



Dirty cop's change



Anthony Bryant. Credit: YouTube

At one time Anthony Bryant was a decorated police officer. But a series of bad decisions saw him helping run drugs through town and eventually in a jail cell with a 12-year sentence.

In an interview for The 700 Club, Anthony shares that he was raised in the projects of Savannah, Georgia. His parents worked hard to provide for their eight children and took them to church every Sunday.

In high school Anthony worked hard to become successful. But in his senior year, his girlfriend fell pregnant, and the young couple married. He followed in his older brother's footsteps and enlisted in the United States Army.

"I took great pride in that uniform, kept it in pristine condition," Anthony remembers.

During his eight-year tenure in the military, he became shift supervisor, received various awards, commendations and recognition for successful performance of duty and leadership abilities. He was proud to be trusted with highly classified information. After receiving an honorable discharge from the military, he again followed his brother into law enforcement in roles including corrections officer, deputy sheriff, and county/highway patrol officer.

"Failure definitely wasn't an option," he shares. "My focus was my job – going to the next level professionally." But as he continued to achieve success at work, his personal life began to suffer. "I (was) still a good provider but just not a good husband," he admits. "As you build up power, you build up ego. As you build up ego, you build up self-reliance."

He began to have affairs and lead a double life.

Then his older brother approached him with a proposition – to escort some drug runners through town.

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Getting grateful

At Christmas do we focus on giving or getting?

This Christmas, the second Covid Christmas of the world, it could be easy to focus on the negative – maybe it is your first Christmas in prison and you are unsure of how many Christmases you will face behind bars. Maybe you are unable to have visitors. Maybe

you are grieving the loss of a loved one. Maybe you are unwell yourself.

American author Max Lucado says, "The good life begins not when circumstances change but when our attitude toward them does."

If you are counting your blessings and remembering all the good things you do have in your life, it is easier to feel content. Your focus is on the glass half full, instead of the glass half empty.

Pastor Greg Laurie notes: "Studies have actually linked gratitude with a variety of positive effects. Researchers have determined that grateful people demonstrate less envy, materialism and self-centeredness. Gratitude enhances relationships and contributes to longevity and even our quality of sleep.

"If it came in a pill form, gratitude would be a miracle cure. So if we can learn to be thankful for what we already have instead of what we think we need, it could make us happy."

Contentment is not natural

However, that isn't our nature. The Apostle Paul said that he had learned to be content: "Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost

nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little" (Philippians 4:11–12 NLT).

Greg Laurie goes on to say: "Some things have to be taught. For instance, children are not naturally well-mannered. Instead, they are naturally selfish and inconsiderate. So we have to teach children manners.

"If you put a child in a room and give him a toy, he'll be relatively happy. But when you bring in another child with another toy, friction begins. They'll fight over the toy they've determined is the best one. Each child wants what the other has. That's human nature, and we don't necessarily outgrow it.

"So we see that contentment needs to be learned. It doesn't come naturally to us, because we're not naturally content."

How do we learn contentment?

• The first thing to note is that our natural lack of contentment may be an indication, like hunger or thirst, that there is something fundamentally missing in our lives.

Famous Oxford don C.S. Lewis said: "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." The Bible says we were made for heaven and an eternity with God.

In so many of the stories in this paper, people chase happiness and fulfillment through drugs, sex, power

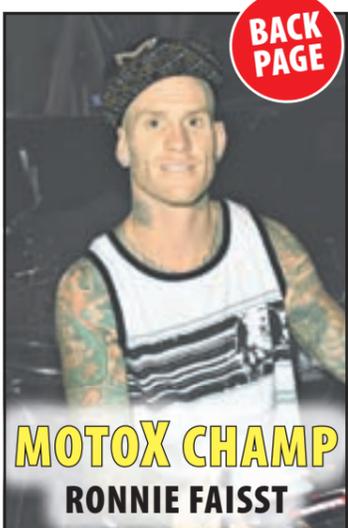
or wealth, only to find that they are left more miserable than they were

before. It is only when they find a relationship with Jesus Christ and have met that very deep longing to be loved and for their lives to mean something, that they find contentment with their circumstances.

Hebrews 13:5 in the Bible says, "Be content with such things as you have. For [God] Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" Once we are in relationship with Father God we can have the security to know that He is always with us and that He has promised to supply our needs. We don't have to be afraid anymore and we don't have to rely only on our own inadequate strength or ability to sustain us.



My face reminds me where I came from
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MICHAEL OCHOTORENA



MOTOX CHAMP
RONNIE FAISST

BACK PAGE

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One of the keys to contentment is to give generously.

