

## Chapter 12

# Life Behind the Glass Wall



*“When darkness overtakes the godly, light will come bursting in.”*

Psalm 112:4 (N.L.T.)

This is a story that in my wildest dreams I never imagined I would tell. I never dreamed I would be telling a story of survival, the power of hope in the midst of sorrow, and life beyond the diagnosis of schizophrenia.

At the age of seventeen my eldest son Christopher came home from high school making bizarre comments, and exhibiting strange behaviour. He came home telling me he had great influence on the other kids. He said, “If I wore a red hat everyone at school wanted to wear a red hat”. When he showered he told me the water hurt his head. I went to a parent and teacher meeting at high school and the teacher told me that Chris said he tried to kill himself. I was so upset and knew nothing about this. Although I knew there was something wrong, a parent never thinks the problem is that their son is mentally ill. As time went on his thoughts became more confused and he expressed the delusions that began to plague his mind.

Chris stayed out very late at night and wandered the

streets looking for something, but what, he didn't even know. One night the police showed up at our door saying Chris had stolen a bike. Later, Chris said the bike had his name on it so it belonged to him. Because Chris was paranoid, he thought everyone was out to hurt him which led to some aggressive behaviours.

One day in his delusional state Chris was having what we would later call an 'episode'. He began smashing windows and doors, becoming completely out of control. I tried to talk to him and reason with him but in one of those dark episodes light is not allowed in. I was standing in the doorway of his room and I didn't realize at the time when someone is having an episode you do not block an entrance of a room. In his mind, he believed he was trapped. In his quest for freedom he began to throw things at the window. He pushed me to the side and kicked the side window out of our front door. He was in a total wild frenzy. Only seventeen years old Chris was admitted into the hospital against his wishes. There, we received the heartbreaking news that our firstborn son suffered from schizophrenia. The long dark journey began, and we had no idea where it would end.

Schizophrenia is not a disease of a split personality, as many may think, but rather a disease where one is split or separated from the real world. This disease caused Chris to separate himself from the world, and from his family. We have lived behind a glass wall with Christopher for nine years. I call it a glass wall because with mental illness you can see the person, you can get very close to the person but you can not touch them. You put your hand on the glass wall and he will put his hand to touch yours, but it's as though you cannot feel the warmth of his hand. Chris was

in a world that I could not go to, or even understand. I knew nothing about the disease at the time.

We came against two obstacles in our attempts to save our son, one of which was the law. We found out that during one of Christopher's violent episodes, we could not hospitalize anyone eighteen years old or over against their wishes unless they are arrested for disturbing the peace or some other crime. Once they are in custody and undergo further evaluation, the police could admit the person to the hospital. To our horror we discovered that during one of these 'crisis' moments we had to have our son arrested in order to remove him from our home to get him help.

The second obstacle was an unexpected one. It was the church, which has limited understanding of mental illness. If you are diabetic, and your pancreas malfunctions, then you are given insulin, the church has no hesitation praying for you without judgment. If you have a heart condition and you need medication and rest, the church will send meals to your house for weeks until you are better. If your illness is in your brain however, many well-meaning Christians think you have a demon. Can you imagine the horror a God fearing parent feels when she is told her son is possessed?

I believe that God did not intend for us to be sick. When God created Adam and Eve, they were perfect until they sinned. Consequently, along with sin came imperfection and illness. I do believe, however, that people can be in bondage in their life and are in need of deliverance. People, who mistakenly label mental illness as a "spiritual" issue rather than a "physical" chemical imbalance are making an unjust generalization, and it only makes the chasm between the families coping with the disease, and the church wider than ever.

Chris was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. It is a disease, not a demon. He always thought people were watching him or trying to hurt or kill him. He spent hours in his bedroom pacing the floor worrying about his fate. He was paranoid about his health. He thought that if he grew his hair long that would cure him. One week he drank litres of milk and the next week he could not drink any milk. Pop would kill him. He thought he needed to eat buffalo meat and spent hours on the phone trying to find it. He was obsessed with his teeth. He thought his teeth were making him sick. He wanted the dentist to pull out his teeth or do root canals on healthy teeth. He would not wash his hair for days until I bought him baby shampoo because he thought the chemicals in the other shampoos would seep into his brain. These are only a few of the obsessions that we had to cope with as a family. You cannot reason with someone suffering from schizophrenia. No matter what you say, their minds lock on an idea, or notion that cannot be shaken. Chris didn't always understand spiritual things. I once talked to him about how Jesus died for him and he said to me, "I'd do the same for Him." His mind was not grasping that God died for us but once. He took our place.

