.

I stood and handed the penny back to the Lord.

“Well done, my good and faithful servant,” he said with a smile. *“You have done well with this one. But there is more for you to do.”*

He gestured to my right, and I turned to see an endless mountain of muddy pennies. My heart sank. *“Lord,”* I said, *“there’s no way I can wash all of these. It would take forever.”*

The Lord placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. *“Mike, your purpose is not to wash them all. Your purpose is to spend as much time as needed washing just one until it shines like new. That one will then go on to wash another from the pile. And so, it will continue, one by one, until the mountain is no more.”*

Tears filled my eyes as the weight of His words sank in.

“Mike,” He continued, *“I put you through all those trials so that you could understand what it means to be completely broken. I allowed you to suffer so that you would have a heart of compassion for the least of these—the forgotten, the lost, the hurting. Your purpose is to love and care for the muddy pennies I bring into your life each day.”*

With that, the dream ended, and I woke up with a clarity I hadn't felt in years. I immediately wrote everything down, determined to never forget the message God had given me.

From that day forward, I began to see my life differently. My struggles, failures, and even my pain were no longer meaningless. They were the tools God had used to shape me and prepare me for a mission greater than myself.

I realized that my purpose was to inspire and uplift others, especially my fellow veterans who, like me, have felt lost and broken. Each person I encounter is a muddy penny, and my job is to love them, encourage them, and help them see their worth in God's eyes.

The mountain of muddy pennies no longer overwhelms me because I know I'm not alone in this task. Each penny I help to shine will go on to do the same for another.

“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

-Galatians 6:2

Now, when I look back on my life, I see the hand of God in every moment—even in the darkest times. The Sea of Tears reminds me that none of it was wasted. Every tear I've cried, every ounce of pain I've endured, has a purpose. And every day, I strive to live out that purpose, one muddy penny at a time.

This dream wasn't just a vision—it was a calling. It was God's way of showing me that even in my brokenness, I have

value. My past doesn't define me; it equips me to help others, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

The muddy penny is a reminder that everyone deserves love, compassion, and hope. No one is too far gone to be redeemed. And with every penny I wash, I am reminded of God's promise: that He will use even the broken pieces of our lives for His glory.

I know I still have a long way to go, but now I wake up each day with a renewed sense of purpose. I look for the muddy pennies God places in my path and do my best to love them as He has loved me. The journey isn't easy, but it's worth it.

After all, the Lord Himself showed me the way.

Chapter 12

Loved and Accepted: Flawless and Heading Home

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.”

-Jeremiah 31:3

When I look back on my journey—the endless battles with addiction, the heartbreaks, and the times when I felt lost—I see God’s hand in every step of the way. He never left me. Now, I understand that God wasn’t just setting me free from addiction; He was setting me free for a bigger purpose.

For a long time, I thought that being free from alcohol and the chains of my old life was the end goal. I didn’t see that God had a greater plan for me. But now, I see that He wants to set us free so we can step into the purpose He has for us. His plan is bigger and more beautiful than anything we can imagine, even when we feel lost or broken.

God created each of us with unique skills, talents, and experiences. These things aren’t random—they are meant to help others, share our stories of hope, and show people that even when we’re broken, we are still loved.

For me, I know that my mission is to help other veterans who struggle with PTSD, addiction, and thoughts of suicide.

I've been there, and I know how heavy those burdens are. All the pain I've been through—the rebellion, the moments I felt like I was too far gone—was all part of God's plan to make me someone who can say, "*I've been there, and there's hope for you too.*"

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners."

-Isaiah 61:1

There's also wisdom in Proverbs that speaks to my heart: "It is not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish! Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

This passage speaks directly to me. I was once drowning in misery, unable to see my worth. But now, God has called me to speak up—not just for myself but for others who feel forgotten and broken. Whether it's a struggling veteran, someone fighting addiction, or anyone overwhelmed by life's challenges, I know my story can give them hope.

My responsibility now is to G.R.O.W. in Christ each day.

- **G stands for God:** I start every day with Him, giving Him the first part of my time and heart.

- **R stands for Recovery:** I work on my recovery every day, reading God’s word through the Life Recovery Bible and staying grounded in His wisdom.
- **O stands for Others:** My life is not just about me. It’s about serving others, sharing my story, and loving those who are hurting with compassion and understanding.
- **W stands for Work:** God calls us to stay active, use our hands and minds for His glory, and help others.