Getting grateful

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Being in a relationship with God also opens our eyes to the good and beautiful around us, so that it is easier to be grateful. We appreciate things that we never noticed before, like sunsets, close calls and last minute provisions. Suddenly our circumstances are no longer random but ordered by Providence and life events take on a new significance. Knowing God and believing He promises us a life hereafter, also gives us perspective. This world is not all there is and we don't have to try

to cram all the good things into 70+ years. If we have to endure poverty or sickness now, we have all eternity to enjoy mansions and healthy bodies.

Hymn writer Fanny Crosby, who was born blind, famously said: "If I had a choice, I would still choose to remain blind ... for when I die, the first face I will ever see will be the face of my blessed Savior."

• **The second key to contentment, is to be careful who you compare yourself to.**

It is easier to be grateful and content when you remember that even having a full tummy and a bed to sleep in at night is more than what many people in the world enjoy.

GENEROUS PEOPLE ARE HAPPIER, MORE CONTENTED PEOPLE



• **The third key to contentment is to give.** Generous people are happier, more contented people. It was Jesus Himself who said that is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:5).

When we are focusing on the needs of others and helping them, then we have less time and inclination to worry about stuff we don't have. We feel a sense of purpose and usefulness that motivates us, and we are reminded continually that there are those who are worse off than ourselves.

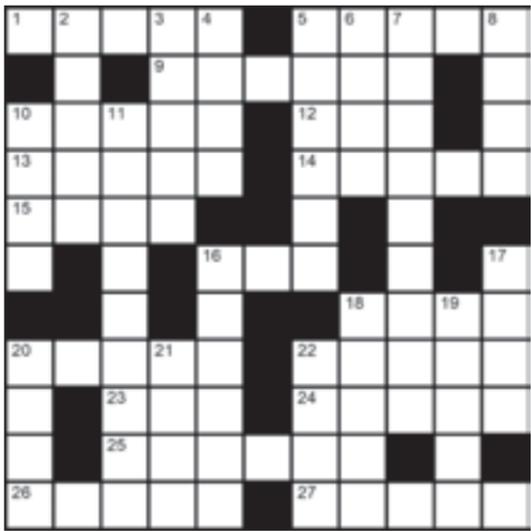
So this Christmas, instead of getting depressed or angry at the things you lack, get grateful by turning your life over to Jesus and focusing on all the good people, opportunities and circumstances in your life.

And may 2022 bring you many more!

Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

ACROSS

- 1 Trainee
- 5 Loud car feature
- 9 Quickly assembled building
- 10 Collectible
- 12 Hoover's agency
- 13 Put up, as a statue
- 14 Speck of land in a river
- 15 Meadows
- 16 Place for fitness buffs
- 18 Nip with your teeth
- 20 Tooth edges
- 22 Say "hi"
- 23 Restaurant gratuity
- 24 Airplane's walkway
- 25 Cold old time (3,3)
- 26 Person from around here



- 27 A shaft from a bow
- 4 Quick jogging pace
- 10 Jailroom
- 19 Phone company
- 5 Certify as true
- 11 Sensible, practical
- 20 Hip, groovy
- 6 Chem class rooms
- 16 Religious music
- 21 12-point type size
- 2 Blue of the sky
- 7 Skills
- 17 Local fair
- 22 Infatuated, doting
- 3 Long stories
- 8 Dewy fog
- 18 Bramble

SOLUTIONS PAGE 7



"I hope none of you are feeling stress about this test. It's only 50% of your grade, 60% of your future and 100% of your self-esteem."

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Dirty cop's change

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"I looked up to him and felt a type of allegiance towards him to say, 'Okay I'll do it,'" Anthony explains.

He wasn't concerned with getting caught as he had developed a 'Superman complex' – in his mind he was untouchable.

But it turns out, he wasn't. He and his brother were caught in a sting operation by federal investigators.

Anthony admitted to attempting to aid and abet the distribution of cocaine.

"(It was) very humiliating," he admits. "It was indescribable to go from one extreme to the next extreme. It was the beginning of the fall for me."

While he was awaiting his sentencing, Anthony made a bargain with God.

He would return to the faith he was raised in and give his life to Jesus Christ on the condition he was spared from jail.

"Okay God, I gave my life to you – now don't allow me to go to prison," he recalls praying.

But two months later he found himself in prison with a 12-year-sentence. Again he cried out to God: "You did not hear anything I said! My kids are gonna grow up without their dad."

When his wife filed for divorce, Anthony hit rock bottom. He saw suicide as his only way out and began hoarding pills from the infirmary and other inmates.

"I was just gonna take them all and just go to sleep and never wake up again – that was my plan," he shares.

