

I'm Living Proof

1. Warm up: Tell us something about you that most people don't know. It can be something huge or something trivial. Go ahead, surprise us! ☺

2. Annie Smith has been part of our church for over 12 years. We know, love, and admire her. But it turns out there's a good bit more to Annie's story than we realized. On Sunday, she shared the rest of her story, introducing us to Inmate 951427, Ramona Johnson (her birth name). Annie told how, as a young adult, she bought a handgun for protection. When a heated confrontation arose outside her workplace, she asked someone to take the gun outside to defuse the confrontation. Instead, the guy ended up shooting someone. Along with him, Annie was also tried, convicted of murder, and sentenced to 35 years in prison when she was only 21 years old.
 - a. Annie said, "You might be wondering what in the world I was thinking [at that time in my life]. The answer is, I wasn't thinking. I was a follower most of my life, yearning for acceptance. . . . I just wanted to belong." Peer pressure is one of Satan's most powerful tools. When in your life have you allowed peer pressure to cause you to do something you deeply regret?

 - b. In prison, Annie hit bottom. "I was this broken girl who latched onto anyone who I thought would save me. I was broken physically, mentally, and definitely emotionally. . . . I was stuck in a cycle of negative behavior." Looking back over your own life, what has been your lowest point?

 - c. From the depths of despair, Annie wrote a letter to her Mama, raging against her for not protecting her from childhood sexual abuse. Annie's letter demanded to know, "Where was your God, Mama, [when all this was happening to me]? Where is He now? Are you listening God? Go ahead, give me the silent treatment. I'M USED TO SILENT TREATMENT! RIGHT, MAMA? Mama's God, you are just a myth to me that does not exist!" As children, each of us learned to see God in a certain way that may, or may not, have stood the test of time. Some of us may have had to discard our parents' way of seeing God in order to really find God in our lives. As a child, how did you learn to see God? Was that positive or negative? If negative, how did you eventually overcome that negative view?

3. Life throws us for a lot of loops, often causing us to wonder, "Where are you God?" Annie finds great insight in the Biblical story of Joseph. Joseph's life was a series of disasters that seemed to be leading nowhere. He too landed in prison – in his case

unjustly. And yet God was with him even there, showing him favor and grace. Read Genesis 39, verses 1-23, as printed on p. 3.

- a. When Joseph landed in prison on false charges – his life ruined by tragedy – what do you imagine he was thinking and feeling? When he landed in prison, do you think he believed God was with him and had a plan for his life?
 - b. Speaking of her time in prison, Annie said, “I didn’t realize it then, but looking back, just like Joseph, I began to receive favor and grace.” God sent her a training dog who became her best friend and solace. God surrounded her with younger girls in prison who needed her as a mentor, and Annie rose to the occasion. Then a woman from the Department of Education took note of Annie’s mentoring role and vowed, “I’m getting you out of here.” To Annie’s utter amazement, she did! FAVOR & GRACE! Tell us about a time God showed you great favor and grace, even though you may not have deserved it.
4. After her release from prison, Annie continued to experience profound moments of God’s favor and grace – including meeting her spouse Cindy, finding LifeJourney Church, and finding here a wonderful circle of friends who loved her simply as she was, odd behaviors and all, and became a vital support system.
- a. Jesus said, “To whom much is given, of them shall much be required.” God sent Annie key people to mentor her – the Department of Education person, her spouse Cindy, her friends from church – who showed her amazing patience and grace. Now Annie feels called to turn around and do that for others – to mentor kids, sharing her story and warning them (and others) about the risk of falling in with the wrong crowd and the dangers of gun violence. Who’s someone in your life who’s in a vulnerable place and needs you to be a mentor or a source of patience, grace, and support? Are you rising to the challenge?
 - b. Annie said, “Looking back, all those years, I received favor and grace beyond measure. I thought that God had turned his back on me, but the truth is, he saved me, he spared me and he never left me. The life I was leading, I wasn’t going to make it, but God said be still my child. Prison was a pause, it was my saving grace.” When have you experienced something that seemed really bad in the moment, but turned out to be a kind of saving grace?
 - c. We often learn the most from each other – from sharing our stories. Now that you’ve heard Annie’s story, what’s the most important insight you take away from it?

Genesis 39:1-23, selected verses

¹ Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him. ³ His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper. ⁴ So Joseph found favor and his master made him overseer of his entire household.

⁶ Now Joseph was handsome. ⁷ And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on him and said, "Lie with me." ¹⁰ Although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent. ¹¹ One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was there, ¹² she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he fled. ¹³ When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, ¹⁷ she later told her husband, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; ¹⁸ but as soon as I cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside."

¹⁹ When Potiphar heard these words, he became enraged, ²⁰ and he put Joseph in prison and there Joseph remained. ²¹ But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. ²² The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it, ²³ because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.