One dark night he ended up in a dirty, run down motel on the west side of town right near the jail. I just had to get him out of there. I took Joel, my youngest son with me and began searching. At the time I did not realize how dangerous it was for a woman to be on that side of town so late at night. Finally, I found the motel and pleaded with Chris to come home. However, he was with friends and wanted to stay. He needed his medication and I knew if he stayed in the motel without medication he would only get worse. Joel was only twelve then. He said: "Mom he isn't going to come

home, let's go home." I quoted a scripture to Joel in a determined voice "Greater is He that is in me, than He that is in the world." Then God showed me a way to get him home. Chris, in his irrational mind had talked about having a wolf as a pet. So I told Chris if he would come home I would allow him to have a wolf as his pet. He then agreed to come home. The next morning he did not remember the promise.

In one of his early admissions to the hospital Chris was in isolation. The nurses had to tie his hands and feet to the bed because of his raging violent episodes. I remember Joel wanted to come to the hospital with us but before I could stop him he looked into the window of the door where Chris laid tied to the bed. Joel's face totally changed. His older brother was tied down. Joel had a hard time accepting what was going on in our home. At school I asked for the counselor to see Joel.

Although Chris was tied down to his bed I felt tied to fear and anxiety. I felt tied to circumstances I could not control. It had a grip on me and no matter how hard I tried I could not untie the grip of this fear on my life.

Chris escaped from the hospital twice. During his first stay he ran out of the hospital in his hospital gown and bare feet. He ran wildly down the street with his bare feet pounding on the cement pavement. Of course, he was very noticeable running down the street in only a gown on a cold fall day. Frightened and confused, Chris was running to a place with no destination. The police picked him up and he was returned to the hospital. The next day Chris complained about his sore feet.

During another stay Chris escaped again. This time he managed to get his clothes. I was at home that morning getting ready to go to the hospital. The phone rang and it was

Chris. He said: “Mom I am ready to go back now.” “Go back? Where are you Chris” I replied. “I am at the movies and it is so cold in here,” he murmured. Chris was not used to the air conditioner and he wasn’t physically feeling well. We went and got him at the movie theatre and took him back to the hospital.

In Chris’ paranoia he thought germs were everywhere. He didn’t like to shake people’s hands. Chris was brought up in a Christian home so he was obsessed with the bible. He read the bible constantly while in the hospital. You would think that would be a good thing but his mind interpreted the bible in such a confusing way. He would tell me he was going to save his money because Jesus saves. He was reading Acts and said that it was his favourite book because if you changed the letters around and put the ‘c’ in front of the ‘a’ it would spell ‘cats’. Chris likes cats. The twisted ideas poured out of Chris’ mind. My husband had a hard time at the hospital. He found it so difficult to sit for hours listening to bizarre statements. He asked: “Connie how can you stand this?” I again remembered the scripture: **“Love bears all things.”**

One day Tom said he didn’t want to go to the hospital with me anymore. He just couldn’t take it. My anger was expressed in my tears as I pleaded with him, “Tom I need you now more than ever. You have to do this with me. You can’t let me struggle alone.”

Tom was very strong physically; but emotionally he struggled with this situation. In my pleading he understood he had to rise to the occasion and be at my side like he had been for so many other things. I guess we all come to a breaking point. At times we all say, “I can’t do this.” I said that to myself many times, “I can’t do it anymore”, but I

knew God could. When I was weak He was strong. It seemed during that time I was stronger than Tom in coping with Chris.

As time progressed I realized that no matter how hard I tried I could not change the situation. I felt completely helpless and had a sorrow that words could not go deep enough to express.

Overwhelming stress and anxiety took over my life. This situation was simply beyond my control yet with great energy I battled to control this stressful situation causing my joy to die in the struggle.

In my weakened state I began to wrestle with my thoughts. Was this the result of my poor parenting? If I had been more spiritual by reading my bible and praying more, I could I have prevented this terrible tragedy. These lies from the enemy made me feel guilty which caused even a deeper hopelessness.

My son, my precious son, was mentally ill. I felt ashamed as a parent. While other parents told me how their children were becoming engineers, going to university and even Bible College, I was ashamed to say my son was in a psychiatric ward for the mentally ill. Shame always renders us powerless. It makes us feel unworthy. It prevents us from ministering and connecting with others. That is precisely the plan of the enemy to isolate and then watch as guilt and shame destroys the soul.