"I heard this voice that said, 'Look under the mattress.' I pulled up the mattress and I saw this Bible."

As he began reading he realized it wasn't all about him.

"I said, 'God I've tried it my way and I failed,' and I flushed all those pills down the toilet."

This time Anthony made the decision to give his life to Christ – on God's terms, not his. He turned his focus onto doing what God wanted him to do while he was in prison. He studied the Bible, led prayer groups and shared his story with other inmates.

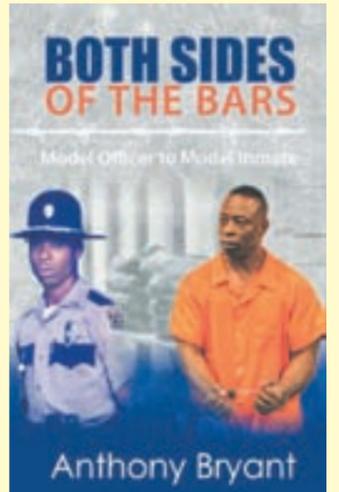
He was released in 2008 with a new mission for sharing the lessons he learned on both sides of the bars.

He serves his community by teaching ethics and responsibility classes to law enforcement agencies, universities, and corporations.

He also speaks at schools, youth events and parent groups about peer pressure and making right choices and volunteers at a youth detention center and a homeless shelter.

He has written a book called *Both Sides of the Bars*.

"That moment when I gave my life to God was a true transformation," Anthony explains. "God began to work in my life even then. God has now placed me on even a higher platform but the difference is with Him I know how to exercise humility. God has definitely done a mighty work in my life and I'm grateful."



Anthony Bryant now teaches ethics and responsibility classes.

How Johnny Cash spent his Christmas

BY GREG LAURIE



Johnny Cash

IN 2019, I wrote a spiritual biography about Johnny Cash. I was just thinking of one instance in Johnny's life that especially reminds me of Christmas.

Johnny had just finished a super-intense detoxification from the pills that had controlled him for so long. His daughters had come for their first visit to his new, beautiful home. It was winter and as his daughters slept warmly in their beds,

the house was quiet. He looked out the window at the pristine scene of snow gently falling on a white wonderland.

It was like the picture on a Christmas card, and the peace that he saw outside perfectly matched the peace he was feeling inside. For the moment, things were going right in his life, and a powerful sense of tranquility permeated everything.

He knelt on his knees and thanked God for the good he was experiencing.

He was tasting the abundant life that Jesus promised to those that follow Him, and he was grateful.

For the believer, not only do we have the promise of life after we die, we get to experience life during life.

I don't know what's going on in your life at the moment. It may or may not be a peaceful Christmas Eve with drifts of snow and children asleep in their beds "with visions of sugarplums dancing in their heads."

But I can tell you this: Jesus offers life. True life.

Abundant life. Everlasting life.

That's why He came as a baby so many years ago.

This Christmas, I encourage you to get on your knees, like Johnny Cash did, and thank God for His gift of life.



Jennifer Smith. Credit: YouTube.

JOY IN A PRISON CELL

Jennifer Smith was 11 years old when she was introduced to drugs and by 22 she found herself in prison. Looking back now, however, she says going to prison was the best thing that could have happened to her. She shared her story in a Revive Our Hearts YouTube video, explaining how people's words had impacted her throughout her life, from the moment she was born.

Ultrasound sonographers told her parents they were expecting a baby boy. They had picked out a name for their son but they were surprised – and disappointed – when the baby turned out to be a girl.

"They said one little sentence to me in teasing throughout my childhood, and it was, 'You were a mistake, God was supposed to give us a boy,'" Jennifer shares. "Those words created insecurity within me. They created anger within me and they created doubts."

She attended church with her grandmother, but she had begun to believe that God made mistakes – and she was one of them. She didn't want to have anything to do with Him. Then she was sexually molested by a church Sunday school teacher. The abuse continued for four years.

"So now I had this heart that is very angry, very cold and very bitter toward anything that has to do with the Lord," Jennifer explains.

At 11 years old she was introduced to drugs and was told they would make her feel better.

"I wanted to feel something different than what I had felt to that point in my life. So I tried it and it made me feel better temporarily, but when it wore off the next morning, the same misery was there, the same emptiness, the same despair. And so I began a lifestyle of drug use,

and everything that goes with that lifestyle – relationships that were not healthy, living life on the streets, leaving home at 15 years old, disrespecting, and not valuing anyone that spoke any kind of guidance into my life. I found myself just in a cycle that I could not get out of."

