

# TEEN FELON SURRENDERS



Cameron Casteel with his wife Presleigh.

One of Cameron Casteel's earliest memories is of his father beating up his mother. He recalls red and blue flashing lights and his father being handcuffed and taken away. Cameron experienced abandonment, imprisonment, abuse, and homelessness before he had even finished high school. Then, when his girlfriend became pregnant, Cameron saw only one solution. How could he be a father when he'd never had one himself?

Sharing his story on his YouTube channel, Cameron says he didn't know how to process the emotions that came with his traumatic childhood experiences and began to rebel against his mother and the law.

"At a very young age I'd already broken into several schools, I'd been in tons of fights, I had stolen from several stores, and I'd stolen from people," Cameron admits.

"People would always say, 'Oh you're just like your dad.' That kind of made me proud a little bit, I hate to say, because my dad was my hero."

Then a close family friend took his own life. Cameron was confused and hurt. "I realised that there was

an escape from the pain that I was enduring," Cameron shares.

At 13 years old, Cameron decided to kill himself.

One day he was on his way home to take an overdose of pills and a neighbour saw him and asked him what he was doing.

"I don't know why I told her the truth, but I did." The neighbour was a Christian and prayed for Cameron and told him about Jesus. Cameron decided not to

kill himself at that time but the thoughts did not go away. Then his father was released from prison. He got married and had a child – Cameron's half-sister.

"He would tell me all the time, 'If you don't help me sell these drugs then your sister is going to go without diapers and food.' And he would say, 'Cameron, if I get caught I do another six years but if you get caught you do six months.'"

So at 14 years old, Cameron helped his father sell drugs and it wasn't long before he found himself in a juvenile detention center.

Cameron found a Bible in the prison library and read that Jesus loved him and wanted to be his Father. But Cameron resented the words he read.

"I didn't want a dad. I didn't want someone to love me, because all I knew at this point was that it brought pain."

After Cameron's release from the juvenile correction center, he lived with his aunt and uncle while he was on probation. But when that ended, he moved back in with his dad.

"Since my father was not in the right state of mind to care for me he eventually just stopped," Cameron recalls. "I came home one day after school and found my belongings thrown outside the house in the dirt."

Feeling as though he had burned his bridges with other family members, Cameron found himself homeless and begging at stores for food that was going to be thrown away. Then Cameron met a girl at school, Presleigh, and it was love at first sight. By the end of the year,

Presleigh was pregnant.

"I wasn't ready to be a dad," Cameron admits. "I'd never had a dad and so I told her, 'Let's have an abortion.'" Presleigh didn't want an abortion and the pair fought about it for days. Eventually she booked an abortion in a different state.

Curious to know about the abortion process, Cameron looked at some videos online. He came across a song called *Give me a Voice* by Dillon Chase. The

first line of the song: 'I thought this was a womb not a tomb,' brought tears to Cameron's eyes.

He felt as if his unborn daughter was speaking those words to him. He called Presleigh and begged her not to go through with the abortion.

To his relief, she told him she had already decided not to.

When Cameron's daughter was born he remembers holding her in his arms and looking into her eyes for the first time.

"I said, 'You'll be the child that I never was and I'll be the father that I never had. I'll never let you go and if it comes down to it, I'm gonna die for you.' And it was in that same moment that I felt God

talk to me and say, 'Cameron, you can be the child you never were. I am the Father that you never had. I never left you. I have never forsaken you. And Cameron, when it came down to it, I did die for you.' I lifted my hands in that moment and I surrendered everything I had to King Jesus. I couldn't run anymore. Everything that I had experienced in my life trying to fill this eternal gap I tried to fill it with temporary

things and it just never seemed to work. God revealed to me His love – the love of the Father – through me becoming a father."

As Cameron looks back at his story he now sees that Jesus was there all along.

"He was always in my corner and He was always saying, 'Come here, I love you. I'm the Dad you need.'"

Not long after this, Presleigh also gave her life to Jesus and the couple married.

By this time Dillon Chase, the artist behind the song that caused Cameron to rethink abortion, had become his best friend and was a groomsman in the wedding.

Cameron and Dillon now travel together to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, including in prisons.

"I encourage you today to follow Jesus," Cameron says. "I don't know your situation. I don't know what you're going through but I do know that you're in such great dire need that Jesus abandoned the throne of heaven to come down and die in your place. And to me that's a God worth living for."

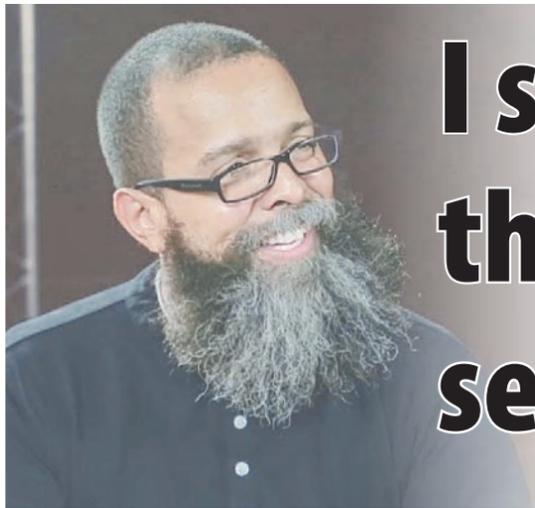
## I WASN'T READY TO BE A DAD



**AFRIKAANS, ZULU, ENGLISH** story **PAGE 6**



Cameron with Dillon Chase (left), the artist behind the song that impacted Cameron.



# I saw peace in the eyes of the security guard

Alexander Pagani had been arrested before he was even a teenager. Raised in the Bronx by parents involved in the drug scene, he learned at an early age that he was on his own and would do whatever he could in order to survive.

He joined a gang and was in and out of prison before facing a lengthy term when he was 17. But while in prison, he had an encounter that changed everything – to the point that he is now a leader in the community he once terrorized.

In an interview with 700Club, Alexander says he felt rejected and abandoned by his parents and the gang life appealed to him as an outlet to express anarchy.

“I remember exaggerating that street lifestyle when I didn’t have to or feeling like I did have something to prove,” Alexander recalls.

“If I was going to be evil, I became very evil.”

At 16, he was jailed for robbery, burglary and kidnapping. While awaiting sentencing at Riker’s Island, he attacked two other

inmates. “I stabbed them honestly for no reason – just to make a statement,” he admits.

He spent almost a year in solitary confinement.

“I’m 17 years old and I have nothing and this is how this ends. I think I was at the lowest that I could be.”

Alexander’s aunt Vilma worked as a youth counselor at Riker’s. She would regularly tell him, “You’ve tried everything else – why don’t you try Jesus.”

Alexander’s Christian grandmother had tried talking to him about Jesus before.

