

Pathway to Freedom: A Journey Begun
presented by Melissa Buhler on the occasion of her baptism
at the Gospel Fellowship Church in Steinbach,
on November 20, 2005

***Preamble:** After listening to Melissa share the story of her downward spiral as a teenager and ultimately finding renewed hope, love and restoration, I thought it was worth sharing with a wider audience than our local congregation. Melissa agreed to have her story posted on my site. Since I did not have a preaching assignment in December, I thought it would be fitting to post her story in the place of my monthly sermon posting. I think it is a powerful sermon on its own.*

While Melissa's story has some sensational dimensions too it, I am not posting it for that reason. Rather I feel it important to shatter the myth so prevalent in our community that the underground drug culture, with all its harmful side effects, does not exist in our community. It does. Melissa's story of spiraling downward into its clutches and eventually finding redemption through unconditional love is a poignant reminder of the power of darkness but also the greater power of love. Melissa's honesty in sharing her story illustrates for us all that there is power and freedom in living openly and vulnerably within the community of faith. I hope you are moved by this story as I am.

Jack Heppner

My name is Melissa Buhler. I have been attending this church for approximately two years, and in September I also became a senior youth sponsor.

I was raised in a Christian home and grew up in the church that my parents attended. But I never made their faith my own. For some reason, and I still don't know why, I never had a high self-esteem. In Junior High I began to dabble in self-mutilation and alcohol. When I started to attend the Steinbach Regional Secondary High School (SRSS) I found myself mixed up in the wrong crowd. Even though I continued to party, I began to attend a new church. But the attitudes of superiority among some of the other youth quite simply turned me off. Besides, I was getting deeper into the party scene. I began smoking pot and hanging out at the dealer's house. So I stopped attending church.

I began to hang out at the dealer's house pretty much every day. I had earned their trust and they had earned mine. I considered them to be my close friends. Even though these "friends" were at times intimidating this way of life seemed glamorous. One night my life changed. There was a party much like other nights, except that this night I was raped. From that night on my life changed. I began to spin out of control.

Once again I got deeper into partying. The location of the parties changed, but I still hung out with the same people, including the guy who had raped me. And a month or so after the first time I was raped, he did it again. Despite the fact that he moved to Winnipeg

after the second time, I couldn't bring myself to talk about what had happened. I was afraid my friends would not understand what had gone on, and there was no way I could tell my parents – I was too angry.

Shortly after the last incident I began to see a guy whom I had met some time before. He was really nice and had a lot of respect for me. I was so happy that somebody could like me for who I was and who did not force me to do anything that I did not want to do. Approximately one month after we started dating I moved into his place. I was sixteen years old.

I thought that I was living the good life, and that I had life by the horns. Up until this point I steered clear of the hard drugs. I thought they were stupid and that I did not need to go there. Then there was a bad turn of events which are too deep and complicated to discuss at this time. Now I was more angry and confused than before. On my 17th birthday there was a party at my house (like there very often was) and our supplier felt sorry for me because I was so depressed. So he offered me a free chemical fix – however much I could take. That night I became very addicted to this drug.

My parents say that when they would look into my eyes they were vacant, as if nobody was at home. It was not that I looked simple, but I did not react to anything, except with anger. They begged me to move home, and after I finally told them about being raped they took me to counseling. This did not me at all, but it did show me how much my parents were dedicated to wanting to help me – most of all how much they loved me despite what I had put them through. In any case, the counseling did not help and I got deeper and deeper into doing the drugs.

The place I was living at went from occasionally having hard drugs to always having hard drugs. This particular drug that we were doing is an appetite suppressant and so I hardly ate. And when I was hungry there was no food to eat because the drug was so expensive. Just to paint a better picture for you about this lifestyle, there were – give or take – about nine people living in this two-bedroom trailer and we could not meet our monthly rent. All of the money went to chemicals. For those of you who have not head of these sorts of communes, they are commonly known as “dens.”

I knew that there was more to life. I felt convicted by the Holy Spirit and decided to move home and leave my boyfriend. There was this girl in my Math class named Christine Ginter, and she invited me to come and check out the GFC senior youth program that they had going. So I attended a couple of times, but unfortunately could not get a hold of my addictions and started smoking, drinking and doing chemicals again. I only stayed clean for a couple of weeks. Other than Christine, Christian girls were not allowed to hang out with me and were very liberal in letting me know this. According to their parents I was a “bad influence” on them.

I went back to hanging out with the people I had hung out with earlier. A couple of months after moving home I started to date this new guy whom I had met. He was all

wrong for me and was not what I was looking for. But he sure was smooth. Very gradually he became possessive and did not let me hang around with many of my other friends. Because of this I had no choice but to quite doing the chemicals. I did suffer from withdrawal, but it was not too severe. I did not attend any sort of rehab or group of any sort. This may be partially because God had provided me with an amazing job. People at work knew what was going on. But I did not want to take responsibility for my actions. I guess I was sort of in denial because I thought the whole time that I had control of the drugs – that they did not control me – which was a complete lie.

I dated this guy for a little over a year, and in that time he went from being smooth and nice to being physically, sexually and emotionally abusive. I am not going to get into everything that happened because it would take too much time, and it is also a very fresh wound for me. But I became very broken. The only friends I was allowed to have were his and I wasn't allowed to see my family, even though I lived at home. He spent and had control of all my money – my entire income.