Jennifer was arrested several times for drug possession, attended three different rehabs, and became a felon before she was 18. At 22 Jennifer was sentenced for 12 years to the Arkansas Department of Corrections for drugs and robbery. It wasn't long before she discovered a group of women within the prison whose lives looked different to the

other inmates. They were a part of a faith-based program where prisoners could live in a barrack and study the Bible together.

"I started making fun of them like everybody else did," Jennifer admits. "But secretly I was watching them. Secretly I was observing the joy that they had in the midst of prison and that haunted me because I had never experienced that. I didn't understand how some of these ladies could have this joy in the midst of doing a life sentence and never going to be able to walk outdoors."

After about a year, Jennifer decided to sign up for the program.

"If you can't beat them, join them right?" Jennifer says with a grin. "I began to hear things I'd never heard in my entire life. I heard a Gospel that said that it wasn't anything that I could do – I couldn't clean myself up enough in order to be accepted by the Savior. I heard about a Savior who knew no sin at all yet He became sin so that I could be made in His righteousness. I heard about a Savior who died a criminal's death – my death. And the wrath of God for my

sins was placed upon Him that day. He bore my sin and He paid that debt and all I had to do was accept what He had done and believe and trust that the work that He did on the cross was enough to free me from a lifetime of bondage of sin and the blood was enough to cleanse me and to forgive me."

Jennifer remembers crying out to God in her cell and asking Him to forgive her sins.

"Now I had a new life in Christ and His Spirit resided within me [but] I still had the memory of who I was. I still had the memory of what I had done. And that's why His Word (the Bible) is so precious, because it's the very thing that He says will renew our minds and bring transformation in our life, which I've so desperately needed and still need today."

Jennifer learned about the importance of forgiving those who had hurt her. "I had to take responsibility," she shares. "I could not excuse and justify the decisions I'd made in life because of the way I'd been talked to or because I'd been taken advantage of and sinned against greatly. I could not use that anymore as an entitlement to continue to make bad decisions. After [receiving] forgiveness, now I had to forgive. And that was a challenge, but I needed the Gospel, I needed the grace of God, to be able to do that. Even today when I get offended, I have to forgive. Because I don't want to be bound in a prison of unforgiveness."

Jennifer says going to prison was the best thing that could have happened to her.

"It's there I met Christ. It's there the Gospel transformed my life and it's there that I've learned how to live a life free in Christ, full in Christ and fruitful in Christ."

After being released from prison, Jennifer returned as a chaplain for the women in the same unit she was incarcerated in.

I HAD THIS HEART THAT [WAS] VERY ANGRY, VERY COLD



Forgiveness is needed every day

BY GREG LAURIE

FORGIVENESS is a unique thought in the times in which we live. In our uptight culture of road rage, cyberbullying, and frivolous lawsuits, we prize revenge as a virtue. I don't remember when I last saw a movie celebrating forgiveness. Payback is the story our culture likes to see.

We've all been hurt by someone. We've all been taken advantage of. We've all been insulted. We've all had people wish us ill. In the book of Genesis in the Bible, Joseph faced all those things and was able to extend forgiveness.

Joseph shows us a better way. In Joseph's story, we learn how to overcome adversity, how to face envy from others, how to resist sexual temptation, and how to lay hold of and have faith in the promises of God.

The most significant lesson in the life of Joseph, however, is how to forgive those who have hurt us. There isn't a better example of forgiveness in the Bible than Jesus, but apart from our Lord, Joseph shows forgiveness on an epic level.

Joseph was able to say to his brothers who had sold him into slavery years earlier, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good" (Genesis 50:20). In other words, "It was not you who sent me here but God."

PAYBACK IS THE STORY OUR CULTURE LIKES TO SEE



The theme of Joseph's life could be summed up in Romans 8:28: "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them."

Whatever happened in Joseph's life, God used it for His glory.

We may not have full resolution on some things until we get to Heaven and God

explains it. Or maybe just seeing His face will explain it all. Whatever it is, it ultimately will work together for good.

We also need forgiveness every day because we sin every day. Maybe you're thinking, "I don't know that I really sinned today."

Well, can you think of a single impure thought you had? Did you lose your temper even once? The Bible tells us, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

The passage goes on to say, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (verse 9).

In what we often call the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us" (Luke 11:3-4).