“I would tell my grandmother, ‘Come on Ma; don’t start with that church stuff. I’ll go when I’m ready.’”

But in prison, he says he had no choice but to listen. He also talked to a security guard and noticed there was something different about him.

“There was just something about him that really appealed to me,” Alexander recalls.

“I [thought], ‘Man this guy is

really into Jesus’. I could look right in his eyes and I would see complete peace. I didn’t have that. I wanted that. I didn’t even know where to start.”

When he went to court to be sentenced, he intended to dispute the charges. But something strange happened that stopped him.

“When I walked in I heard a voice saying, ‘They’re going to give you nine years. You are to take it.’ When I heard that voice I remember saying to myself, ‘Who’s that? Who’s speaking to me?’”

He raised his head to look and noticed a plaque behind the judge which said, “In God we trust”.

“Rays of light came out of the word ‘God’ and came into me, into my mind,” Alexander shares.

The judge was willing to decrease Alexander’s sentence from 21 years to nine if he pled guilty.

“I knew God was talking to me so without even thinking about what was told to me I pleaded guilty,” he remembers.

Back in his cell Alexander wrote to his aunt to explain what happened.

“I’m telling her how I believe God wants me to change but I’m really having a hard time making that transition but I know that I need to and I’m beginning to want to because I want to go to heaven,” he explains.

As he wrote the words, he had a life-changing vision.

“Jesus Christ came in my cell and He speaks to my right ear, ‘Follow me’ and I lifted my hand and when I said, ‘I accept,’ it felt like things were breaking off of me and I felt so peaceful. I fell asleep.”

The changes in Alexander were immediate.

“The cigarettes, the pornography, the cursing – everything instantaneously left me and I lived for Jesus behind prison walls.”

Alexander began to read the Bible but struggled when he came to Romans 8:15: “So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, ‘Abba, Father.’”

“I clearly remember that day having a problem calling God, ‘Father,’” Alexander admits.

“I realized that my relationship with the Lord [should be] based on me loving Him, not fearing Him and I began to love Him ... He’s my Father – He’s everything that I have.”

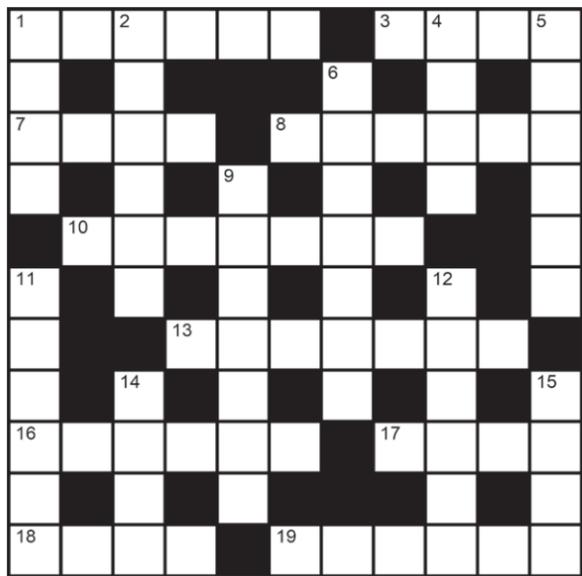
After his release from prison, Alexander started a church in the Bronx, which his family now attends. He has written books and appeared on TV networks.

He is married to Ibelize and has two sons, Apollos and Xavier.

## IF I WAS GOING TO BE EVIL, I BECAME VERY EVIL.

## Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

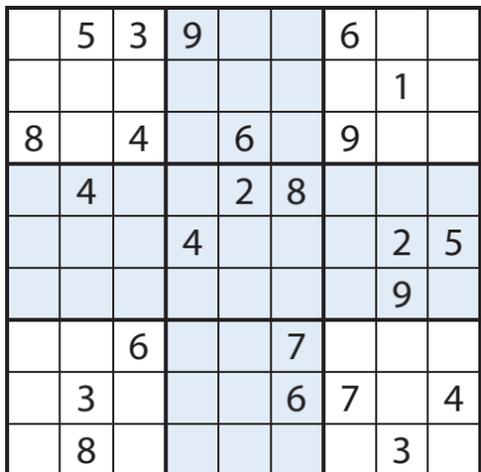
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  - 6 Label for a picture
  - 9 Daytime show
  - 11 Martial art (4,2)
  - 12 Warren inhabitant
  - 14 Volcanic flow
  - 15 WWII vehicle



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And then it occurred to him: the world needed yet another book on leadership.



# A SUCCESSFUL TOTAL DISASTER

BY JODY BENNETT

I RECENTLY learnt about the life of American chemical engineer Thomas Midgley, a mild-mannered inventor, who only lived 55 years and whom I had never heard of before, but whose impact was one of worldwide destruction and death. He has been dubbed the most destructive single organism on Earth!



Thomas Midgley.

Midgley was instrumental in the invention both of leaded gasoline and CFCs, two of the worst inventions ever, which continue to have untold human and environmental impacts.

Leaded gasoline, developed as an anti-knock agent for internal combustion engines, pumped toxic lead into the atmosphere for decades causing “serious long-term health problems from childhood, including neurological impairment [ie. lowering people’s IQ, as well as literally causing them to go crazy, like mercury did] and [linked] with increased levels of violence and criminality ... around the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Midgley himself suffered twice from lead poisoning and knew of its dangers, but continued to lie about his fuel additive, tetraethyllead (TEL), sold as Ethyl. Only decades later, due largely to the work of Clair Patterson, the truth about lead poisoning became public knowledge and un-leaded fuel became the norm.

Midgley was not only a danger to the whole planet, but himself as well.

In 1940, at the age of 51, he contracted polio and became severely disabled. In order to get out of bed, he devised an elaborate system of pulleys and ropes. As with his other inventions, this too eventually proved to be deadly. In 1944, he became entangled in the device and died of strangulation. Imagine living such a life! Thinking that you are solving problems with helpful inventions and ending up leaving absolute carnage in your wake, with your inventions killing more people than even the worse dictator on earth, and adversely affecting generations of not only humans but animals and plant-life too! The mind boggles!

Here was someone with the best of intentions, with a first class education and a fine mind. Someone lauded as a hero and success at one time, whom history now calls a one-man environmental disaster<sup>3</sup> and has nothing good to say about. It would have been so much better for the planet if Thomas Midgley had never existed. How very tragic.

But, to be fair, at the time he invented Ethyl, no one knew the dangers of lead in the environment; at the time he invented Freon, no one knew what CFCs would do to the ozone-layer. This ties into another idea I heard of recently – the Dunning-Kruger effect – that people vastly overestimate their knowledge or competence in a field in which they are unfamiliar; basically that we don’t know what we don’t know, so we think we know a great deal. (On a side note, this may explain how 16 years old know everything!) The fact is that all of us know very little compared to the sum of all knowledge in the universe and that even as a highly developed society, there are vast amounts of things of which we are totally unaware. In some instances we know we don’t know much – like about deep space or how the human brain works. But the scary thing is we don’t actually know how much, or what, we don’t know!

