

# OPIOID CRISIS

## TWO CHRISTIAN LEADERS SHARE THEIR HARROWING EXPERIENCES WITH PRESCRIPTION ADDICTION

Story by Christmas Beeler

For thousands of Americans, prescription opioids for pain have spiraled into life-controlling addiction and even death. Two Calvary Chapel believers—one a pastor, another involved in recovery ministry—describe their descent into the opioid nightmare and how God delivered them. They share their stories in hope of sparing others similar pain.

### Prescriptions Lead to Addiction

Ten years ago, Pastor Bryan Newberry of Calvary Chapel San Diego, CA, underwent a double knee replacement; afterward, his life devolved into a nightmare of addiction that led him to a grueling fight for his sanity, his spiritual walk, and his marriage. Now he seeks to help believers who are drug-dependent, and to warn others before they fall into the same trap.

Another man, Bob Cooney, had been serving in a recovery ministry at a California Calvary when prescription opioid addiction forced him to stop serving. Now free, he reaches out to others at Calvary Chapel Reno, NV.

Both men's wives related watching their husbands deteriorate bit by bit. They were caught in the difficult position of wanting to be supportive caregivers, but eventually realized that their husbands were in danger and needed serious intervention.

Some may wonder, *Isn't all drug addiction a sin?* It takes understanding and honesty to answer that question, both men affirm. When a believer in pain takes medication prescribed by a doctor and develops a dependency, Bryan

said, that is not fairly comparable to a person who intentionally seeks out illegal drugs. "I never took anything the doctors didn't give me," Bryan asserted. "I had never even drunk a beer. I grew up loving the Lord."

Bob agreed that the line between need and want gets blurry after an opioid is in one's bloodstream; in a matter of days, the patient can begin to crave more—and is often prescribed more for pain. But the more one takes, the more the body wants, explained both men—therefore, it's a slippery, downhill slope to full-blown opioid addiction. They both warn that it's dangerously easy to become physically and psychologically addicted to opioids, since they impair judgment and memory.

### A Pastor's Decline

Having felt called to ministry at age 15 and planting CC San Diego at age 24, Bryan knew little of the dangers of addiction. Pastoring a thriving church, Bryan began having severe pain in both knees; in 2009, doctors urged him to get both knees replaced. "They created a pain management group for several of us who had knee replacements," he recalled. "They tried different things to help us; basically, we were guinea pigs. I would be fine for a few weeks and then suddenly collapse." Under the care of doctors, Bryan was given various medications and dosages as the years went on, he explained, partly because opioids quickly lose their effectiveness and because "opioids themselves can cause pain," he later realized.

While Bryan juggled health issues and church demands, his wife Cheryl looked after their home and family,



Pastor Bryan Newberry & Cheryl

including her parents—unaware of her husband's growing dependency. "It didn't seem to become a big deal until a few years into it," Cheryl recalled. "The doctors were taking him through these pain management classes—changing him from one medication to the next." Believers at Calvary Chapel San Diego prayed for their pastor's health problems, and sometimes other staff pastors taught. The chemicals in his system took a heavy toll, so doctors put Bryan on steroids, leaving him exhausted and in bed unless he was teaching or meeting with people. Then, in January 2014, the unthinkable happened: The Newberrys' 21-year-old son Tracy was suddenly killed in a car accident.