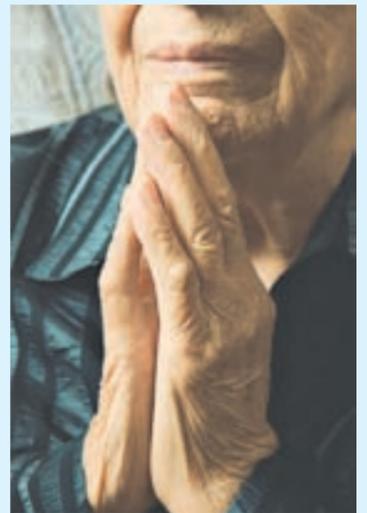
Jesus was saying that we not only should pray for our daily bread, but we should be praying for and extending forgiveness every day. God wants us to forgive others.

Maybe someone has hurt you, and you're thinking, "This person did something so horrible that I can't forgive them. Ever?"

I like what C. S. Lewis said about this: "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive." It's a great concept until it's time for us to forgive someone who we think doesn't deserve it.

So, let's just concede that point and say they don't deserve it. But hold on. Do you deserve forgiveness? You don't, yet God gave it to you. So why would you not extend it to another person as well? The Bible says, "Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32).

God wants us to ask for forgiveness – and extend it to others as well.



Remember:

American writer Frederick Buechner said: "A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's **nothing** you have to do. There's nothing **you** have to do. There's nothing you have to **do**" (his italics).

However, he adds: "There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it."

Buechner is right. There is a divine-human partnership at the heart of the Christian life. God offers grace, but like any other gift, we must receive it to experience it. God offers forgiveness, but we must ask for it (1 John 1:9). God offers His perfect will, but we must choose to follow it (Romans 12:2). •

About Crossroads

The Crossroads Prison Ministries mentorship program connects you with mentors who help you study the Bible.

Mentors write to you, answer your questions, share stories from their own lives, help you see how God is speaking to you through His Word and encourage you to continue to grow in your faith.

Through the mentorship program, Crossroads offers more than one dozen different correspondence Bible study courses that each contain up to 14 lessons.

Each course is designed to help you learn more about God and how to follow Him.

If you are interested in joining the program, please fill out the attached application form and mail it to us today!

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First Last

ID #: _____

Date of Birth: _____ Earliest Release Date: _____
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Gender: _____ Complete Mailing Address: _____

Referred by: CHAL Institution Housing

Prefiero el curso en español. Street or PO Box

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STUDENT COMMITMENT

I will finish each lesson I receive in a timely manner and, with the help of my mentors, I will complete each course that I start. I agree that Crossroads may use anything I submit, such as my picture, testimony, writings or artwork, for promotional purposes or to further its mission.

Student Signature _____ Date _____

When you have completed this form, please return it to:
 Crossroads Prison Ministries | PO Box 900 | Grand Rapids, MI 49509-0900
 Crossroads Prison Ministries Canada | PO Box 5037 | Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8

College to prison to freedom

At 19 years old, Louis Dooley should have had his whole life ahead of him. But instead, he was sentenced to prison for life plus 100 years. He didn't even know what that meant at the time, just that he was never getting out of prison. But it turned out there was a different plan for Louis' life.

Sharing his story with the National School Project's Meant for More event, Louis said as a child he was bullied by children in his neighborhood. But it was no better at home.

"My father was a physically abusive person," he shares. "He was an alcoholic, a drug user, a drug dealer, a woman beater and a child beater."

Louis' mother advised him that if he wanted to make it in life, he had to go to school and get good grades so he could go to college, get a good job and have a nice family and a nice house.

Louis knew that was what he wanted, so he worked hard to achieve it. All that changed in his sophomore year.

"I came home from school and my mother was crying. I said, 'What's up?' She said, 'Your father has just been murdered in a drug deal gone wrong.'"

Louis was devastated. Although he didn't have a relationship with his father, he had desperately wanted one. He felt robbed of what he could have had with his father.

"The hurt that I had inside me turned to anger and that anger turned to rage. I didn't really know how to cope with that as a 15-year-old. I felt in some weird way that if I became like him it would make me close to him."

Louis' friends had offered him drugs and he had been curious about it but fear of his father finding out had stopped him from experimenting. So after his father died he decided to try it.

"By my junior year, I was selling weed but by the end I couldn't sell weed anymore because I was smoking it all up. By my senior year I graduated from selling weed to selling crack."

He was making a lot of money dealing drugs and exchanged his dream of going to college for a dream of becoming a drug kingpin.

"I started robbing gun shops to protect myself and that led me on a whole path of doing drive-by shootings and all sorts of crazy things."

Louis' crimes caught up to him and he was arrested. He was found guilty of attempted murder and first degree armed robbery.

After his sentencing, he was taken to a dorm room. He found an empty bunk, where he sat down and reflected on his life. Another inmate gave him a cardboard box full of clothes and snacks.

