

At each Mass, and probably for many of us during the week, we ask for in the Lord's prayer the strength not to fall into temptation. Yet in all of our lives, there are plenty of trees bearing the forbidden fruits if you will; the temptations to gossip, to cheat, to fall into sensual behavior, and do things that ultimately diminish us as a person. So what is a Christian to do? The answer is to travel through that narrow gate to freedom by acknowledging what our sins are, asking for help, and turning them over to God so we can be led to the wide open space of heaven.

Like all of us, Elizabeth Vargas, who is a Catholic and also reached the top of her field as a journalist working for ABC News on "20/20," but she held a secret, which was she was using alcohol to cope with anxiety and stress, and it was spiraling out of control.

As she put it with respect to the urge, "I can feel it coming, like a wave. My heart beats faster, my head pounds, my stomach churns, fear surges through me. It can happen in the middle of a busy day at work at the ABC television news magazine 20/20 or at home with the boys."

There was a time not so long ago that she would have reached for the bottle of wine in the fridge—or the bottle she'd hidden underneath the bathroom sink. Now she's found something that works much better. Something that helps her live, not die—the powerful weapon of daily prayer.

She does not know if she was born an alcoholic, but she was definitely born anxious. The alcoholism came later in life, after years of drinking on the sly. But the anxiety? It was there from the start, as if it was part of the essence of her.

Elizabeth grew up in a very Catholic home. Her dad was in the Army, and her family's involvement in the church their our spiritual constant as they moved from base to base. In the late sixties, they moved to Okinawa. Her dad was sent to Vietnam, to Saigon, leaving her mom and her younger brother, Chris, along with Elizabeth in Japan.

Her mom was pregnant with her little sister, and in order to stay on the island she had to work every day, leaving Elizabeth with a babysitter. Each morning she would panic. She would chase after her, crying, begging her not to go, grabbing at her skirt, digging in her heels, holding her legs until she peeled away her fingers.

On the night Mom gave birth to Elizabeth's sister, she looked out the window from her bunk bed and saw her walking to the car, clutching her stomach with one hand, carrying a bag with the other. She knew she needed to go to the hospital, but Elizabeth could not contain her panic. She jumped out of bed and ran to the door.

She was stopped by a neighbor who had come over to look after the kids. "What's the matter with you?" she said. "Go back to bed. Stop making a scene."

She was only six, but the message sank in, imprinted on her: My anxiety, my panic, was something shameful... something to be hidden at all costs. And the costs would prove huge. She white-knuckled her way through anxiety during childhood and adolescence.

Her dad's Army postings meant homes on nine different bases. She went to eight different schools. She says she wasn't wise enough to turn to prayer to deal with stress and panic. She learned to survive the attacks in secret, to bury her feelings. Elizabeth thrived academically, graduating from the University of Missouri's top-ranked journalism school and starting a career in TV broadcasting. She prided herself on being cool in a crunch, a real professional. My secret was safe. Except once.

It was a Saturday night in Chicago in the early 1990s. She was working at WBBM, doing the 10:00 p.m. newscast with a veteran coanchor. All at once she felt like she couldn't breathe. Her hands trembled. She was queasy. She was sure she was going to vomit. Elizabeth clenched her jaw and stopped reading the teleprompter right in the middle of a story.

The air went dead. Hundreds of thousands of viewers could see the real her, exposed. A full-blown panic attack on air. So much for being a cool professional.

Her coanchor jumped in and read her part. They went to commercial and he glared at her, furious, and then—like that neighbor all those years ago in Okinawa—demanded to know what was wrong with her. Elizabeth had no answer, at least not one she was willing to share. She had violated one of her basic rules: Don't make a scene. She vowed it would never happen again.

She was careful never to do a broadcast on a full stomach. She discovered that a beta-blocker could help. Better yet, off air, when she needed to unwind, a glass of wine hit the spot. It was like turning off the worry switch. "Just wine" was her rule, though. Nothing stronger.

Elizabeth put a lot of pressure on herself. Good enough wasn't good enough; everything she did had to be perfect. The more successful she became, it seemed, the more she had to hide. And the more she hid, the more she cut herself off from other people and from God. When she prayed, it was reactive—pleading to get through a stressful day or through a panic attack without anyone knowing—not a true relationship with God.

Then came the job at 20/20. It was a huge break. And there was a price. Besides the long hours, she would have to do a ton of traveling. More hours on a plane, trapped in a tube at 30,000 feet. Reason enough for anxiety.