### God Intervenes

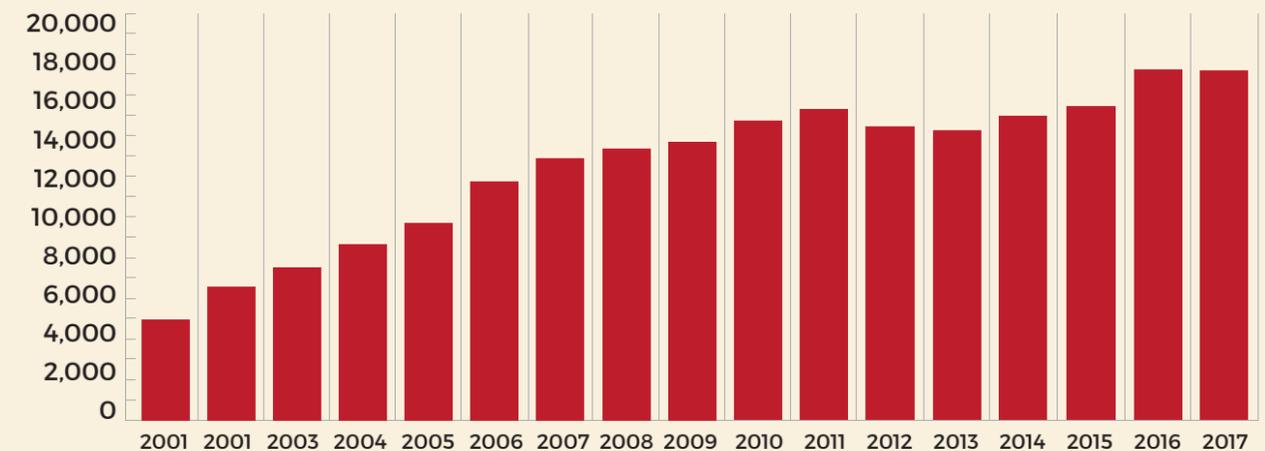
Bryan confided, "When my son died, I just melted down. Sorrow and grief came at me; doctors put me on anxiety drugs. I don't remember the eight months after he died—anything." Anxiety drugs, steroids, and opioids sent him plummeting to his lowest point. After a three-month hiatus, he returned to teaching on Sundays: "At home, I was practically in a coma. My messages were just horrible."

Sunday mornings were torture for his wife Cheryl: "Some days he was okay, and some days he was really out of it. It would be really scary to watch him in the pulpit in an altered state. I would sit there and pray, *Lord, he is Your servant; help him through this.*"

At home, Bryan had changed from being a level-headed, good-natured leader and father to having frequent paranoia, moodiness, and memory loss. "It was hard to tell how bad it was getting because some weeks he seemed fine," Cheryl noted. "At that point—after our son died and my parents were living with us—my role was just survival." She reflected, "As a wife, you don't want to throw your husband under the bus or make things worse; you want to act in God's timing." Desperate, she asked God to send someone to help, and He answered. Bryan and Cheryl had committed to serve at a ministry event in Europe, and while there, it became clear to their long-term friends—another pastor and his wife serving in Europe—that Bryan was in serious trouble. Cheryl sensed this was her answer to prayer and related Bryan's downward spiral over the last few years. The couple prayed with her; the three decided it was time for a serious intervention.

Back in the States, in late 2014, Cheryl and some pastors at Calvary Chapel San Diego approached Bryan. He recounted, "They said, 'You either go to rehab, or you're out on the streets.'" Though he still didn't believe he had

### Rising Deaths from Unintentional Overdose of Prescription Opioids



**From 1999 to 2017, almost 218,000 people died in the U.S. from overdoses related to prescription opioids. Overdose deaths involving prescription opioids were five times higher in 2017 than in 1999.**

Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse, NIH

## Opioid Prescriptions Decline But Remain at High Levels



Many experts consider the introduction of OxyContin in 1995 as the catalyst of the opioid crisis. Opioid prescriptions rose from 76 million in 1991 to a total of 207 million in 2013. The amount prescribed peaked in 2011 and has dropped since, but remains much higher than when the crisis began.

Source: Iqvia Institute

a problem, Bryan recalled Ephesians 5:21: *Submitting to one another in the fear of God.* “I knew these people who loved me were in unanimous agreement, so I submitted. I told them I would go and prove to them I was fine.” He added, “You are the last one to know you are messed up. The medication deceives you; you think you’re fine because you take a pain pill and feel fantastic.”

For the first time in several years, Bryan quit all medication while at rehab for 41 days. At first, “The pain was insane,” he described. “Three times I ended up in the ER because my heart rate dropped to the bottom.” As his sobriety increased, so did his memory. “When you realize that you brought shame on God and your family, it’s intolerable.” He submitted to a list of guidelines to help him stay free after rehab.

