

# Smoke Screen

by John Prin



**D**anger was far from my thoughts as I reached for the marijuana joint tucked in my suitcase. I stepped out of my cabin and strolled among the tall evergreens at twilight in search of an isolated place to toke up. This was the final day of a Christian writers' conference I was attending, a week of workshops and seminars with fellow believers on a mountaintop in California.

I stopped at a rugged precipice, hidden from the light of the resort's cabins. I rationalized that it would take just a few minutes and nobody would be the wiser. I had smoked grass regularly for eight years, including the past seven months since my conversion to Christ. Dur-

ing the turbulent '60s when I attended college, I was one of the thousands who defied the establishment, marched in protests, became hippies and professed peace and flower power. Marijuana was a trademark, like long hair.

But by the months after my rebirth in November, 1977, it had become a thorn in my flesh. I went faithfully to church, prayed daily, attended Bible studies—and smoked the evil weed. I was a walking contradiction. Outwardly, I was a radiant believer. Inwardly, I couldn't hold my head up to God. I knew that it wasn't right. "Anyone who believes that something he wants to do is wrong shouldn't do it. He sins if he does; for he

thinks it is wrong, and so for him it is wrong" (Rom 14:23 LB).

It was a stubborn, besetting sin that compromised my daily walk, a counterfeit euphoria that replaced divine intimacy with my Lord. But I didn't know all this consciously—yet.

As I put the "devil's toothpick" to my lips, something told me to walk a few steps further, to insure not being seen.

Disregarding the risks involved (geographical danger to my body, spiritual danger to my soul), I inched forward on the steep rocks and suddenly started losing my footing . . . falling . . . sliding farther into the devil's shadow. I could see the headline: Christian

Writer Dies From Fall—Found Reaching For Marijuana Cigarette.

Miraculously, my downward motion stopped. I looked up. "You saved me, Lord! Seven months ago, and now again!" My heart jumped. I shook my head. Wouldn't Satan have scored a victory?

I pulled myself to safety and chided myself. To hide from my fellow mortals was one thing. To hide from Him was laughable. Refusing to light up the joint, I yelled audibly, "Get out of my life, Satan! I have Jesus! You have no power over me!"

The next day, in bright sunlight, I stood where I'd stopped sliding the night before and saw a sheer drop to the creek 150 feet below.

My battle to quit getting high began from that day forward. First, I stopped buying grass (an illegal act in itself). Then I stopped growing it, and later stopped keeping it in the house. These were important first steps, but they were not enough to eliminate the remorse I felt each time I toked up.

Remorse is defined: *a gnawing distress arising from a sense of guilt for past wrongs*. Remorsefully, I prayed. Remorsefully, I read scripture. Remorsefully, I tried to stop by my own power until I had asked for forgiveness countless number of times. Another year had passed by now. I hadn't discovered that obedience is its own pleasurable reward.

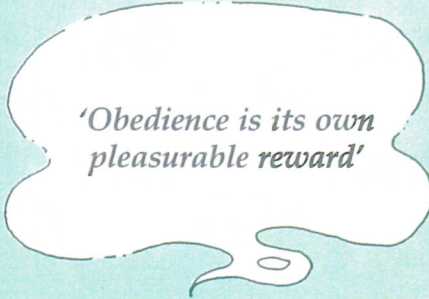
We Christians many times carry habitual baggage from our pre-Christian lives, coping mechanisms that seemed to work during former periods but which pale compared to the power of Christ. We are afraid to yield, afraid that He may ask something of us that will not be fun or easy.

I realized I could not call myself a Christian unless I stopped depending on my own feeble strength. I needed to reach for His hand instead of habitual (carnal) comforts. "Give me Your will to stop, Lord," I prayed. "Please take away the desire to smoke and my fear of finding You inadequate.

This I ask, claiming Your promises."

I devised an experiment: since grass gave me such a pleasant high, could depending on Christ (not smoking) equal, or even top, the high from pot? My purpose wasn't to test the Lord, it was to renounce my carnal dependence on a suspicious crutch. Hadn't I managed just fine without the stupid stuff for years before trying it?

I kept from smoking for a week. It wasn't easy but the glimpse of freedom from remorse and guilt was exhilarating. Although I wasn't in an altered state, I was in a right relationship that heightened my



*'Obedience is its own pleasurable reward'*

expectations—getting high could be topped.

I resisted another week, but it got harder each day. The old man in me was actively fighting for his familiar fix. Temptation, "the pull of man's own evil thoughts and wishes" (James 1:14), hounded me until I claimed one of God's keenest promises: "No temptation is irresistible. You can trust God to keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it" (I Cor 10:13).

The answer came in prayer: "Every minute you're stoned, John, is a minute we could be sharing together." Again the reminder, I was excluding Him! To make up for this error, I plowed through the Word, seeking guidance: "If we say we are God's friends, but go on living in spiritual darkness and sin, we are lying" (I John 1:6). "Stop loving this evil world and all that it offers you, for when you love these things you show that you do not really love God" (I John 2:15). "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that you abstain from immorality"

(I Thes 4:3 RSV).

These and other warnings turned me in a new direction. He required that I refrain from anything I thought was sin. He wanted me to have His own character, holy and pure, even though I existed in a mixed up, sin-ridden world.

There is now unity in my marriage. "When you're with me nowadays, says Susie, "all of you is with me; you're not glazed over. I'm less afraid of you getting arrested, and I have fewer worries. In the past, my not smoking was a sore spot because you saw me as your judge, but now we're finally on the same wavelength."

I also have more energy, time and money. I no longer practice the daily ritual of smoking with its enervating trance. Now I have the get-up-and-go to tackle multiple projects and see them through to satisfying conclusions. Now my time is available for exercising and gardening and playing with my daughter, instead of running out to buy a new stash. Also, now \$50 to \$100 a month goes into tithes and offerings and for worthwhile books and recreation.

The list of residual benefits goes on: no more risk of emphysema, for example. But above all, the fruits of the Spirit is now *really* in my life. The peace and joy and self-control I experience each day, outward evidence of inward change, have replaced the works of the flesh that grieved the Spirit within me for so many months. I now enjoy—and get real pleasure from—the sure knowledge that He is trustworthy, and I feel liberated from a false and addictive substitute that can never surpass the genuine and lasting Truth.

Obedience *is* its own pleasurable reward.

As I look back now, the trail is littered with remorse, hiding, deception, escape and a long string of disobedience—now, thankfully, all forgiven. God's authority, strategy and presence helped me get high on freedom instead of being trapped by this stubborn sin.