That is one of the reasons why being a Christian makes so much sense to me. I know I don’t know much, but I entrust my life and future into the hands of a God who knows ALL things – the beginning from the end, all things visible and invisible, the future and the past, the knock-on effects of every decision; and I obey Him because He alone knows the repercussions of all my actions and the legacy I will leave.

God forbid that history decides it would have been better if I had never been born!

We all make some impact, big or small, on those around us and on those who come after us – our children and grandchildren, our pupils, those who read our books or watch our movies or engage with our inventions. But we are ignorant, finite creatures who within living memory have made the most incredible blunders, so I pray daily that God’s will, not mine, be done. May misguided Midgley be a lesson to us all.

- 1. By J.R. McNeill, environmental historian
- 2. Wikipedia
- 3. Fred Pearce, New Scientist



“The first step to being happy is being grateful, so focus on counting your blessings, not your burdens. Regularly writing down all you are grateful for doesn’t only make you feel good, it can improve overall well-being.” – Dr Michael Mol

# A mind rewired and a life remade

BY EMILY ANDREWS

Last year, Ashley Hale followed an Oklahoma City sidewalk to an office building, dressed her best to start a new job. At her feet, she saw words carved into the cement – company values like integrity that guided Ashley’s own life.

Not long before, she sat behind prison walls as her life was falling apart.

For much of her young life, Ashley sought joy in materialism. From an early age, she got what she wanted – if the things she wished for could be bought. Since her single mother made good money, they never asked others for help. But money couldn’t buy everything. Like many teens, Ashley dealt with feelings of insecurity and wished to fit in at school. Though she seemed outgoing and athletic, she feared failure and never tried out for sports.

“The other side of that was, well, I can go to the games, and I can party,” Ashley remembers. Parties became an easy place for her to belong. When she dabbled in alcohol, pot, and cocaine, Ashley told herself she could stop whenever she wanted. But by college, she was trying ecstasy and meth. Being high made her feel numb and carefree. As Ashley sank deeper into addiction, she left her college dorm to live in a house alone off-campus. She started selling drugs for extra cash. She threw house parties, so she’d never be lonely.

At age 21, Ashley was arrested for the first time. She spent six months in a prison-style boot camp, then moved to Arizona. She stayed clean for a few years and even attended beauty school. But she returned to Oklahoma and the party scene there, and by her late 20s, Ashley was a single mother with a full-time job and a full-time addiction.

Ashley struggled when her son was diagnosed with a developmental disorder. She used meth to mute her pain and stay awake as she researched her son’s condition late into the night. “I thought that was how I was going to survive,” says Ashley. “It just became a way of life.”

That way of life led Ashley to a short stint in rehab and, finally, to prison on a 10-year sentence. Broken and tired, she checked in to a substance abuse treatment program in prison to begin her recovery. But soon she wanted more. Ashley’s cellmate knew Tammy Franklin, a Prison Fellowship staff member who served as the manager of Prison Fellowship Academy, a yearlong life transformation program. Tammy had previously been incarcerated at the same facility as Ashley, before being released and turning her life around. Ashley wondered if the same radical renewal was possible for her, too.

Ashley enrolled in the academy and discovered a place to belong. Caring staff and volunteers guided her through a yearlong journey to develop biblically based values like community, integrity, and responsibility. With curriculum like Celebrate Recovery, she learned to process difficult emotions and to heal from past hurts.

“That was the first time that I had been told that my feelings are normal,” Ashley says of her time in the academy. “It’s OK to have them and then process whatever it is, and then move



Ashley Hale is now a licensed peer recovery support specialist.

Inset: Ashley used drugs to numb her pain and was eventually imprisoned.



forward. A lot of healing came from just that.”

In the academy, Ashley also rediscovered her faith in Jesus, in part through the Alpha study included in the academy curriculum. Alpha introduces participants to the basics of the Christian faith, which Ashley grew up believing, although she had treated it as a “free ticket to sin” and continued to live however she wanted.

“I thought if I was saved, how I lived didn’t matter, because I was going to heaven no matter what,” Ashley says. “But I learned that God wants a relationship with us.”

From the yard to her cell, Ashley practiced living in healthy community without fear of failure, knowing that Jesus loved her unconditionally.

“The academy changed my life more than any prison stay, any bootcamp, any rehab,” says Ashley. “That’s been the best thing that could have happened to me.”

After three and a half years, Ashley was released. A Prison Fellowship volunteer picked her up and brought her new clothes for going home. Ashley moved into Hope House, a transitional home for women in Oklahoma City, where she spent her first several months as a free woman. Right away, she got involved with Bible studies and found a church community.

Re-entry into society wasn’t easy. Ashley juggled work, school, serving the community, and being a mom, all while learning to adjust to society again. She had to set healthy boundaries with family and friends, and commit to her sobriety.

In February 2021, Ashley was baptized [immersed in water] at her church as a public expression of her faith in Jesus. Today she is in a program to become a licensed peer recovery support specialist. Her relationship with her now 19-year-old son is growing stronger. Ashley hopes to someday be cleared to return to prison as a Prison Fellowship volunteer to help others—especially other women who struggle to ask for help like she did. Even in tough times, she says she finds purpose in serving others freely with the love of Christ.

In a way, Ashley is still the woman who gets what she wants. But now, what she wants has radically changed. ●

The original of this article can be found at [www.prisonfellowship.org](http://www.prisonfellowship.org) and it is used with kind permission.

# I have peace inside

At 51, John Wesley Banos has spent more than half of his life in prison – and still has another 28 years of his 60-year sentence to go.

Incarcerated at 19 for aggravated kidnapping and aggravated sexual assault, he tells *Challenge News* he had an abusive father but got along well with his mother, two brothers and sister.

He played truant from school and says that was what “started me on the wrong path in life. I was born with sticky fingers and things that did not belong to me had a way of sticking to my hand – but I never had any drug addiction.” John was introduced to the Bible and Christianity when his mother became a Christian and shared her faith with him.

He says he “did not think a lot about spiritual things” but remembers something that happened to him when he was five.

“I was in the front yard and I looked at the trees, the animals, the sky and humans and I knew that there was a Creator. When I looked at my mum’s car and my dad’s pickup truck I knew that they were created by someone even though I didn’t know who they were.”

Then when he was 16 John says he believes he was protected by an angel though he did not realise it at the time. In fact, John says he heard the Gospel message (that Jesus Christ died for humanity’s sins) almost his whole life but had never understood it. It wasn’t until he hit rock bottom emotionally and “felt miserable” that he turned to God in 1990.