After suffering a particularly harrowing panic attack on one flight—sweating, hyperventilating—she went to a doctor and for the first time confessed her anxiety. He gave her a prescription for anti-anxiety medication. It helped. So did the wine the helpful flight attendants brought to her seat.

But you can't hide from everyone, Elizabeth notes, especially someone you love and trust. She met Marc after she moved to New York and soon they were married. They had two beautiful boys. Marc was the only one she had confided the secret of her anxiety attacks to. He countered with a truth she wasn't ready to believe. "I think you drink too much," he said.

"Are you kidding?" she was furious. No one had ever said that to her before. No one knew how much she drank. How dare he!

She walked right out of the room. "Me, a drunk? I was an Emmy-winning broadcaster on network TV, meeting deadlines left and right, appearing on air night after night. I could cut back or quit anytime I wanted. No problem." She reasoned. What alcoholic could do that?

Since Marc didn't like to see her drinking, Elizabeth would sometimes stop in a little bar on her way home from work and have a glass—or two—of wine there... draining the day's tension. But that didn't feel quite as nice. She felt pathetic, sitting there alone. Sometimes she would pretend she was waiting for a friend.

"That's all right," she would say into her dead cell phone. "I just sat down. Take your time."

Things got out of control so slowly that she convinced herself there was no problem. She'd go on a trip for work, drink heavily at night after the shoot, then pull it together in time to be on camera in the morning. She told herself she was good at maintaining the work-life balance. But then, on a long-anticipated family vacation, Elizabeth ended up spending most of the time in bed, sleeping off her hangovers from raiding the minibar.

The shame was incredible, palpable, almost as bad as a panic attack. It was like a moral panic attack. She checked into a rehab facility right away. But only for a couple of weeks. Doing the full 28-day program would have meant revealing to her bosses at the network that she had a problem. So she told them she needed surgery—nothing life-threatening. It was a flat-out lie.

The rehab place was beautiful and the people were kind. They helped her reconnect with God for the first time in years. Not that she was ready to turn my will and my life over to a higher power. That wasn't happening.

Two months later though Elizabeth was drinking again. She went back into rehab for a longer stint, the full 28-day program. There was so much she had to deal with, especially her feelings. She had spent the majority of my life hiding.

Recovery meant getting honest, most of all with herself. She had to dig deep. She had to confront why she had become so dependent on alcohol. People all around her spoke openly about themselves. She had to be open too. It was hard, maybe the hardest thing she ever did.

One day close to the end of her stay she spoke to the group. “I’m really scared,” she said. “I’m afraid of going back to my life, of being surrounded by stress and temptation. I’m afraid of my anxiety and what I will do to escape it.”

Tears came to her eyes. She rarely allowed herself to cry in front of anybody. She thought people would be embarrassed seeing her cry. She expected to be reprimanded, the way she had been by that neighbor all those years ago. Instead, her tears were met with understanding and compassion. Was it possible that she could reveal the worst about herself and still be loved?

“God bless you,” someone said. “Pray to God to help you.” Prayer was the tool she could take with her, prayer whenever the stress hit, prayer when the desire to reach for a glass of wine overcame her. This time she managed to hold it together back in New York City. For a while, at least.

She was so glad to be sober, so glad to be back at work. But the stresses were still there, and when she dropped into a recovery meeting with other alcoholics, as she promised she would, Elizabeth would sit in the back, hiding under a hat, never speaking out, never revealing that she was struggling like everyone else in the room.

Gradually she stopped going to meetings, stopped reaching out to friends in the program.

Then came the first setback. She couldn’t handle it sober. She thought the anxiety was going to kill her. She didn’t pray. She walked into a bar and ordered a drink. It wasn’t so much the glass of wine that was her downfall, but that she was no longer praying daily or talking with other people in recovery. Her isolation was growing again.

Soon she was sneaking wine regularly and it was inevitable that I would show up for work drunk, which I did.

She hit absolute bottom. Back in Chicago she’d fallen apart on the air. This was worse. Much worse. Yes, the cure turned out to be worse than the disease.

There was no hiding it. Now everyone knew Elizabeth was going into rehab—again. She had to issue a public statement: “Like so many people, I am dealing with addiction.” Her shameful secret was there for all to see. “I am in treatment....” This rehab place was much tougher than the other one. It was grim, and she felt hopeless there. Reaching out to her parents and her brother and sister was what saved me.

There was a weekend when family members came. Family histories—and family secrets—were revealed and explored in a therapeutic setting. Her brother, Chris, her sister, Aimie, and both of her parents made the trip. For the first time ever they talked about our childhood.