When we drove home from the hospital we saw people biking, cutting their grass, taking a walk, and enjoying the summer outdoors. I thought to myself will we ever enjoy those things again. The simple ordinary things that I once took for granted now seemed to be so extraordinarily beautiful. I felt like I was on the inside looking out at the world.

I was no longer a participant but merely observing a world going on without me.

There was one day I remember in particular that joy pierced through our life even in the midst of such sadness. Tom and I went to the hospital to see Chris. We were so exhausted that upon leaving the hospital, neither one of us wanted to drive. Quickly we started for the parked car on the street almost in a race to see who would get there first. I jumped into the back seat thinking he would get into the driver's seat but Tom also jumped into the back seat. There we were, both sitting in the back seat with no driver. There happened to be an elderly lady on her front porch watching us with a puzzled look on her face as two adults laughed uncontrollably in the back seat of the car. Neither one of us wanted to drive. Finally I gave in and drove home. That day laughter set joy free to flow from within us even in the ridiculous situations, just as our tears flowed out sorrow in the painful situations. Laughter and tears are both needed for one is a gift of contentment and the other is a gift of compassion.

I really struggled when Chris came home after the first stay in the hospital. I was teaching at that time. As I drove home each day from school the fear started to well up inside of me. I would begin to pray asking God to help me. I never knew what I would find behind my front door. Would Chris have hurt himself? Home is to be your refuge but for me it was a cold reality of the pain that lived in our house. I didn't want to go home. I would cry all the way to school and all the way back home. No one at school knew the pain I was in. By the time I arrived at school I would wipe away the tears, lift my head and proceed to go into the world of children where band-aids and hugs seemed to solve all the problems. Then I would get in the car to go home and

immediately my mind would come out of the child's world and begin to journey back into my dark world of mental illness. Fear came back from my 'cornfield experience' to revisit me. My only protection was found in His word. ***"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of sound mind."*** 2 Tim. 1-7 NKJ

Chris was admitted into the hospital a second time. He spent another six weeks there, and although still sick, he was discharged, but not allowed to come back home. He was placed in a rest home for several months. We couldn't have him home because he was threatening suicide. I couldn't let Joel and Dean be exposed to such a tragedy. I had to give up one son to protect the other two boys. At the time it was the hardest thing I had to do, leaving him in a rest home at the 'Salvation Army Facility'.

One day the emotion of hopelessness overcame my being and I sat on my bed and wept after we took Chris to the rest home from the hospital. These were not just tears from my eyes, but from the depths of my soul. I truly thought my life was over. ***"The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Psalm 34:18 NIV*** It was an ache like Rachel had when she wept for the children that Herod killed and no one could console her. I will always remember the day when God gave me the grace to truly surrender my son to Him. It is the day I chose hope over despair. A day I surrendered what was so precious to me and gave back to God what He gave to me. I didn't want to, but I knew I had to in order to live a life of peace. The hardest part for me is that I had to rest in the outcome God had for me. I am convinced that the only way we can surrender our children is with divine intervention through prayer. It is not humanly possible.

This day of surrender I will always cherish. As I prayed, God came so close that His mercy was like soothing oil that massaged my heart. The bible says that if we draw close to God He will draw close to us and that is just what happened. My heart and my soul were desperately searching, crying, reaching out for my God, my Saviour. A soul that was panting and running so hard to find Him, running so hard to find a safe place.

As I sat on my bed continuing to weep an unexpected moment came so mysteriously and gently. It was a moment filled of mercy. Jesus came to me. Did I see Him? No, I did not, but I felt His presence in that room like never before. It was as if He took his arm and embraced me. He was so close I can't even put in words, for words are so limited in explaining a divine encounter. It was almost like Jesus was sitting right beside me on my bed and I, like John, laid my head on his shoulder and wept bitterly. My tears however, went from deep sorrow to tears of releasing joy. My eyes and my heart that wept for me and my son, now wept for the joy of knowing my Saviour came to rescue me. He came because He cared. He came because He saw my pain and wanted me to know He was there. In that moment, I not only knew I was loved by God but I 'experienced' His love. Nothing can drive you to your knees and make you desperate for God more than heartache.

I struggled through the journey of releasing my son to God, but in this process I learned how deeply He loved me. I despised the ordeal that compelled me to come so close to Him. However, I cherished the ordained moment of sitting with Him on that 'graced-filled' day. That day, God in His mercy gave me Jeremiah 29:11 to be my foundation. It is the word of God that saved my emotional life.