At first I gave him an allowance, but soon he was the one giving me spending money – from my own pay cheque. My self-esteem was completely gone. He did not allow me to wear my hair down. He convinced me that at approximately 85 to 90 pounds I was fat. In fact, he did not allow me to eat certain foods because he figured that they would make me gain more weight. He told me what I could wear and when. As if this was not enough, he told me that I was ugly too. He convinced me that I was stupid even though I held down a good job.

Looking back, I now see that all he did to convince me of these things was to repeat them often enough until I started to believe them. He did not allow me to hold my head up in public because he would think that I was looking at other guys and he would get extremely angry – to the point of violence. He told me that if I left him no other guy would ever want to date me again because I was worthless. I tried to leave him many times but he would either physically make me stay, or threaten to commit suicide. I was convinced that I was trapped.

Once again, I knew that there was more to life, and I began to long to get to know God. It started out with a fear of going to hell, which in itself is not healthy, but through that fear the Holy Spirit gave me the courage to leave this guy. With the help of the RCMP and with God's strength, I left.

I was so broken. At first he followed me from a distance to a lot of the places I went. And so I became fearful of leaving the house. The only thing that I had to hold on to was God and my parents because I had nobody else. I had left everything.

Then Christine and I began to hang out. We had finally found some common ground and I was actually able to help her. We became best friends and I soon began to attend this church. But the spiritual battle had just begun. Even though I thought God had abandoned

me, after I started to attend this church he was hard at work in me – breaking down the extremely thick and high walls that I had been building for years.

It took a while, and a lot of patience on Christine and my parent's part. But eventually I was able to go out and hold my head up high. I realized that, no, I am not fat and stupid – that God sees me as beautiful. It is interesting how God sent a hairdresser (Christine) into my life – someone whose entire profession is to make people feel good about themselves. This is such an affirmation to me that God knows my innermost needs.

Now, after being clean for a whole year, I was struggling with intense cravings as well as withdrawal from the chemicals that I had once done. Sometimes it was worse than others, but a lot of the time it was as though I had just taken the drug. I had all of the aspects of the high. I mean everything. And when I had these cravings I would feel so guilty because it felt as though I was committing a sin. At other times I felt as though I might as well go and do the chemicals because I felt high anyway. It took a very long time for me to realize that this was how Satan was trying to drag me down. Luckily, it was not always so intense. There were times when I could only taste or smell the drugs. (To be honest I can taste them right now.)

Of course all these cravings only happened in church. My entire walk with God was concentrating on staying clean. This had been going on for some time when I decided that I was going to share my testimony with Christine's parents. After I had shared with them the R-rated version of my life they decided to pray over me. They specifically prayed about the smoking and drinking, but mostly about my chemical addiction.

Soon days had passed, and then weeks. Very soon I realized that God had healed me of my addiction to chemicals. At the end of this November I have been clean from this chemical for three years. Since that night Satan has tried to use this addiction against me a few times, and every time it had no effect on me. I recognize that some of these temptations mimic what I experienced when I was using this drug. But instead of getting a craving, it was only a reminder that my past is real and that God has healed me.

At this point I did not believe that love existed. Although it took a long time, God sent many unknowing people to my side to help me in my battles. These people surrounded and supported me in my walk and through that provided an example of how love is real. Through their example I realized that Jesus is not only a guy in a history book, but that he is very real today and that we need to be like Christ in our everyday walk.

Although I came to realize these things, I still struggled with showing emotion, crying in particular. Although I did not know him personally, Jack showed me that it was okay to show emotion – that it does not show weakness but instead strength. Coming to this realization was pivotal in my Christian walk. This is where the healing truly began. I was finally able to cry and express my emotions other than anger about experiences such as being raped. I am no longer upset at the people in my life who have wronged me, or myself for allowing them to do so. I am also no longer mad at myself for spinning out of control and for the harm that I caused myself.

I also found that not all guys are bad – that they also can be trusted. This is largely due to the fact that Garry, our youth pastor, mentored me and was a sounding board as well as an encouragement.

I know that I will carry great consequences for the rest of my life because of my actions. My hopes, dreams and prayers are that through my experiences God will enable me to help at least one person in his or her walk with Christ. My ultimate goal is to be able to work with the homeless as well as those who live in dens in our community, such as I did. If I can do this my life will not have been in vain.

As I stated before, I am a senior youth sponsor, and I trust that this is only the beginning of where God is taking me. If the present is any indication of the future, I cannot wait to see what God is going to reveal to me about himself as I continue to search.

Today I want to be baptized as a public declaration and celebration of my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And I come before you today not to air my dirty laundry, but instead to expose God's grace in my life. Also, I trust that you will be able to see beyond my past.

I would like to share with you two Bible passages that have meant a lot to me. The first one is found in I Corinthians 10:13:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

The second passage is found in Psalms 119:25-32:

*I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.
I recounted my ways and you answered me; teach me your decrees.
Let me understand the teaching of your precepts;
then I will meditate on your wonders.
My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.
Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me through your law.
I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws.
I hold fast to your statutes, O Lord; do not let me be put to shame.
I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.*

Amen.

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