



## Pastor John Baker's Testimony

Good evening everyone. It's really great to be with you tonight. You know you guys are spoiled. You have a great communicator and preacher in Pastor Ike. I'm from Saddleback Church and we have some extremely gifted communicators in Pastor Rick Warren and Tom Holladay. Outstanding speakers - Ike, Rick, and Tom - gifted speakers. That's good news.

Well, I have a little bad news for you this evening. The bad news is that I am not one of those gifted speakers. But, Pastor Ike has heard me speak before and he still invited me. Seriously, I'm really excited to share one of the greatest gifts I have been given with all of you -- my recovery!

In the time we have together we are going to start talking about taking a journey. A journey of 8 principles along the "road of recovery." I have the privilege of serving Jesus Christ at Saddleback Church as the Pastor of Ministry. I joined Saddleback's staff six years ago as the pastor of recovery and small groups.

Three years ago I was asked to serve as one of the eight elder pastors and I oversee the over 150 ministries at Saddleback Church. Now, that's what I do. But, you know, God is really more concerned about who I am rather than what I do. He's concerned about my character and my values; who I really am when there's no one else around. As a way of re-introducing myself - my name is John and I'm a believer who struggles with alcoholism. Notice I said I'm a believer who struggles. You see, my identity is in my Lord and Savior - Jesus Christ, not in my struggle with a bottle of booze.

I was raised in a Christian home in the small, mid-western town of Collinsville, Illinois with a population of 10,000. I had a normal childhood, whatever that is. My parents were members of a small Baptist church and I asked Christ into my heart at age 13.

In high school, I was class president and lettered in basketball, baseball, and track. I felt called into ministry at age 16 and I applied to several Christian universities.

Up to this point everything sounds fine. It almost sounds boring. But, you see, there was this problem. I had to be the best in everything I did because deep down inside I never felt good enough for my parents, my teammates, my girlfriends, or anyone. So if I wasn't good enough for them, how could I ever be good enough to serve God? I must have missed the Sunday sermons on Jesus' unconditional love and unearnable grace.

I was a walking and talking paradox - a combination of the lowest possible self-esteem and the world's largest ego. Believe me, that's not a very comfortable feeling inside.

The best way that I can describe the feeling is a burning emptiness, a hole, right in the gut.

I wrestled with God's call and judged myself "unworthy" to enter the ministry. So after high school, instead of taking the path that would lead to seminary, I went to the University of Missouri. When I packed for my freshman year, I took my non-existent self-esteem with me. I joined a fraternity and soon discovered the solution, or what I believed to be the solution for all my life's hurts - alcohol! It worked! I fit in! For the first time in my life I felt like I belonged. That burning - that emptiness inside - went away, for a while. I was majoring in business administration, with a minor in partying.

I met my wife, Cheryl at a fraternity-sorority football game. I was president of my fraternity and Cheryl was president of her sorority. Cheryl and I were married in my senior year. Little did Cheryl know what the next 19 years would have in store for her.

We didn't want to wait because the Viet Nam war was in full swing. We knew that after college, I would be called into the service.

After graduation I joined the Air Force and was chosen to be a pilot. I attended Officers Training School and in 90 days I learned to act like an officer and drink like a gentleman! I continued to abuse alcohol and viewed it as cure for my pain. Certainly not a sin! In the service I quickly found the proper use for 100% oxygen - to cure hangovers! You know, the service is gifted in discovering one's talents. I was selected as my squadron's social officer. Perfect! A job that required a lot of hours planning functions at the officer's club bar.

The war ended and I was assigned to a reserve unit. After the service, I joined Scott Paper Co., got my MBA degree at night school, and God gave us our first child, a daughter, Laura. And two years later, we were blessed with our son, John Jr. I was promoted eight times in the first eleven years of my business career. I was the vice president of sales and marketing for two very large consumer food manufacturers. I had reached all my life's career and financial objectives and goals by the time I was 30!

I kept replaying the words of a song in my mind -- "Is That All There Is?"

With all the business success came several relocations. Attending church became less and less important to me as my drinking increased. I knew that if I died I was saved; however, I also was beginning to be uncomfortable with my lifestyle, business practices and priorities. To the outside world, everything with our family seemed normal, but in my heart, I knew something was very wrong.

I was a leader in my church's youth ministry. I thought it was normal to leave work early and stop by a bar before the Wednesday night meeting, so I could relate better to the kids. Didn't everybody? I was my son's Little League coach for 5 years. Again, I thought it was normal to stop by the pizza joint with my assistant coach for a few pitchers of beer after every game. Didn't everybody? Talk about insanity!

Slowly I became more and more uncomfortable leading this lifestyle and had to face a major decision. You know, conviction is really uncomfortable! I had a choice here, do it my way - continue drinking and living by the world's standards; or surrender, and repent, and do it God's way.