At 20 years old “I prayed ‘Yahweh (the Hebrew name for God) and I believe that Yeshua (Jesus) died on Calvary for me. I ask Him to come into my heart and redeem me. I pray for this in the name of Yeshua, amen.’”

Since then John says he has matured in many ways and has grown stronger spiritually. “God filled me [with His Spirit] and then guided me in my thought process and I matured spiritually and mentally as I learned the truth about all issues from the Bible.”

Some of the truths are to do with proof of creation and Biblical accounts of events. “Creation declares a Creator,” he says. “Numerous archaeology finds have verified the accuracy and truthfulness of the Bible. They found solid evidence of Sodom being destroyed by intense heat. The Bible is 100 per cent correct. Jesus died at Calvary for us so that we can be redeemed and restored back in a spiritual relationship with the Father. But you must walk in faith.”

As for his personal development, John admits that he felt he is constantly tested and offers this insight for other prisoners.

“You are in a difficult spot right now, but the Father is more concerned with your personality and character, and prison permits you to be free of distractions so that you can grow and mature in His love, holiness and righteousness. You will obtain a wonderful peace inside. I speak from 32 years of experience.”

John says he had to learn to forgive many people along the way to attain this sense of peace.

“I had to forgive the corrupt officials who are keeping me incarcerated for a crime I am innocent of, and to forgive corrupt prison guards. I also pray for more compassion for people.”

While maintaining his innocence, John believes he is in prison by the will of God for his own greater good and God’s glory. ●

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<p><b>BIBLICAL DISCIPLESHIP 2</b></p> <p>This course builds on the foundation laid by Discipleship 1 and provides a deeper understanding of the word of God in the Christian walk. This course consists of two books A and B, each 13 lessons. A certificate is awarded upon completion of each of the books.</p>	<p><b>GODS ANSWER TO AIDS</b></p> <p>The purpose of this course is to enlighten and educate individuals of how to overcome the scourge of HIV/AIDS, based on what the Word of God says. This course consists of six lessons six weeks, engaging a DVD and a resource workbook. It is taught by a World Hope Ministries facilitator.</p>

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# CHANCE ENCOUNTER

Looking at the online bios of Chance the Rapper, who has a history of drug use, swearing and sexual immorality, one may not immediately realise that he is a Christian. And yet, like his mentor Kanye West, the evidence attests that he has come out of a profoundly self-focussed past to find the forgiveness and new life offered in relationship with Jesus Christ.

His own Instagram posts state the case eloquently: "The wages of sin are death. That's heavy knowledge right there! All of us are born into sin, BUT the son of God lived a completely sinless life, won the victory over Satan in the garden, and STILL experienced death on the cross. All for us. Tmw I celebrate His victory over death" He tweeted on the 11th of April this year, the day before Easter Sunday.

He has also posted a quote from Psalm 51 in the Bible that reads: "Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin."

And that is exactly what God does when we turn to Him, apologising for all the ways we have disobeyed and rebelled against Him and asking Him to help us start afresh.

This big moment came for Chance, as it does for many people, in a moment of crisis. Often at these times we realise just how frail and helpless we are in the face of the big issues like disaster, disease or death.

The successful rapper, singer, songwriter, activist and actor was raised as a Christian by his grandmother but later walked away from his faith. He turned back to God when his daughter Kensli was born with an atrial flutter (abnormal heart rhythm). Speaking about the



Chance the Rapper has been very open about his faith.

situation, he said "[I just] pray a whole lot, you know, and need a lot of angels ... And...you know, God blessed everything, it worked out well." Following the situation, Chance wrote on Twitter on January 31, 2016, "Today's the last day of my old life, last day smoking cigs. Headed to church for help. All things are possible through Christ who strengthens me."

Since then, Chance has reconciled with and got married to his daughter's mother, Kirsten Corley, from whom he was estranged, and they have had a second little girl, Marli.

He has also cleaned up his life, been very open about his faith publicly and, inspired by musicians like Kirk Franklin and Kanye West, has produced many gospel driven songs.

Chance's music has been described as uplifting, generally containing jazz-inspired melodies and gospel

influences. His lyrics usually have references to Christian theology, his struggles with his faith and his upbringing. Chance also incorporates choirs into his music to attempt to maximize the gospel undertones.

The multi-award winning rapper shared details about his faith on "The Ellen Show" last year after DeGeneres pointed out that Chance has given millions of dollars to charity and asked, "Why is it important for you to give back?"

The 27-year-old entertainer, who is worth an estimated \$33 million said: "So, my understanding of a lot of stuff is based on Jesus. Jesus teaches us to ... care for your neighbor, care for people who aren't necessarily your blood but still a part of your body, because we're all humans." He also credited his parents with instilling in him the value of caring for and giving to those in need. His parents have both been actively involved in Illinois politics and social justice issues.

"So I guess it's a mixture of my parents and Jesus," he said.

The year before the celebrity announced he was taking a brief sabbatical to spend time studying the Bible. [Christians] all quote Scripture and tell each other what God likes and doesn't like, but how much time do we spend as followers of Jesus to really just read and KNOW His Word?" he said at the time. "I'm definitely guilty of not devoting time to it. So I'm off to read and learn, because the next generation of Bennett is here."

Good for him for wanting to get to grips with what Christianity really teaches before passing it on to his children. People have also been curious about the number three Chance wears on his hat. "I've rationalised it to myself that it stands for the third mixtape (*Coloring Book*, which earned three Grammy awards), the Holy Trinity, and the three-pronged family of myself, my girls, and my wife," Bennett said in an interview.

In an Instagram post in March as US quarantine began, Chance encouraged his followers: Matthew 5:14-16 says let that light shine so they may know the Father. I encourage everyone out there today! Be who He made you to be!! A servant, a neighbor, a light, a smile, a helping hand, a worshipper, A WITNESS!! For He is God and God alone!! He is nigh HALLELUJAH [praise the Lord].



Kevin Kemp and his wife Brenda.

## Drugs derailed my dreams

Musician Kevin Kemp had a promising career in the LA music and nightclub scene and was looking forward to his big breakthrough.

Unfortunately, he was drawn into drugs and crime.

"I was seduced by the lifestyle," Kevin tells *The 700 Club*. "I started selling dope and making money, eventually became my own best customer and started smoking up my product and my profits. It was downhill from there."

He got involved with a group of people who decided to break into a house and rob its occupant. Kevin didn't actually enter the house - he was the lookout guy and stayed outside.

He did, however, see much of what occurred. "I'm looking through the window, and there was an altercation in the house. I saw him go down. We left." Not knowing what had happened to the robbery victim, Kevin returned to check on him - and found him dead. He called the police but scrambled out of there. He wasn't able to stay hidden for long though as the police ultimately caught up with him.

Kevin eventually confessed to the murder, even though he didn't actually commit the crime, because he felt responsible - he was the one who planned the robbery.