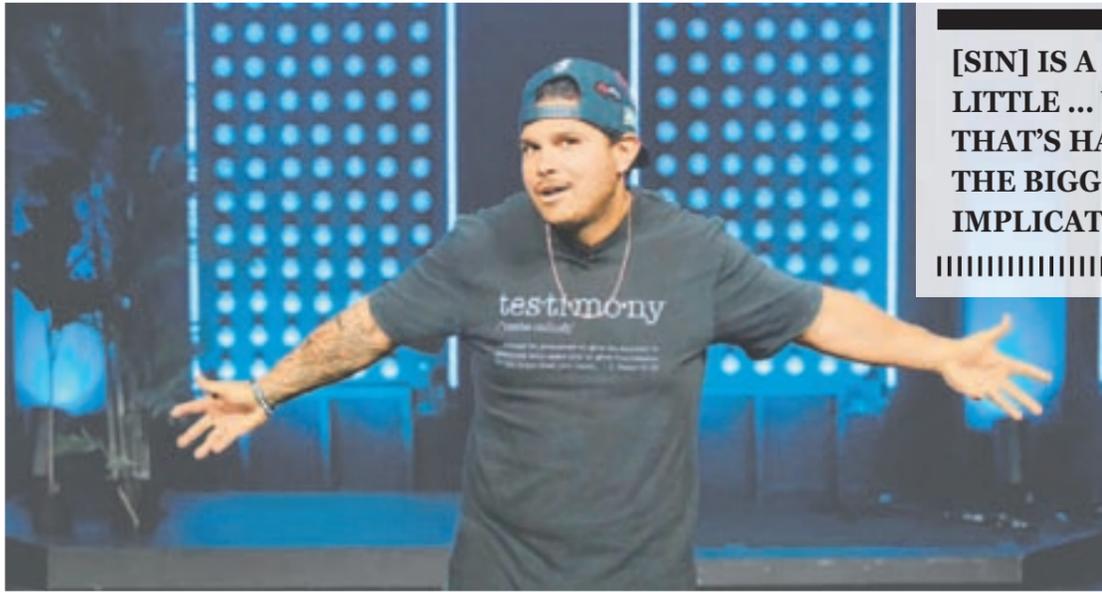
"My first thought was, 'I've got to kill this dude. He's giving me something and if I take it he's gonna come back later and tell me I owe him a million dollars.'"

Louis went to the man's cell and was surprised to see him having a Bible study with two other inmates.

"I wasn't expecting that and he continued to read," Louis explains. "At one point he stopped and he looked at me and he said 'Do you believe in God?' I said, 'No man, I don't believe in God, I believe in evolution.' That was just something I picked up in my local public high school. So he handed me this little pamphlet."

Louis took the pamphlet and left. That night he was afraid to go to sleep, worried someone might try to hurt him in the night.

He wished he had a gun so he could



Although he once dreamed of attending college and becoming a lawyer, Louis Dooley became a drug kingpin. Credit: YouTube.

take his own life — preferring that to spending life and 100 years in prison.

Unable to sleep, he opened the pamphlet and read. It explained the Gospel — the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Most of the concepts were brand new to Louis.

"I had never heard the word 'sin' before," he says. "It's a little three-letter word that's had the biggest

implications this world has ever known. It simply means disobeying God."

The pamphlet quoted Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" and Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ."

"I had never heard of Jesus before," Louis admits.

The pamphlet explained that Jesus was born to a virgin, Mary, lived His life as a perfect human being and gave His life to pay for everybody's sins.

"He loved us so much that He gave His life so that we could have a life. My life sentence didn't start in the courtroom, it started when I was born. You have a life sentence. You have an eternity that you will go to

[SIN] IS A LITTLE ... WORD THAT'S HAD THE BIGGEST IMPLICATIONS

one day. It's either a place of bliss called heaven or a place of torment called hell ... I decided to put my faith and trust in Christ."

The next day, the Christian inmates gave Louis a Bible and taught him how to pray.

Then he went to prison. "I said, 'God I'm here now for the rest of my life. What are you gonna do with me? What can you make of this mess that I've made?' About six months later I got two more life sentences because one of those gunshot robberies caught up with me."

But that didn't matter to Louis — he knew he had sinned and was living out his consequences.

"(God) gave me a mission to proclaim His Word right where I was at — to represent Him right where I was at and that's what I did."

Miraculously, after 15-and-a-half years, Louis was released from prison.

He did not share details of exactly why he was released.

"I didn't have a judge or a bunch of money or the prosecutor help or clemency or a pardon or anything from the president. They just let me go ... God does the unexpected." •

Drug pusher turns pastor

A former drug addict who was incarcerated, Pastor Juan Martinez, shares how the popular children's story, *The Wizard of Oz*, represents his journey to salvation.