I wish I could stand here and tell you that I saw the light and did it God's way. But, the truth is, I chose my way. My drinking increased and I turned my back completely on God.

*Proverbs 14:12 (TLB) says, "Before every man there lays a wide and pleasant road that seems right but ends in death."*

I was known as a functioning alcoholic. I knew I had a problem, but I never lost a job or never got arrested for drunk driving. Up to this point my secret was still safe. Cheryl was in denial, or so I thought. My wife just couldn't label me as an "alcoholic" until she noticed my new breakfast drink - beer! One evening over the minor issue of my refusal to go for pie with some friends, in her anger she asked me to go to counseling with her or to just leave. Much to her surprise, I left! And our separation began.

The only things my "hurts, hang-ups and habits" cost me were my close relationships with the Lord and my family. You see, what I had considered the solution for my life's problem - alcohol - became the problem of my life! And finally my drinking cost me all purpose and reason for living. I was dying physically, emotionally, mentally, and most importantly spiritually!

I finally was at....

**Principle 1      Realized I'm not God; I was able to admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and my life was unmanageable.**

*"Happy are those that are spiritually poor." Matt 5:3 (GN)*

(The Christ-centered 12 Steps are included because so many of those attending Celebrate Recovery have come from a 12 Step background. You will easily see how the 12 Steps fit and are covered by Celebrate Recovery's Eight Recovery Principles, based on the Beatitudes).

I was at . . .

Step 1: I admitted I was powerless over my addictions and compulsive behaviors. That my life had become unmanageable.

*"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out." (Rom 7:18 NIV)*

My life was out of control. It was an October morning and I was in Salt Lake City on a business trip. I woke up and I knew I couldn't take another drink. But, I also knew that I couldn't live without one! I had finally hit my bottom. I made it back to Orange County and went to my first AA meeting. I started going to AA meetings daily. I went to over 90 meetings in 90 days. As the days passed I became ready for.....

**Principle 2      Earnestly believe that God exists, that I matter to Him, and that He has the power to help me recover.**

*"Happy are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted." (Matt 5:4 JB)*

Step 2: I came to believe that a power greater than me could restore me to sanity.

*"For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." (Phil. 2:13 NIV)*

This is where I began to find hope! I finally understood that God loves me unconditionally. I was finally able to understand Rom. 11:13: "... that everything comes from God alone. Everything comes from His power."

My own willpower left me empty and broken. I had to change my definition of willpower. For me, willpower became the willingness to except God's power for my life. This led me to.....

**Principle 3      Consciously choose to commit all my life and will to Christ's care and control.**

*"Happy are the meek." (Matt 5:5 GN)*

In working the first three principles, I said, "I can't, God can." And I decided to let Him – One day at a time. You see, if we don't surrender to Christ, we will surrender to chaos! When I took the third principle (Step 3) I surrendered, completely. I was truly broken.

In Step 3: I made a decision to turn my life and my will over to the care of God.

*"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship." (Rom 12:1 NIV)*

God found a loving, gentle, sponsor for me, who guided me on my road to recovery. I can still remember kneeling with my sponsor praying the third step prayer. He helped me stay balanced and didn't judge me. I learned quickly that this recovery program, this journey, is not meant to be traveled alone.

I thought the first 3 principles (steps) were hard, but now came the fourth principle where I had to:

**Principle 4      Openly examine and confess my faults to God, to myself, and another person whom I trust.**

*"Happy are the pure in heart." (Matt 5:8)*

I had to go back and visit that young boy in high school and finally face all the hurts, hang ups, and habits that I had attempted to drown with alcohol for all those empty years. I had to face the loss of my brother as an infant. I began to see my part in all the destruction that my alcoholism had caused to all those you were once close to me.

When I got to Principle 4 I was ready to:

Step 4: Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself.

*"Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord." (Lam 3:40 NIV)*

And in Step 5: I admitted to God, to myself, and to another human being, the exact nature of my wrongs.

*"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (James 5:16 NIV)*

After I "fessed up," I was able to face the truth of my past - for the first time in my life.

I finally was able to accept Jesus' forgiveness, which led me out of the darkness of my secrets and into His wonderful light! I can not begin to tell you the burden that God lifted off me when I completed Christ's instructions found in James 5:16!

After completing the 4th principle, all of the sins and wrongs of my past were no longer a secret. Now I was finally willing to have God change me. I was at principle 5. In fact, I was ready to:

**Principle 5      Voluntarily submit to any and all changes God wanted me to make in my life.**

*"Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires." (Matt 5:6)*

I had to let go and let God. You see, not much changed in my life - just everything.

I had to allow God to transform my mind - its nature, its condition, its identity. I allowed him to rebuild my self-worth based on His love for me, not trying any longer to measure up by the world's standards and always falling short.

In Step 6: I was entirely ready to have God remove all my defects of character.

*"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up." (James 4:10 NIV)*

Step 7: I humbly asked Him to remove all my shortcomings.

