

## Thinking Things Through: The Way Back From Addiction

I have a clear recollection from one Saturday afternoon about twenty-five years ago of an older man giving a talk about his life. He spoke about his experiences in general, but more particularly about his alcoholism and how it had impacted on him and those around him. I was about forty years of age at the time and he would have probably been in his mid-sixties. I found him to be surprisingly impressive.

He had been born and raised in East Belfast in the shadow of the shipyard, and had run the back streets among the red-brick terraced houses along with his mischievous mates, absorbing the culture and behaviours of that place and time. When he was old enough, he left school, got a start in the shipyard, and became a riveter (hence he was a bit hard of hearing).

He then went on to describe his life as a local “hard man.” A lot of the attitudes and behaviours that he’d absorbed when young he said, were copied from the Hollywood gangster and cowboy films of the time. For example, he learned valuable social skills such as how to roll a cigarette one-handedly, how to spit onto the pavement stylishly, and how to talk out of the side of his mouth. Exactly the sorts of things that they don’t teach you at expensive Swiss finishing schools.

He also described how his hard drinking habit developed and how after he got married, he terrorised his wife and children. Then he spoke about how one day, a few years later, it all came to an end. When everyone had left him and he was alone with no money, no friends, and nothing but four bare walls surrounding him. He found himself at rock-bottom. Then somebody came along from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and helped him to get sober.

Although not formally a well-educated man it seemed to me that he had a store of great hard-earned wisdom. One thing that he suggested during his talk was that addicts of all kinds (not just alcoholics) were really like the prodigal son from the Bible story. He reasoned that this was so because they had essentially ruined themselves through chasing their pleasures, and that like the young man in the parable one day they had come up against a choice. The choice was of either living out short and brutish lives with the pigs or going back to their father’s house. So, like the prodigal, the riveter chose to go back to seek God.

Although he was clear that it was working the twelve-steps suggested in the AA programme that had got him sober, he also said that his personal view was that the AA steps had their roots in the Bible. I found that an interesting idea and thought that after all this time I might have a look at it here. Although, given the constraints of time and space, I’ll just look at the first three AA steps and also look at three Bible quotations which I’ve chosen, and which might be relevant for each of those steps.

It is worth mentioning that although the twelve-step programme was developed by AA for alcoholics, its principles and suggestions have been utilised over the years by other groups seeking freedom from other addictions, such as to drugs, food, gambling and pornography.

So, here goes.

**AA Step One: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.**

Bible verse: *My breath is corrupt, my days are extinct, the graves are ready for me. My days are past, my purposes are broken off, even the thoughts of my heart.* (Job 17:1,11)

Comment: Here, Job realises that his life may be coming to an end. His former strength is gone. His plans have come to an end. He is powerless to control events.

Bible verse: *What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate.* (Romans 7:15)

Comment: Here Paul describes the kind of powerlessness that addicts can suffer from. Even if their lives look fine from the outside, they can be inwardly out of control and full of self-hatred.

Bible verse: *There was a woman afflicted with haemorrhages for twelve years. She had suffered greatly at the hands of many doctors and had spent all that she had. Yet she was not helped but only grew worse.* (Mark 5:25-26)

Comment: Often, like the woman in the story addicts have tried a whole range of remedies but none of them have worked. Shortly, she will come broken before God and be made whole.

**AA Step Two: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.**

Bible verse: *Jesus said to him, "If you can! Everything is possible to one who has faith." Then the boy's father cried out, "I do believe, help my unbelief."* (Mark 9:23-24)

Comment: The man has asked Jesus to cure his epileptic son, if he "can." We must realise that faith is a gift and not simply a matter of willpower. God can increase and deepen what little faith we have.

Bible verse: (Jesus said) *The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised. To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.* (Luke 4:18)

Comment: Just as God freed the Israelites from Egypt so Jesus can free those enslaved by compulsions and addictions today. The Messiah liberates captives from their enslavement and prisons.

Bible verse: *....he (Jesus) cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes; and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, "Loose him and let him go."* (John 11:43-44)

Comment: Addicts are not free to choose whether or not to drink or use drugs. They are entombed in a sense like Lazarus. If Jesus can raise Lazarus from the dead, he can certainly restore modern-day addicts to sanity.

**AA Step Three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.**

Bible verse: *Jesus answered and said unto him, "If a man love me, he will keep my words; and my father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him."* (John 14:23)

Comment: We need to understand that God dwells within us and is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Each of our bodies is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Bible verse: (Jesus said) *Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.* (Mark 10:14-15)

Comment: When we make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God we become childlike. We are called to be simple, trusting, open, grateful and honest – all of which are childlike qualities.

Bible verse: (Jesus says) *To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice; and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him; for they know his voice.* (John 10:3-4)

Comment: When we surrender our lives, we turn to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We recognise the voice of the good shepherd, Jesus, through discerning the still small voice in prayer, through reading scripture, and through following sound teaching and sound advice.

In closing I would make the following point. When using the word *addiction* above I am not only thinking of the modern usage of the word. I am also bearing in mind that its roots are in the Latin of the Roman Empire. In ancient Rome *addiction* was a legal technical term used in court when an individual was surrendered to a master (as a slave). Just as the unfortunate Roman might be surrendered by the court into slavery, so it might be said that somebody today essentially hands themselves (and their lives) over as a slave to their new master. To their drug of their choice.