I often tell my wife that we must go through the valley to stand on the mountain of God. She once said, “Mike, you didn’t just go through the valley; you went through the Grand Canyon.” She was right. My journey has been full of deep lows and incredible challenges. But through it all, I’ve learned that God’s love and grace are enough to carry us, even through the darkest times.

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

-Isaiah 41:10

I hope that anyone who reads my story will understand this: God can redeem even the most broken, sick, and hopeless among us. There is no pain, no mistake, and no failure that can separate us from His love. You cannot outrun God’s mercy or grace.

If you are feeling hopeless, please know that there is no shame in reaching out for help. Asking for help doesn’t mean

you are weak—it means you are taking a step toward healing. Professional help, support from loved ones, and the love of God can lift you out of even the deepest pit.

When I think back to my first time in treatment, I remember waking up early every morning, waking up the other patients, and going for a run around the hospital. Today, I do something similar—I rise early to follow the G.R.O.W. principle in my life. God, Recovery, Others, and Work—it's the rhythm that keeps me steady and focused on His purpose.

I truly believe that God has forgiven me and has broken the chains of addiction that held me for so long. He has shown me that true freedom isn't just about getting away from something bad; it's about stepping into the life He created me to live.

These days, I share the good news of forgiveness and the new life we can have in Christ. I believe that God is calling those who are hurting to come out of the darkness and step into a life of purpose, a life where they can truly feel His love.

No matter where you are right now—whether you're homeless, struggling with addiction, or feeling like your life has no value—know this: You are loved, and you are perfect in God's eyes. Your scars, your struggles, and even your failures are all part of a story He wants to redeem.

There are over seven billion people on this planet and not one of them is like you. You are a one-of-a-kind masterpiece created by God with a unique purpose. Only you can reach certain people with your story, your kindness, and your love.

When you begin to understand this truth, the weight of your burdens will start to lift. God's love is powerful and can change even the darkest of lives.

“And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

-1 Corinthians 13:13

Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is who God is. He showed us the greatest act of love through Jesus Christ, who gave His life so we could have eternal life.

If you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead and say with your mouth that He is Lord, you will be saved. This is the promise of Romans 10:9, and it's a promise for everyone—including you.

I remember when I was at my lowest, feeling like there was no way out. I was in such a dark place that I thought there was no hope left for me. But I cried out to God, and He heard me. He reached out to me in my brokenness and lifted me. He can do the same for you. No matter how far you think you've fallen, God's hand is never too short to pull you out. His love is always there, ready to heal, restore, and make you whole again.

There were times when I felt unworthy of God's love. I had messed up so many times that I couldn't imagine anyone, let alone God, wanting anything to do with me. But God's love is not based on what we have done; it's based on who He is. He is love, and His love for us never changes. He loved me at my worst, and He loves you just as you are right now.

When I first entered recovery, I struggled a lot. There were days when I wanted to give up. But God never gave up on me. He placed people in my life who supported me, encouraged me, and reminded me that I was not alone. One of the greatest lessons I've learned in my journey is that we were never meant to do life alone. God created us to be in a community, to support each other, and to carry each other's burdens. That's why sharing my story is so important to me—because I want others to know they are not alone.

Sometimes, we feel like we have to clean ourselves up before we can come to God. But the truth is, God wants us to come to Him just as we are—messy, broken, and in need of His grace. He is the one who cleans us up, who heals our wounds, and who makes us whole. There is nothing we can do to earn His love, and there is nothing we can do to lose it. His love is a gift, freely given; all we have to do is accept it.

I remember waking up in treatment, feeling lost and unsure of what the future held. I knew I had to make a change, but I didn't know how. It was in those early morning runs around the hospital that I began to find hope again. Each step I took was a step away from the darkness and a step toward the light. I wasn't running just to get away from something—I was running toward a new life, a life filled with hope, purpose, and God's love.

Today, I continue to rise early, to seek God, and to follow the G.R.O.W. principle. It's not always easy. There are still challenges, and there are still days when I struggle. But I know that God is with me every step of the way. He has given me a

purpose, and that purpose is to help others find the same hope and freedom that I have found.

If you are struggling today, I want you to know there is hope. God loves you, and He has a plan for your life. You are not alone, and you are not beyond redemption. There is nothing you have done that is too big for God to forgive. He is waiting for you with open arms, ready to welcome you home.

Let each morning bring you word of God's unfailing love. Trust in Him, and let Him show you the way forward. Bind love and faithfulness around your heart, and know that in God's eyes, you are perfect, and you are on your way home.