Juan Martinez needed to be the best at everything he did. And if he was going to be a drug pusher then he was going to be the best drug pusher ever.

The boy from New Jersey, who grew up poor and came from a broken family, set his sights on becoming a main distributor in his hometown, then neighboring New York City and then the rest of the US. He was 14 when he began selling drugs.

Juan's strategy was as cold as it was cunning — he targeted families, beginning with the fathers. He would befriend them, become drinking buddies, go over to their homes and eventually ask them if they wanted to get high.

"Once I got the guy high, it was easy because now I'm invited into his home," Juan reveals.

Once he got both husband and wife hooked, he became their dealer and moved on to the next victim.

"Everywhere I went I destroyed homes, business owners, lawyers, dentists and I thought I did it best," Juan confesses.

"I felt that I was finally proving myself to everyone. It was this weird world, this prideful, weird world that made me feel like, 'yeah, I'm accomplishing something in life.'"

It was a twisted sense of success, but Juan didn't really care. As long as the money kept coming in, as long as he stayed high, he didn't bother about much else.

"I didn't think that the things I was doing were bad," he admits.

"If you don't think you're doing anything

wrong, you just begin to chase after something that really will never satisfy you. But you chase after it anyway."

Until one day Juan heard a voice, a voice he didn't recognize.

This voice said: "Why are you killing, stealing and destroying the very lives I'm giving people?"

The question struck the hardened drug dealer like a lightning bolt.

"For the first time in my life I felt horrible," he remembers. "I'm just weeping and crying; right?"

"I still went and made my deliveries but there was a thought every time I handed it to somebody, you know? I would hand it to a woman and

I was thinking, 'man, I'm ruining her life.' I would hand it to a guy, 'man, I'm ruining his life.'"

Juan, who had attended church as a child, believed he had heard from God. It was a dramatic turning point and sparked the desire to change, only he didn't know how.

A short time later, Juan was arrested for meth possession and landed in jail with a 25-year sentence. He was only in his 20s.

This was his rock bottom moment.

"I had nowhere else to go," he acknowledges. "I was at a place where I didn't have anybody."

As it turns out, he did have someone — a cellmate who encouraged him to pray and read the Bible, which he did. It made Juan weep.

"I got on my knees and confessed everything I'd done," he shares. "I was praying and thinking about the things that I have done in my life. I was like, 'I'm sorry, God. I want you in my life. I want this Jesus. I want this.'"

Juan surrendered his life to Christ and miraculously lost all desire for drugs. "I didn't feel like



Juan Martinez with his wife Ruthy.

I had to prove anything anymore," he says with relief. "I felt like I was accepted and felt this love. I was never the same again."

His sentence was reduced, and he spent his time in prison growing in his faith. Today Juan is married and has a family.

As the pastor of a church in Texas, he goes back to the very neighborhoods he dealt drugs in and shares the story of Jesus.

Juan says, "Jesus filled every void. When I didn't have a father, He was my father. Whatever has you running on empty, you can fill it with Jesus. Jesus wants to give you life."

He has written a book called *Beyond the Yellow Brick Road: Unlocking the Promises of God*, in which he retraces his journey from drug lord to servant of the Lord.

The title comes from the childhood tale *The Wizard of Oz*. In the book, the yellow brick road was the way home for anyone who was lost. Juan says to him it represents the Word of God and the importance of keeping close to the paths God has laid out in the Bible.

"I was a sower of death, and before my radical transformation for Christ, my joy came through stealing, killing, and destroying," he writes. "However, by God's grace (undeserved kindness of God), He planted in me a deep, burning passion to sow life where death once prevailed." •

My face reminds me where I came from

Michael Ochotorena was only in his mid-thirties when he had two heart attacks – something he blames on his addiction to heroin.

“I had become someone I thought I would like but in fact I hated myself,” he says in an interview with Ryan Riffle for the Faith Counts YouTube channel. “My body couldn’t handle everything I was putting it through.”

Most people would look at the 43-year-old, his head and face covered in tattoos, and cross to the other side of the street. Michael does not let this bother him though.

“If you see my face, it’s a reminder of where I came from,” he says unashamedly.

Michael was of middle-school age when he took drugs for the first time.

“I never had a father in my life, he left when I was young,” he explains.

“I had a lot of resentment so I turned to the gang life. I thought I would become someone bigger than who I was.”

He became a drug addict and an alcoholic, and developed serious health problems, such as stage 2 cirrhosis of the liver. He hurt people and stole from his family to fuel his drug habit but felt no remorse at the time.