*“For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray I will listen. You will find me when you seek me, if you look for me in earnest.” (The Living Bible)*

I saw that God was in control. He had a plan for me and my son. I realized that hope was not about having a perfect family, every dream fulfilled, lots of money, good health or never being disappointed. It was also not about having children who met the world’s standard of success. Hope remains secure when we come to know Him, the source of our hope. Perhaps the psalm of David says it best:

*“I wait quietly before God, for my hope is in him. He alone is my rock my salvation, my fortress where I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honour comes from God alone. He is my refuge a rock where no enemy can reach me.”*  
Psalm 62:5-7 (N.L.T.)

I remember looking out my window and seeing a neighbour joyfully crossing the street, carrying a case of beer to visit another neighbour. They were going to have a party, enjoying life. None of their children were sick, yet they were not serving the Lord.

I thought, “What is wrong with this picture?” In my hopelessness I became a modern day Job. Like Job I said to God, “God I have served you all the days of my life. Why is my son sick?” I forgot about the covenant that God held with me. I was His daughter and He was my Father, sealed in love forever.

During the time of heartache I learned how to pray dif-

ferently. It is not necessarily in the words I said, but it is the intimacy that I experienced with God because of my desperation. I am a desperate woman. I hope I always stay a desperate woman. The only way we can truly come into God's presence is if we are so hungry, so desperate, that we will not move, we will not go until we hear from God. I yearned relentlessly for Him. In fact, this was a time of emptiness and thirst, but it was also a time of fullness. Jesus was the One that reached down and touched a part of me that no man could touch. No human intimacy could ever compare with the moment of intimacy I had with God Himself.

When Chris went to the rest home at the Salvation Army I was horrified even to visit. The rest home was on the third floor but I had to walk through the first floor which was a place for the homeless. Fearfully, I walked up to the door where there were men outside, smoking, and intoxicated. I had to walk through this crowd of dirty, smelly men with their eyes looking through me. I almost felt I was naked walking through the crowd. I was repulsed by the sight. After all, I lived on the right side of town, in a nice affluent area. I was clean. I was a teacher. I was a pastor. These people were low life. Over time however, God showed me that He hated the smell of my pride more than the stench of the bodies of these men. God gave me eyes to see these people differently. He allowed me to see beyond their physical appearance, beyond their circumstances and see them as lost souls that Jesus loved as much as me. I began to learn their names one by one. I talked to them about Jesus and how they were loved. I brought the 'candle' of God's burning love in their darkened world of drugs, alcohol and poverty. Some of the men appreciated

the warmth of His Light and others didn't really understand it. For them their pit was so deep that they were blinded by their darkness. ***“Although the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him when he came.” John 1:10 NLT***

One Christmas, I went up to a man with a candy cane in my hand. The candy cane had a message on it that said, “The red stripes symbolize His blood shed for your sin. The white strip on the candy cane symbolizes how He has taken your sin away.” When I gave it to the man I said, “This candy cane will be sweet tasting but the message on the candy cane will be sweet for your soul.” Then I said, “God bless you.” He looked at me with tears in his eyes as I handed him the candy cane and said, “God bless you.” Later I got to thinking about this man and wondered, “When was the last time a woman came up to him and spoke softly?” This man's appearance was not one that a woman would be drawn to, but I was drawn to the face of Christ. Somehow God allowed me to see Him whenever I went up to any of the men at the Salvation Army. I learned that these are the people we need to love and in the midst of their darkness we provide light.

I met a homeless woman there also. Her name was Suzanne. She was an alcoholic. By looking into her eyes I could see that at one time she must have been attractive, but the hard life and alcohol sucked the life out of her and left her weary and broken. One day she said, “Connie could I borrow a dollar from you, I want to take a bus to see my friend.” I said, “Okay, but I have to go to the car to get money.” I never wore jewelry or carried money with me when I went to see Chris. I knew the people were desperate. So she came to the car with me. By time we got to the car she convinced me to lend her five dollars. The director of

the facility was upset with me. She said, “Suzanne wouldn’t know how to take a bus if her life depended on it. She is going to buy a cheap bottle of wine and at 11:00 p.m. we are going to call you to take care of her in her drunken state.” I learned my lesson not to give people money. I could bring them food and treats but never money.

The next time Suzanne saw me she came right up to me and said, “Hello.” I was nearly knocked over by the smell of alcohol. She told me she had something for me. She said she drew me a baby angel because I reminded her of an angel. I was deeply touched. I went to her room and she gave me the picture. I looked at her and said, “Suzanne you are a special, talented lady with whom God is madly in love.” Immediately her eyes filled with tears. How long had it been since she heard words of affirmation. The only affirmation that came to her was through a bottle offered by men in order for them to use her body. God’s light shone in Suzanne’s dark pit of addiction that day.