“It was a hard, lonely time, but God restored him and our marriage,” Cheryl related. “The Lord is my best friend;

I am so glad I have Him, and that He loves me no matter what—more than any human person. Relying on Him alone brought me closer to Him.” She added, “As Christians, as hard times come in these last days, we have to call upon God to strengthen our faith. He will not forsake us.”

*“Do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.” DEUTERONOMY 31:6b*

### Determined to Stay Free

After God freed him from drug dependency, Bryan determined not to take anything stronger than ibuprofen. That resolve was immediately tested. Shortly after rehab, he had surgery on his ankle. His surgeon insisted he needed pain medication. “I told him I didn’t want any. He said to just take a few home with me in case I had a bad night. He wanted to prescribe enough for the next six months.

I said, ‘No, and don’t even put a prescription in my file.’ But he said he didn’t want me to call him at home for an emergency prescription.”

Finally, mild-mannered Cheryl stepped in: “Doctor, my husband has told you four times, and you still won’t take *No* for an answer.” The surgeon relented. After surgery, Bryan and Cheryl prayed for God to relieve his pain. After three days, the pain decreased without medication.

Today, Bryan lives with chronic pain in his knees and ankle but chooses not to medicate. He cited several reports that Americans take far more pain medication than anywhere else in the world. “We have this philosophy that we should never be in pain. I’m not saying that some people don’t need to be on medication, but clearly we have this flawed mentality,” he said. “I go to bed every night with pain—but so what. It’s not the end of the world. I have my life back—my walk with God, my marriage, my family.”

### God Lovingly Restores

Bryan praises God for restoring him mentally, physically, and spiritually—and for giving him a greater compassion, love, and grace for others. Bryan noted, “Jesus didn’t go around merely saying, ‘I love you.’ He showed it in the way He treated people, the way He died for us.” All through Bryan’s struggles, “God’s love for me did not change—His calling, His blessings, His comfort, the power of His Spirit. Even when I was in the darkest place, He was with me, and He never stopped loving me.”

*In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried out to my God ... He sent from above, He took me; He drew me out of many waters. ... He delivered me because He delighted in me.* PSALM 18:6a, 16, 19b

In the midst of trials we may feel that God has deserted us. Bryan added, “We wrongly assume that, because we are Christians, God will not let us suffer greatly. But Christians can be blown up, get AIDS, die in a car crash.” Still, God is faithful, he said: “Even with my son dying and me being in the lowest place I’ve ever been, God was there [for me].”

### Like a Fish on a Line

Freed from alcohol addiction years before, Bob Cooney was occasionally leading worship at a recovery Bible study at CC Modesto, CA, when multiple surgeries sent him spiraling into opioid addiction. In 2008, ankle surgery caused complications with his back. In 2009, he had

minor back surgery and became heavily addicted to his Percocet prescription. His wife Jackie disclosed, “I felt like I couldn’t go to anyone at our church because I didn’t want to rat him out.” A Christian nurse suggested suboxone, a treatment for opioid addiction; three weeks later, Bob was free from the grip of Percocet after nearly four years. But then in 2012, Bob underwent a major spinal fusion and was prescribed multiple narcotics.



Bob & Jackie Cooney

Bob related, “Opiates are evil; they are a silent killer. Once you start them, your body craves them. Your mind justifies them. Yes, I have a bad back, but then the manipulation begins. You’ll tell yourself anything to take

more.” After the multiple surgeries, he was prescribed a staggering 380 pills per month. Bob recalled the Holy Spirit warning him not to take the maximum dose, and many times he asked God to help him stop. “But the pain in my body was killing me. Once you are chemically addicted, you’re like a fish on a line.”

Jackie remembers that he was on four different medicines and a pain patch. “He was just a zombie, not himself any more. I could see in his eyes that he was just hollow. I asked the Lord to help me love Bob the way He loved him. Satan had his claws in him.” Though they agreed that Jackie would handle his medication, Bob began to sneak pills when she wasn’t around.