"I felt like I set him up," Kevin admits. "If I had not been for that, nothing ever would have happened. He'd still be here if it wasn't for me." Found guilty of second-degree murder, Kevin was sentenced to 15 years to life in prison. "I didn't hear the 15 years part just that I was going to spend the rest of my life incarcerated. How am I going to do it?"

The sentence was just as devastating for Kevin's partner Brenda, with whom he had two children. She says: "I didn't think he would ever see the light of day. I was really worried about his survival, the kids growing up, especially my son, without his dad being here."

She decided she would do her best. As Kevin shares: "She came and told me that, 'if you dedicate your life to me and your son, I will do as much of this time with you as I can.'"

The couple were married in a prison waiting room, but life in prison was tough for the first-time offender.

"I felt really bad about myself. Really like worthless."

Then a stranger visited him and told him God could forgive his crime and change his life.

"I remember telling him, 'Man, I blew it. It's over.' I was taking the Ten Commandments literally: 'Thou shalt not kill'. I said, 'I'm done.'" But the man told him about Jesus.

"God will forgive you for that. God will forgive you."

He convinced me that God will forgive us for any sin if we repent (turn away from it) and confess it to Him. So, he led me through the sinner's prayer." Kevin began attending Bible studies that the chaplain held in prison. "Initially it was to get out of the cell," Kevin admits, "and then I started to really come to know God through reading my Bible. Jesus means everything to me. Jesus is my example, my strength, my hope. That's what I live for. I live to please God."

Kevin's life began developing positively. He earned a college degree and began helping the chaplain. However, his marriage was disintegrating as Brenda wrestled with some difficult questions.

She says: "I had to ask myself, Who am I? What is it that I want? Why am I really doing this? Am I doing this for myself? For the kids, for Kevin? So it just came to that cross in the road. I really loved my husband, but I just felt I couldn't do it anymore."

After seven years, they divorced, but Kevin refused to give up.

Kevin served 19 years of his sentence and was released on good behaviour. He says he "became a man" in prison. "I became a man of God in prison. If you can really get a grip on God, really trust Him and know that He can change lives, we can make it."

His first priority upon leaving jail was to rekindle his relationship with Brenda. "We talked and decided to start dating again. We decided to start right this time. We're going to do it God's way. We did that," Kevin says. "We dated for six months before we got married." Brenda has also become a Christian. Kevin, ever the musician, has started a gospel group called Redemption. Most of its members are former prisoners.

"The music is really secondary. It's about becoming men of God and understanding discipleship (mentoring). That's what God's been giving me lately. Men need to be disciplined."

Far from being bitter about his prison sentence, Kevin sees it as his turning point for good. "When I went to prison, I got rescued. I didn't get arrested. Jesus rescued me."

**GOD  
WILL  
FORGIVE  
YOU FOR  
THAT**



## The debt we can't pay is erased

BY GREG LAURIE

ONE day Simon Peter went to Jesus and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21 NKJV).

Maybe Peter wanted to impress the Lord with his willingness to forgive. He probably thought Jesus would say, "Seven times! Let's give Peter a round of applause. That is incredible! I can't believe you with your forgiving attitude!" But Jesus essentially said, "Seven times? I was thinking of 70 times seven." Was Jesus saying that we could forgive someone up to 490 times, and then on the 491st offense, we could nail them to the wall? No. Jesus was advocating unlimited forgiveness. He was saying, "You forgive them over and over again."

Jesus then went on to tell a story about a king who decided to collect what his servants owed him. But one of the servants who owed him a significant amount couldn't pay the debt. So the king ordered that the servant, his wife, his children, and everything he had must be sold to pay the debt. But the desperate servant threw himself down before the king and begged for mercy. The king, feeling sorry for this man, decided to immediately erase the entire debt.

Then Jesus continued with the story: "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. ... He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full" (Matthew 18:28, 30 NLT).

When the king heard about what happened, he threw the unforgiving servant into prison until he paid the king everything he owed.

God has forgiven us of the most enormous debt imaginable: all of our sins. Therefore, if God has done that for us; then surely, we can extend that same forgiveness to others. It's only reasonable that we who are forgiven should also forgive.



# Impilo yomzwangedwa isiyabukeka

## Zulutranslation

Stephen Cannou wase South Africa wayeme phakathi nomgwaqo phambi kwesidumbu sendodana yakhe ebulewe.

Ngaphambilini wayeke waphathwa ukwesaba okukhulu nokucindezeleka, uSteve wazizwa ebuyela kulobo bumnyama. Kodwa uNkulunkulu amkhonzayo wayenolunye uhlelo.

“INkosi yamtshela ukuthi athandaze amelana nolaka, nenhlungu kanye nenzondo,” ezisholo.

Indlela yayingelula njalo kulo chef weminyaka ewu 55. Inkinga zakhe zaqala esewumfana ekhulela ekhaya elingekahle nobaba owayebahlukumeza. Ngenxa yesimo esingemnandi sasekhaya, uSteve waba ne stress wacina izinto ngaphakathi.

“Ngangihluleka ukwazana nabantu nganginomzwangedwa,” ekhumbula.

Abazali bakhe bamusa yena nabafowabo esontweni kodwa babehlala bethutha njalo. Noma, u Steve wayekholwa ukuthi uNkulunkulu ukhona, wayengenabudlelwano naye. Kwakubonakala kunzima ukwazana Naye.

Eselibhungu, u Steve waqala ukuphuza nobumnandi njengendlela yokwehlisa ubuhlungu abhekene nabo. Waba nabangani abangasanga kodwa uyavuma, “Ngazizwa ngiyinxenye yokuthize.”

Kusuka, lapho utshwala bodwa babunene, owesifazane ayezwana naye wamlethela insangu. “Wazinikela!”

Kusuka lapho, izinto zaqala ukumsimamela u Steve. Ekuhambeni kwesikhathi, wathola umsebenzi ophakeme omkhokhelayo, washada, waba nabantwana ababili kodwa engajabule. “Wayecindezelekile,” Ekhokha umoya. “Ekufuneni kwami ukuthula ngafunda I Buddhism, nokudlinza, nokuphiliswa esho ezimbalwa.”

Ngalesosikhathi, u Steve wakhumbula u Nkulunkulu wobusha bakhe. Ngokushesha, wayobona umfundisi wobuKrestu. “Uthi konke kwakumhambela kahle ngaphandle kwalokhu,” ngidinga ukulungisa inhliziyu yami no Nkulunkulu!”

Emva kokuzama kaningi ukubulala wacina eyivulile inhliziyu yakhe ukwamukela u Jesu.” Ngangifuna impendulo, esholo. “ Ngo 2015 ngamukela uJesu ngabhabhathiswa emanzini.”