No matter how dark your past may be, God's light can shine through it. No matter how many mistakes you've made, God's grace can cover them all. You are loved beyond measure, and your life has a purpose beyond what you can see right now. God is calling you to step out of the darkness, to let go of the shame and guilt, and to step into the life He has for you—a life filled with hope, love, and a future.

You are not defined by your past. You are defined by God's love for you. And that love is everlasting.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

-Romans 8:38-39

Take that step today. Trust in God's love, and know that you are never alone. He is with you, and He will guide you

every step of the way. You are loved, you are accepted, and you are enough.

Remember, there is always hope, and with God, all things are possible. Keep moving forward, keep trusting, and keep believing. God has a plan for you—a plan to prosper you, to give you hope, and to give you a future. You are not alone, and you are deeply, deeply loved.

Chapter 13

Final Words

“So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.”

-John 13:34-35 (NLT)

In the beginning, the word already existed. The word was with God, and the word was God. He existed with God in the beginning. God created everything through him. The word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

I look back on my life from time to time these days and think about all the dark times and places I had to walk through because I walked away from God after becoming a Christian many years ago. My story should stand as a memoir about how much pain can happen in a person’s life after seeing how good God is, but my free will and my stubborn heart caused so much unnecessary pain not only in my own life but also, I caused so much pain in all my family and friends that loved me.

I turned 60 a few months ago, and none of my siblings and their extended family want anything to do with me. However, only by God’s grace have I been married to the same lady for over 35 years. I am currently in recovery after living like the

Prodigal Son for way too many decades. I think that fact alone speaks volumes of the amazing amount of love, mercy, kindness, and power of God.

God's power can be within us. Recovery is based on God's power at work within us. Jesus gave us several pictures of how we can have God's power. Jesus described how the branch remains in the vine and draws life and power from the vine. He told us that he is the bread of life and that we are to eat the bread. He said he has water to drink to quench our thirst forever. Jesus also taught us in the upper room that the holy spirit would be able to teach us, comfort us, and empower us daily. When we truly repent and cry out to God, the holy spirit comes to live within us and takes step by step to wholeness and healing.

I understand I am a broken soul who is so fortunate to be alive and that I am a broken, fragile, and emotional soul who gets very emotional as I share my story, especially about my two suicide attempts and all the other dark places in my life. The good news, however, is that God uses broken people to reach other broken people by sharing their testimonies. I look at my life now as being very grateful to my lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for giving up his life for everyone who accepts him into their heart. Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future. You have been given this life because you are strong enough to live it.

We feel rejected and overwhelmed when God shows his anger because of our sins. It is at such times that we need to repent and renew our fellowship with him. The consequences of our sins and mistakes hurt others as well, and we need to be

sensitive to that fact and do our best to make amends whenever possible. Discipline is never easy to take, but in the midst of it, God provides us with the direction we need to regain his favor and protection. He has revealed his program for spiritual recovery in his word.

Wherever we are, whatever circumstances we face, we can turn to God for help. He will hear our prayers and protect us with his divine presence. He is our safety and refuge. We can confidently ask him for help because he has proven himself to be a deliverer of those who love him and are under attack. He is our loving protector, who blesses us and gives our lives meaning as we fulfill our vows to live for him daily.

I can only speak from experience when I say that it is not easy to trust in God completely, but that simply comes from not taking the time to read His holy word daily. God will honor that time of fellowship with him. The more time we spend seeking after God, the more we will reveal the purpose he has for us. God created no two people alike; we all have been given our unique gifts and talents, which are all to be used to build up the body of the church and bring glory to God, our wonderful, holy creator.

Now that my story has been told and this book project is about to go to print, I will bring all my readers up to speed about what I am doing in the present day in the year 2025. I am involved in the jail Chaplain ministry in Fargo, North Dakota. I recently appeared in a radio interview, which I freely share with anyone who reaches out to me. I also enjoy appearing on podcasts as a guest all around the world because it gives me a great platform to reach the world for the cause of

Christ. Yesterday, I was interviewed on a podcast based in London. I also lead a small men's group on certain days of the week.

I will leave you all now with one final thought. I am overwhelmed by the fact that God loves me so much comfort and peace in my life now, even after turning my back on him so much of my life. I can't wait for that glorious homecoming in heaven!!! I can't wait for eternity to meet all of those who have gone before me, to walk on the Golden streets, to see the home God prepared for me, but most of all, I can't wait to see Jesus' face to face and thank him with my whole heart as I worship and praise him for all of eternity!!

All of Heaven rejoices every time someone trusts in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. TRUST IN JESUS; HE IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE!!!!