Finally, after begging God for help, Bob sensed that this was the day the dangerous charade would end. A few hours later, Jackie discovered that he had snuck a large amount of Percocet from her purse. His patient and compassionate wife snapped. “I lost it. I told him I was done. I felt like the only thing I could do was flee,” Jackie recalled, so she went to Nevada to stay with family. An elder at CC Modesto asked the church to sponsor Bob to go to U-Turn for Christ. Though he left the program on shaky ground, Bob and Jackie prayed together. After they prayed, “I had this love for Bob, a love I didn’t think I could ever have again,” she admitted. “It kept resonating in my mind that God is the God of reconciliation. I didn’t think it would be possible ever to love and trust Bob again, but God has healed our marriage.”

## PRESCRIPTION ADDICTION: THE SIGNS

- Using more than prescribed or running out of medicine early
- Requiring increasingly more pain medication
- Changing personality or behavior, withdrawing from others
- Irritability, anger, hopelessness, or sadness
- Deceiving others to gain access to more medicine
- Unusual, eccentric, or erratic behavior
- Sleeping for days, extreme lethargy
- Forgetting events or conversations

Sources: U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration; Bryan Newberry; Bob Cooney



## HARD FACTS

- In 2017 there were almost 58 opioid prescriptions written for every 100 Americans.
- Prescription opioids were involved in more than 35% of all opioid overdose deaths in 2017.
- Currently, 46 people die every day from prescription opioid overdose in the U.S.

Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse, NIH

*“If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.”* LUKE 17:3b

### A New Start

In Reno, NV, the Lord provided a place for them to live and a new church family. For the past six years, Bob has been free from addiction and helps in a recovery ministry at CC Reno. Though he frequently has severe back pain, he now prays through it and refuses to take any pain medicine.

Jackie encourages those who have loved ones in addiction: “Don’t give up; just know the Lord is in control, and He wants your husband or wife to be healed.” She advised, “Go to the Lord first; ask Him how to handle the situation. But then you must confront them and try to get them help. I wish I would have gone to our pastor in Modesto sooner; I see now that I was enabling Bob. So we had to go down a long, hard road.”

Help from other believers is essential, Jackie said: “We need that encouragement from our church family. We can’t do it alone. And we have to pray, seek the Lord, and trust Him.” ***Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*** (Galatians 6:2).

She added, “Because of what Bob and I have been through, we have such a compassion for people in crisis. We know Jesus can help them. We meet parents sobbing over their straight-A student getting addicted to heroin. There is such a need out there.”

### Grace to Help

How does medical use turn into addiction? Gradually and subtly, warned Bob and Bryan. “Now they say that you shouldn’t take oxycodone or OxyContin for more

than three days,” Bryan explained, “because by the fourth day, you’re dependent; and by the 30th day, you’re physically addicted. There was a time when doctors would prescribe 90 days’ worth. So patients who took them for 90 days would go through serious withdrawals—in severe pain for several weeks, some even battling insanity.”

Those who find themselves inadvertently addicted to pain medication need to be embraced and helped by church leaders and fellow believers—not shunned, condemned, or ignored, both men affirm. Bryan related, “For a year, I felt like such a failure, saying, *God, please just take me home. I can’t look at myself in the mirror.*” But Bryan testified that God has restored his soul: “Jesus’ grace, love, kindness—I know it now. I never realized how self-righteous I was before. Since I’ve been that guy who doesn’t deserve mercy and a second chance, now I understand grace.”

***Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*** HEBREWS 4:16

After he had been restored for a few years, Bryan sensed God leading him to step down from being senior pastor and to begin serving Jesus in a new way. Now, through Poimen Ministries, a group of veteran Calvary Chapel pastors who help churches or pastors in distress ([poimenministries.com](http://poimenministries.com)), he helps other Christian leaders who are addicted. Bryan added that it often takes a loving, united team to help someone find freedom because the addict may feel attacked or deny the need for help. “Everybody stumbles and struggles; we need to help each other—not ignore the problem or condemn.” 🙌

[Poimenministries.com](http://Poimenministries.com)  
[Uturnforchrist.com](http://Uturnforchrist.com)