Uma I Challenge ibuza u Steve ukuthi

wathandaza wathini, uphendule wathi, “Baba uNkulunkulu ngithathe ungihlanze amacala ami, ngizinikela kuwe. Iguqule ingqondo yami uyenze ibe intsha.”

Ukuzinikelakukholo akhuliswa ngalo akushongo ukuthi inkinga zakhe ziphelile. Empeleni, u Steve walahlekelwa ikho konkengenxa yezinqumo ezingaphusile, umuzi wakhe, unkosikazi, nabantwana kanye nomsebenzi. “Wakha kabusha impilo yakhe ehlala endleleni.”

U Steve wahamba wayohlala e mission station iminyaka emithathu, ekhona, efunda ibhayibheli lonke” emamatheka.

Ngokunakekelwa u Nkulunkulu, uSteve uhlukune nezinto ezazimkhungethe nemicabango emibi usephothule izifundo zobu chef. “Abantu bayangibuza ukuthi kungani nginenhlanhla? Impendulo yami: INkosi u Jesu Kristu.”

Kungekudala, indodana yakhe yabulawa noma bekuyisikhathi esizima kuye nomndeni wakhe, uthi uJesu akazange abashiye. “Kuqala wayefuna uthando kubantu, manje unokuthula ekwazini ukuthi zonke izinto zisemandleni kaNkulunkulu.”

U Steve useneminyaka ewu8 eyikholwa noma ehambe ekulingweni nasenhluphekweni enkulu, uyazi ulondekile kuJesu.

“UJesu uyiqiniso nothando lwakhe lujulile,” evuma.” Ngiyisotsha likaKristu.”

UJesu wethembise abalandeli bakhe: “Nginitsele lezinto, ukuze kimi nibe nokuthula. Kulomhlaba nizoba nenkinga! Qinani Ngilinqobile izwe (Johane 16:33)



Stock photo. Getty Images. The murder of Stephen's son was one event that God used to get through to the chef.

# Lewe van eensaamheid kyk op

## Afrikaans translation

Suid Afrikaner Stephen Cannou het in die middel van die pad gestaan en afgekyk op die lyk van sy vermoorde seun.

Voorheen het hy aan angs en maniese depressie gelei, en Steve het gevoel asof hy terug gly na daardie donker plek.

Maar die God wat hy dien het ander planne gehad.

“Die Here het vir my gesê om teen die vestings van woede, bitterheid en wrok te bid,” het hy gesê.

Die pad was nie altyd maklik vir die 55 jaar oue sjef nie. Sy probleme het as jong seun begin, waar hy in ‘n onstabiele omgewing saam met ‘n beledigende pa gebly het. Met konstante spanning in die huis het Steve ‘n stresversteuring ontwikkel, en was hy ‘n erge introvert.

“Ek kon nie met mense kontak maak nie en het basies baie geïsoleerd en eensaam grootgeword,” onthou hy.

Sy ouers het hom en sy twee broers kerk toe geneem, maar hulle het dikwels getrek. So, terwyl Steve in die bestaan van God geglo het, het hy nie ‘n persoonlike verhouding met Hom ontwikkel nie. Dit het ook gevoel asof dit moeilik was om met God te verbind.

Gedurende sy middel tiener jare het Steve alkohol ontdek, en hy het partytjies gebruik as ‘n manier om sy pyn te verdoof. Hy het saam met ‘n groep rondgegaan wat hom nadelig beïnvloed het, maar hy erken, “Vir die eerste keer het ek gevoel asof ek aan iets

behoort.”

Binnkort was alkohol nie genoeg nie. ‘n Vrou met wie hy seksueel betrokke was het dagga aan hom bekend gestel. “Ek was verslaaf!”

Toe later, het dit gelyk asof alles vir Steve beter gegaan het. Soos die tyd verby gegaan het, het hy ‘n hoogs betaalde korporatiewe werk gekry. Toe trou hy en het twee kinders gehad, maar hy was steeds nie gelukkig nie. “Ek was desperaat depressief,” sug hy. “In my soeke na vrede het ek Boeddhisme, meditasie, en kristal genesing probeer, om ‘n paar te noem.”

Toe het Steve die God van sy kinderjare onthou. Desperaat het hy ‘n Christelike pastoor gaan besoek. “Hy het vir my gesê dat ek alles het behalwe vir een ding,” vertel Steve, “Ek het nodig om my hart met God reg te kry.”

Dit het verskeie selfmoordpogings geneem voordat Steve sy hart volledig vir Jesus oopgemaak het. “Ek het ‘n oplossing nodig gehad,” sê hy. “So, in 2015 het ek Jesus in my lewe aanvaar en is gedoop met water.”

Toe Challenge Steve gevra het wat hy in daardie deurslaggewende oomblik gebid het, het hy geantwoord, “Vader God neem my soos ek is, reinig my van my skuld. Ek wy myself aan U. Hernu my gedagtes en maak my weer heel.”

Heraanvaarding van sy vorige kinderlike geloof het nie beteken dat all sy probleme verdwyn het nie. In werklikheid het Steve alles verloor as gevolg van slegte besluite-

sy huis, sy vrou, sy kinders, en sy loopbaan. “Ek moes my lewe oor begin en het op straat gebly.”

Steve het na ‘n Christelike sendingstasie toe gegaan, en vir die volgende drie jaar het hy kerk bygewoon, Bybel kursesse toe gegaan, en die Woord van God bestudeer. “Ek het die Bybel van begin tot einde gelees,” glimlag hy.

Deur God se voorsiening het Steve sy vorige verslawings en angstige denke oorkom en hy is op pad om ‘n volwaardige sjef te word met ‘n graad in kookkuns en ‘n sertifikaat in gasvryheid. “Mense vra vir my hoe is dit dat ek so gelukkig is? My antwoord is: Die Here Jesus Christus.”

Onlangs is Steve se seun vermoor, en al was dit ‘n baie moeilike tyd vir hom en sy familie, sê hy dat Jesus hom nooit verlaat het nie. “Voorheen het ek desperaat gesoek na liefde en aanvaarding van ander. Nou het ek vrede en selfvertroue, wetend dat alles nie deur my eie vermoë is nie, maar deur God s’n.”

Steve is nou al vir die afgelope agt jaar ‘n toegeweide Christen, en al is hy deur baie verdrukkinge en proewe, weet hy hy is veilig in Jesus.

“Jesus is so werklik en Hy is onvoorwaardelik lief,” verkondig hy. “Ek is ‘n soldaat vir Jesus.”

Jesus het sy volgelinge belowe: “Dit sê Ek vir julle, sodat julle vrede kan vind in My. In die wêreld sal julle dit moeilik hê; maar hou moed: Ek het die wêreld klaar oorwin.” (Johannes 16:33)

## English translation

# Life of Loneliness looks up

South African Stephen Cannou was standing in the middle of the road looking down at the body of his murdered son.