*"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9 NIV)*

I asked God to work on my defects of character, so that I could finally mature and become more Christ-like. It was during this time that God gave me His definition of humility found in 2 Cor 12:9-10:

*"My grace is all you need, for my power is strongest when you are weak. I am most happy then, to be proud of my weakness. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

I had to learn to rejoice in "steady progress." Patient improvement. Others could see the changes in me that I could not. I was beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel and this time it wasn't a train.

It was my favorite:

**Principle 6      Evaluate all my relationships; offer forgiveness to those who have hurt me and make amends for the harm I've done to others when possible, without expecting any reward.**

*"Happy are the merciful." Matt 5:7 JB*

*"Happy are the peacemakers." Matt 5:9 JB*

Step 8: I made a list of all persons I had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

*"Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Luke 6:31 NIV)*

Step 9: I made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

*"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." (Matt 5:23-24 NIV)*

I said these were my favorite steps, but certainly not the easiest! I had quite a long list of names on my amends list. They ranged from former employers, former employees, friends, and neighbors. But the most special amends I owed were to my family - especially to Cheryl. When I got to step 9 we were still separated.

On February 14, 1991, I left a note on her table asking her to meet me for lunch – on Valentine's Day! She thought it was a little strange to be meeting her separated husband on Valentine's Day! During that lunch, I told her that I had been attending Alcoholics Anonymous and that I went to meetings several times a week, and had a sponsor. I told her that A.A. was founded on the principles of the 12 steps and I

needed to share the ninth step with her. I simply told her that I was truly sorry for the pain I caused in her life, that I still loved her, and that if I could ever do anything for her - anything - just ask. Now this is where it really gets interesting.

Cheryl and the kids had begun attending a church that met in a high school gym - a church called "Saddleback." One Saturday night I was visiting the kids and they asked me to go to church with them on Sunday morning. Much to their surprise I said yes! I hadn't been in a church for five years!

That Sunday morning, I heard the music and Pastor Rick's message and I knew I was home. Cheryl and I began in earnest to work on our issues that had torn our relationship apart. And five months later, God opened our hearts and we renewed our marriage vows. As a family, we were baptized and took all the church's classes - Class 101 (Membership) - Class 201 (Maturity), and Class 301 (Ministry) which is the class that I now teach. Folks, that can only be the power and grace of God!

And it was there that I found one of my life's verses - 1 Peter 2:9-10:

*"You have been chosen by God himself... You are the priest of the king... You are God's very own...all this so you can show others how you were called out of the darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were less than nothing (John Baker). Now you are God's very own."*

You know, God never wastes a hurt. All the pain and heartache of my sin - my addiction - finally made sense! However, at my AA meetings, I was mocked when I talked about my Higher Power - the only true Higher Power - Jesus Christ. And at church I couldn't find a place where individuals could openly relate to my struggle with alcoholism.

I knew they were there because, in a church of then 6000, I couldn't be the only one struggling with a hurt, hang up, or addictive habit. I wrote Pastor Rick a concise 13 page single-spaced letter outlining the vision that God gave me - the vision of Celebrate Recovery - a Christ-centered 12 Step recovery program. And he said, "Great ..... do it!"

I finally was able to accept God's call and I entered Golden Gate Baptist Seminary. I committed my life to God to serve Him wherever and whenever He chose.

I intend to work principles 7 & 8 on a daily basis for the remainder of my time on this earth.

**Principle 7      Reserve a daily quiet time with God for self-examination, Bible reading, and prayer in order to know God and His will for my life and gain the power to do it.**

**Principle 8      Yield myself to God to bring His good news to others, both by my example and by my words.**

*"Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires." Matt 5:10 GN*

Step 10: I will continue to take personal inventory and when I am wrong, promptly admit it.

That part - promptly - is still hard for me.

*"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" 1 Cor 10:12 NIV*

And in Step 11: I seek through prayer and meditation to improve my conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for me and power to carry that out.

*Col 3:16 NIV "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly..."*

And finally in Step 12: Having had a spiritual experience as the result of these steps, I pledge to carry this message to others, and practice these principles in all my affairs.

*"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." (Gal 6:1 NIV)*

Thank you for inviting me to share my miracle with you. Let me just give 30 seconds of Celebrate Recovery history. The ministry is its sixth year. We've had over 2,700 people go through the program at Saddleback. Celebrate Recovery is definitely not just for alcoholics but for families as well. We have many recovery groups for men and women. Some of the groups include codependent relationships, eating disorders, smoking addiction, sexual and physical abuse victim's groups, groups for adult children of alcoholics, sexual and relationship addictions, and a veteran's group for those dealing with post traumatic stress syndrome. This program is being used in over 200 churches across the country, as well as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

All of us have several things in common. We love Christ, we're willing to turn our lives over to Him, and we're praying that we can begin to break the cycle of dysfunction for our families.

Thanks for letting me share.

John Baker