*“Feed the hungry and help those in trouble. Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as day.”*

Isaiah 58:10 T.L.B.

I took the Kids’ Praise Club children to sing at the Salvation Army Facility that year. Suzanne was there. She asked Jesus in her heart through a song. I believe she meant it. She was so deeply touched by the love of God pouring out through the children. A year later I was deeply saddened to learn that Suzanne had died. Apparently she fell and broke her neck. Was the fall a drunken accident? Was it a violent encounter with a man? I do not know. I do know

God is merciful. I hope one day I will meet her in heaven and see her with all the beauty God had intended her to have in the beginning. The beauty that was stolen during her lifetime.

Chris came home again after seven months at the rest home. Again, he got sick and this time went to British Columbia. We had to send him money to get him back home. When he came home from B.C. he was skin and bones. Chris had lost thirty pounds and was very dirty from living out on the streets. Only the hand of God had kept Chris alive. He traveled on the train back home. If he would have gotten off the train in the Prairie Provinces in the middle of winter and started wandering he could have frozen to death. God answered my prayers and brought him back to us.

Again, he thought if he went to Ottawa he would get better. He went there and ended up living in a shelter for the homeless.

After many hospital, jail, and rest home stays, Christopher is now twenty-seven years old and still struggling with this disease. At night when he lived at home with us he paced the hallway, going back and forth, running outside and coming in again. It has been very disturbing for all of us as a family.

One particular night is etched into my mind. Chris was pacing the floor again. Back and forth his body went across the floor as though it foreshadowed the anxiety in his mind. This disease of schizophrenia had made him feel trapped and he was desperately looking for freedom. I kept my bedroom door locked every night. I just didn't know if Chris would go into another violent episode. It is unimaginable to be afraid of your own son. But in reality it was not my son

anymore. It was not the boy I raised and loved. Increasingly, Chris began to frighten me. He told me he was going to kill himself but before he does he would burn down the house. He took a clay pot of flowers we had outside and smashed it against the brick wall.

In the morning Chris had a moment of clarity. His mind and heart opened and I saw the boy I raised once again. He said, “Mom I’m sorry. Tell Dad I am sorry. I wouldn’t burn down the house. I would never hurt you.” Then he did something he hadn’t done in years. He hugged me. For just a moment in time, love pushed its way through a dark mind to shine through a heart. It was a moment of an ‘awakening.’ I know my son Christopher would never hurt me, but it was the schizophrenia disease that could. It was the disease that had no mercy or love, and could become the destroyer.

After that evening Tom and I knew that Chris could no longer live in our home. We asked Chris to leave our home. My husband and I got him a nice apartment close by and he seems to be doing well and likes his new surroundings. Joel told me after Chris left, that he too was afraid. He said, “Mom, I used to listen to music with my headphones but with Chris home I couldn’t do that anymore. I had to listen to make sure you and dad were safe upstairs.” It was difficult to let Chris go, but I knew I had to, for the safety and peace of our family. I still pray everyday that God will heal him.

These heart wrenching episodes with Chris are recorded in order to tell others going through this hellish darkness that they are not alone. They too have a Saviour that will give them strength and courage to emerge out of this darkness with victory in their hearts and peace in their souls.

I have come to realize that life is an unpredictable journey for all of us. I understand that we can't always choose what happens to us but we always choose how we will respond.

As I sat at my window watching my son leave home during these 'episodes' I said, "God this can't end up bad, some good has to come out of this terrible tragedy." By that window of 'pain' God proved to be sitting with me that day, for indeed He answered my prayer. I have had the privilege to talk and minister to hurting parents and speak for the brokenhearted not just in my church but in other churches and places. What we have come to call the 'Prayer Blanket Ministry' at Calvary Community Church was birthed through this journey. When I visited my son at the hospital, I noticed that people on the psychiatric floor seemed to be holding stuffed animals, hats, and other small items. It almost seemed that these concrete items brought them comfort. I knew that blankets were items that gave people comfort so I went back to the church and asked the women to make blankets that the patients could use to keep warm. I attached a card with the Jeremiah 29:11 scripture on each blanket. The card also stated that every time they wrapped this blanket around themselves, they could think about God's loving arms embracing them.

Today, hundreds of blankets have gone out to hospitals and to nursing homes where people are sick and need the comfort of God's love.

Imagine, over a simple blanket people have cried and even given their hearts to Jesus. Imagine, when there is a glass wall, God's light can still shine through to make a way for us in the darkness, giving us courage and strength to choose hope over despair.