Having previously suffered from anxiety and manic depression, Steve felt himself slipping back into that dark place.

But the God he served had other plans.

“The Lord told me to pray against the strongholds of anger, bitterness, and resentment,” he says.

The road has not always been easy for the 55-year-old chef. His troubles started as a young boy in an unstable environment with an abusive father. Because of the constant tension in the house, Steve developed a stress disorder and was severely introverted.

“I failed to connect with people at all and basically grew up isolated and very alone,” he recalls.

His parents took him and his two brothers to church but changed locations often. So, while Steve believed in the existence of God, he did not develop a personal relationship with Him. God also seemed very hard to connect with.

In his mid-teens, Steve discovered alcohol and turned to partying as a way to numb his pain. He fell in with a group of bad influences but he admits, “For the first time I felt like I belonged to something.”

Soon, alcohol alone was not enough. A woman he was sexually involved with introduced him to marijuana. “I was hooked!”

Then, things seemed to look up for Steve. As time passed, he got a high-paying corporate job, got married, and had two children but he was still not happy. “I was desperately depressed,” he sighs. “In my quest for peace I studied Buddhism, meditation, and crystal healing to name a few.”

Then, Steve remembered the God of his childhood. In his desperation, he went to see a Christian pastor. “He said I had everything going for me except one thing,” Steve relates, “I needed to get my heart right with God!”

It took several suicide attempts for Steve to fully open the door of his heart to Jesus. “I needed a solution,” he says. “So, in 2015, I accepted Jesus into my life and was baptized in water.”

When Challenge asked Steve what he prayed in that pivotal moment, he answered, “Father God take me as I am and cleanse me of my guilt. I offer myself to you. Renew my mind and make it whole again.”

Recommitting to his earlier child-like faith did not mean all his troubles went away. In fact, Steve lost everything as a result of some poor decision making – his home, his wife, his children, and his career. “I had to restart my life living on the street.” Steve made his way to a Christian mission station and, for the next three years, he attended church, went to Bible courses, and studied the Word of God. “I read the Bible cover to cover,” he smiles.

Through God’s provision, Steve has overcome his past addictions and anxious thoughts and is on the pathway to becoming a fully-fledged chef with a degree in culinary arts and a certificate in hospitality. “Some people ask me how am I so lucky? My answer is: the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Most recently, Steve’s son was murdered and even though it was a tough time for him and his family, he says that Jesus never left him. “Before I was desperately seeking love and affirmation from others. Now I have peace and confidence knowing everything is not in my own power but in God’s.”

Steve has been a committed Christian for eight years and even though he has walked through many tribulations and trials, he knows he is secure in Jesus.

“Jesus is so real and loves so unconditionally,” he proclaims. “I am a soldier of Christ.”

Jesus promised His followers: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

# WORDS FOR THE HEART

## STUDIES IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Welcome to this Bible Study. Read slowly what I have written. If you have a Bible, look up the reference verses given, and allow the Holy Spirit to minister to your soul through them. – ALAN BAILEY

### John 15:4-21

#### INTRODUCTION

We have been listening to what Jesus told His followers in the last week of His life on earth. He was preparing them for life in His absence. He wanted them to remain faithful and not fall away when things became difficult. In this 15th chapter of John, Jesus likens Himself to a vine and his disciples to branches of the vine. This shows that they were joined with Him in a mysterious way and that His life and strength was being shared with them. If they would learn this and remember it, they would live Christian lives and not lose heart. As we have said in these studies, the truths taught were for us as well, if

we are true believers. Jesus makes that clear a little further on in the book.

**Chapter 15, Verses 4, 5** *“Remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”*

This teaching is very clear. Jesus is pointing out the need these men have to keep close connection with Him. No-one can be independent from Christ and produce good results in their lives. Jesus says bluntly that they can't do a thing about fruitfulness without Him. So we should take note—there will be no lasting result for good in what we do in our own strength. As the nourishment flows into the branches of the vine, so the nourishment Jesus gives flows into the experience of believers. Things like love, joy, peace,

D	I	S	C	U	S	N	U	B	7	5	3	9	1	2	6	4	8	
U	E	C	U	U	6	9	2	7	8	4	5	1	3					
S	I	N	K	H	A	M	M	E	R	8	1	4	3	6	5	9	7	2
K	H	A	M	P	B	S	5	4	9	1	2	8	3	6	7			
L	O	A	L	T	I	R	A	3	6	1	4	7	9	8	2	5		
K	R	T	I	R	A	2	7	8	6	5	3	4	9	1				
U	N	B	I	F	O	C	A	L	4	2	6	8	3	7	1	5	9	
N	L	N	N	B	J	1	3	5	2	9	6	7	8	4				
G	O	A	T	E	O	B	O	E	9	8	7	5	4	1	2	3	6	
F	V	E	I	E														
U	S	A	F	L	A	P	T	O	P									

patience, kindness and goodness should be the result.

**Verse 6** *“If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”*

Apparently, there are those who claim to be branches but are not truly belonging to the vine. Judas is an example. He did not have the life of Christ in him and so produced the wrong kind of fruit. This serves as a warning to be real and not a pretence.

**Verses 7, 8** *“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”*

As we have this relationship with Christ, we have the privilege of prayer and the blessings it brings. We all know that God doesn't simply give us everything we can think of. If we are living close to Him we will only ask for things that are in His will. Christians are to live to God's glory and producing good fruit is the way to do that.

**Verses 9-11** *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”*

It is a mistake to see the Christian life as a list of do's and don'ts. This gives the impression of a harsh and demanding rule. But think of Jesus' love. So great, just as the Father's love for Him. Sure, we are expected to obey the commands, but they are all for our benefit and are laid down in love. The result of following the divine plan is to experience joy. This joy is God's goal for us. Just now we can experience it, but later in heaven in all its fullness.

**Verses 12-14** *“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. No one has greater love than the one who lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”*

Jesus has made clear His love for them. Now they must show their love not only for Him but for each other.



We can imagine that at least some of them had never thought of loving each other. The strongest love will even cause a life to be laid down for another person. We often quote this when remembering those who have given the lives in wartime. But Jesus laid down His life not only for His friends but for enemies as well.

**Verses 15-17** *“I no longer call you servants, because a servant doesn't know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything I have learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.”*

A servant simply does what he is told. But Jesus is saying that their relationship with Him is more than that of servants. They are His friends. He is welcoming them into the inner circle of the Father's love and blessing. On their part, the disciples were to obey, go out and live for their Lord. The Christian church was going to commence through these men so the importance of their calling and charter is of huge importance. The Father is pleased to grant what they ask for as it will be in keeping with God's purposes. He emphasizes love once again. He earlier taught it in John 13:34.