Mom and Dad discussed the trials of raising kids when Dad was in Vietnam and Mom was all on her own in Japan. They knew how hard it was on the kids. Her mom had agonized over her daily panic attacks when she left me in the morning. She admitted she didn't comfort her; She didn't know how. The U.S. military was not helping Vietnam vets with their PTSD then. There certainly was no one to help their families with such issues.

"I wished I could help you," her mom said. "I felt so helpless. I didn't know what to do." She put her hand on her daughter. "I'm so sorry."

Those words meant everything. They validated her feelings. An enormous weight lifted from her. A burden she had been carrying for forty-some years. It was all right to be afraid and to talk about it—to God and to other people. Anxiety wasn't going to kill her, but isolation would.

Elizabeth discovered that prayer is her most powerful weapon. Not just at moments of high anxiety, moments when she feels on the verge of losing control, but all the time, turning to God for reassurance and strength as I move through my day.

She has a real relationship with God now, an awareness that it's not just her on my own, that there's a higher power at work in her life—every moment, every day. She ends each day by making a list of all the things that she is thankful for. Gratitude is a potent antidote to fear.

She is grateful to her family, grateful for her job and especially grateful to all those people who have supported her and loved her when she doubted she deserved love. She does not hide in the back of recovery meetings anymore but sits in the front, glad to help as she has been helped. Anxiety is always there, but prayer is too. It has given her the power to say no to drinking and the power to say yes to life.

What she did was to travel through the narrow gate.

At first glance when we hear these words about many trying but not able to enter it, it makes it sound like salvation is limited. But in Revelation, we are told "there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb..." This is hardly a limited affair if we are talking about heaven. So is God somehow setting the bar high? Should we be anxious like Elizabeth was and think we can't trust God, that we have to have it all together that we have to be perfect to find that narrow gate? How do we resolve this verse with others like in Timothy where we are told that God wills all to be saved?

Saint John Chrysostom asks whether there is some contradiction here. Jesus says elsewhere that his yoke is easy and his burden light. Chrysostom points the way to the resolution of these tensions when he says, "the one was said because of the nature of temptations, the other with respect to the feeling of those who overcame them." He goes on to talk of the way that this narrow gate leads to wide-open space. The wide open space is the love of God. The gate is narrow because temptation enters into the

picture; and some never ask for help, never own up to what they have done and failed to do, but just close the door to that love. Others take the path that is challenging and open the door. They make a scene if you will, asking for God's help and strength.

So how do we do the same? By confronting sin and temptation and realizing that we don't have to be perfect, because God has come to help us take the journey. But we do have to open up our eyes and confront the reality of temptation and sin, and, as Elizabeth did, do something about it.

We first acknowledge the reality of sin in our lives. It impacts us all. And we can pretend that there is nothing wrong with us, but dig a little bit, and there is always room for growth. So what is it we battle?

Second, ask yourself do you feel stressed or full of angst like Elizabeth or that you have to be perfect? Remember, perfection only happens when we let God take control and through grace.

That leads us to doing just that - asking for help. We need hold nothing back from God. Healing only happened when Elizabeth confronted her situation, but reached out to God and also other people. We sometimes think we have to be perfect not just for God but for others even in our family. But we can't do it alone. By being vulnerable and reaching out, we'll travel through the gate with one another.

Lastly, as we grow in grace as Elizabeth did, we look around and ask ourselves what closes the gate. For her it was a dependence on alcohol that was diminishing her. Once we figure out the sins and battles, we strive to avoid the near occasion of sin as we say in the Act of Contrition. What changes can we make to make us less likely to make a bad decision? Perhaps it's stress that causes us to do things, or we are with a group of friends who aren't really friends but causing us to be more prone to make a bad decision, or there are things in our home that might not be necessarily sinful in and of themselves, but can cause us to make poor judgment. By knowing the tempters around us it helps to keep the gate open for good.

And what is through that narrow gate? Heaven and the ocean of God's love. But the good news for us is that it's not just out there on the other side, but when we look at the Son and the Spirit we see how that love comes to us through the gate, into our lives each and every day - something that will happen in just a few moments on our altar. So enter through that narrow gate and realize that yes, many can be saved, but doing what we are told to do every Ash Wednesday, namely turning away from sin and being faithful to the Gospel, it's not easy. But thankfully God and others are with us step by step - so let us turn to Him and one another as we together journey through that gate into the Kingdom of Heaven.