**Verses 18-19** *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”*

We need to realize that the Lord

and his followers were virtually unknown at this time we are looking at. Yet the Lord knew that his message and influence would spread widely and at the same time attract opposition. How true all that turned out to be. The world that Bible often speaks of is the society of unbelievers who are the majority of the population. It is the system that guides human affairs and leaves God out. The people of God are not popular but are hated in many circles. In our day, persecution of the Christian church around the world is like a pandemic. But we are to remember that it hated Jesus first and crucified Him.

**Verses 20, 21** *“Remember the words I spoke to you. ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.”*

John's Gospel goes on to tell of Christ's rejection by Israel and His resurrection from death. The Book of Acts shows how the Gospel spread and the church grew. But alongside this was just what Jesus predicted. The disciples lived and died for the truth. Though many Jews believed, the majority did not and showed their opposition. Later the Romans became even greater persecutors.

#### CONCLUSION

The world around us does not know God. There is an avoidance of Him and times of verbal abuse and actual physical violence. But Christians have lived with this for 2000 years. The challenge comes to every reader this way. Are you prepared to stand for Christ and for the truth no matter what? Do you value the approval of other people more than the approval of God?

We need to face these questions. But note, in these messages we are looking at, Jesus is assuring His men that God looks after them. He will empower them to meet all that confronts and threatens.

## HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

**What?** Salvation is an eternal relationship with God – now on Earth and, after we die, in Heaven.

*The Lord Jesus says: “I tell you the truth. Everyone who believes in Me has eternal life.” John 6:47*

*“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33*

**Who?** Anyone can gain the eternal life offered through Jesus Christ, regardless of how you have previously lived or what you have previously believed.

*God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16*

**Why?** Because sin separates us from a holy God. Sin is all the wrong things we do, say and think, as well as our desire to be our own boss.

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Roman 3:23*

**How?** The Bible says you become a Christian by confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead.

*If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. Romans 10:8b-10*

**Ready to change your life forever?** Here is a prayer you can pray, but you can also use your own words. The words are not as important as the heart attitude – which only God can see.

Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth,

I acknowledge that I am a sinner. Please forgive me for all the ways I have disobeyed and defied You.

Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to live the perfect life I couldn't, and die on the cross for my sins. Thank You that His blood was sufficient to pay my debt to You, and His resurrection proves that there is life beyond death. I accept that His sacrifice is all I need to get right with You – I bring nothing I have done but I give you everything I am. Help me to live for You. Please be my Saviour and my Master. Amen.

#### What now?

1. Tell someone - either a fellow prisoner who is a Christian, or your Prison Chaplain.
2. Ask a friend or family member to bring you a Bible. Ask the Prison Chaplain to sign you up to a correspondence discipleship program.
3. Keep praying. Talk to God anywhere, about anything. He is always listening, and you don't need a formula.
4. Find out if your prison has church services and attend them regularly.

#### AS A NEXT STEP:

I have prayed this prayer.

- Please send me:
- Bible portion
  - Some 'starting off' literature
  - Information on a helpful church

\* Please tick and write clearly \*

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Send to: World Hope Ministries, PO Box 96176, Brixton, 2019

All overseas enquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

### ASTRONOMER

A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. PSALM 19:1-2 NIV

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God's promises are like the stars; the darker the night, the brighter they shine.  
– David Nicholas



# Gareth Angel wrestles with his past

**MAIN PHOTO:** Gareth Angel in the ring, with his trademark slogan on his shirt. **INSET:** Gareth takes every opportunity to display his faith.

A rocky start marked by abuse and anger saw Gareth Thompson homeless and living in a skip bin as a teenager. It's a far cry from his life today as a husband, father, debt-counsellor and pro-wrestler.

In a video on his website, [gministries.co.uk](http://gministries.co.uk), Gareth remembers his parents' divorce and his father leaving when he was six years old. He says his mother became an alcoholic and was aggressive and abusive.

Then his cousin sexually abused him. The police got involved and his cousin was imprisoned but word of the abuse spread at his school and he was bullied about it. He learnt how to fight and was constantly getting into trouble at school.

His glimmer of hope was the Friday nights he stayed with his grandmother, who prayed for him and cared for him.

Finding life miserable at home, Gareth started watching wrestling on television.

"I felt weak, I felt vulnerable, I felt angry," he remembers. "I wanted to be strong and in control and charismatic. For me it was a massive escape."

At 15 his mother threw him out of home and he lived in skip bin for eight weeks before living in a homeless hostel. As the years went on, Gareth got a job and found a place of his own and he met a group of Christians, who invited him to

church. He says he thought he knew what to expect as he had attended Catholic churches in the past but this was different. He sat down at the front and found himself crying as he listened as the church sang worship songs about Jesus's love.

Noticing Gareth's tears, a man approached him after the service a man and offered him an explanation. The man said, "You just felt love for the first time in your life," and he encouraged Gareth to "give church and God a go".

He said he spoke to the friends

who had brought him to church and opened up about his past.

"Church isn't full of perfect people – it's full of broken people," Gareth explains. "I could be vulnerable because no-one's perfect and all they want to do is help and support me and try and bring me some healing."

But there were more challenges to come.

Gareth's grandmother passed away the night of his wedding and a few months later, he discovered his wife had been having an affair and she left him. Unemployed with a load of debt, Gareth felt he had hit rock bottom. He says he was really angry at God and everyone around him.

A man from his church noticed Gareth hadn't been to church for a while and offered to help him get his life back on track. The man worked for Christians Against Poverty (CAP) and helped Gareth deal with his debt. Gareth says he went on a journey of forgiveness by talking to his mum and reconnecting with his dad, but got stuck when it came to the point of his abuser. The man encouraged him to pray about it and give it to God.

Gareth he prayed, "God I really need you to help me deal with this. If you can help me deal with this You've got me and I'm all in."

He continues, "The following day at work I'm serving on the tills and

my abuser walked in the door and joined the queue. I was freaked out. So I thought: okay I've got a couple of choices here. First of all I can make an excuse and avoid him... or God's held up his end of the bargain and I've got to hold up mine. I can make a move and deal with it."

His cousin came down the queue and Gareth served him.

"I held him by his hand and I looked him dead in the eyes and I told him, I forgive you for what you did," he says. "And as I let go of his hand and he walked off a little bit bewildered and a bit shocked by what had just happened. It almost felt like I'd been carrying like 16 Indian elephants on my back and I

was just able to put them down and I felt this massive pressure release. I was like okay God, you've got me."

This was the moment everything changed for Gareth.

"From that point onwards my faith has been an absolute anchor for me and it's driven me to want to see other people find that freedom themselves," he says.

Gareth is now married to Beth and recently welcomed his first child. He works with CAP as a debt counsellor and is a Christian pro-wrestler under the name Gareth Angel.

He runs GT Ministries, which holds wrestling events featuring Gareth's story.



Gareth Angel with the British Wrestling Championship belt he won in 2018.

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