“I got busted for selling drugs and did time in prison,” he admits, but instead of learning from past mistakes, he just ‘became a better criminal.’

Unbeknownst to Michael, his mother was praying for him. “She had faith that I was going to come through,” he says. “As a kid, I used to go to church. I had a religious upbringing but it wasn’t very consistent. I had heard the manger stories (the Christmas story of Jesus’ birth) but nothing else.”

The turning point came when Michael passed out after overdosing on drugs and his gang ‘friends’ left him to die.

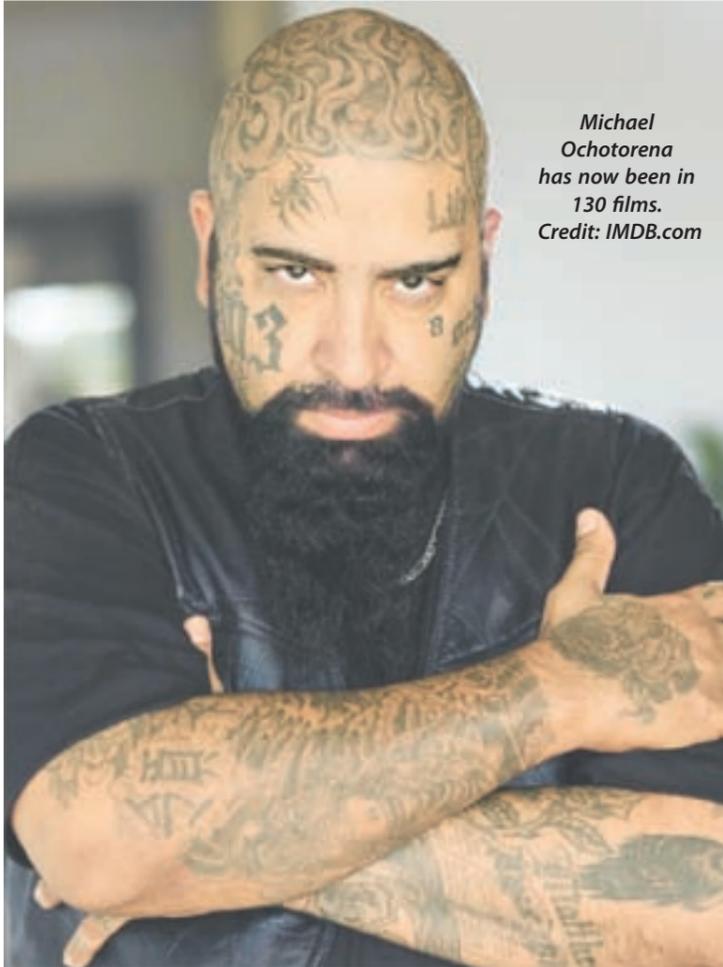
Miraculously, he was found and survived, but he was filled with doubts.

“You think they’re your buddies but they’re not,”

he states. “I started having regrets. Life got dull and boring. It was hollow. I didn’t want to end up like my father – partying and drinking until my 60s.”

Then Michael met the woman who would become his wife – a Christian who encouraged him to go to church. Although reluctant, he wanted to impress her so he went.

“You could really just feel the power of God and His love in that room,” he remembers. “It was like God knocked me in the face. I’d



Michael Ochotorena has now been in 130 films. Credit: IMDB.com

never really experienced love or joy or peace and when I found out there was a God who was forgiving, it was a game changer. I’d never heard anything like it before.”

Michael attended all the Bible studies and mid-week services but wondered – “how could God love someone like me with all the stuff I’d done? How can someone like me be forgiven?” Then he realized, “God is a God of second chances. All you need to do is get down on your knees and ask for His forgiveness.”

Now Michael knows real joy. “When I’m filled with the Holy Spirit (the invisible presence of God) it’s better than any drug I did in my life. Every time I wake up and every time I go to bed, I’m filled with the love and power of Jesus Christ.”

Breaking away from his old sinful life was challenging.

“I stopped hanging around people who would influence me. It was hard but whenever I’m tempted to go back, I think of all the things I would lose. It’s just not worth it. I pray to God for strength and He gives it to me. He comforted me and gave me what I thought I was missing in life.”

Michael’s relationships with his

family and with God have gone from strength to strength. He reads his Bible and prays all the time.

“This is what faith means to me, this is what the love of God means to me,” he smiles.

Michael’s pastor encouraged him to pursue prison ministry so he could talk to other gang members about the love of Jesus Christ. “I went around the country talking about redemption. Those people, they can see an out now, they can see that God can change anybody.”

Later, Michael got the opportunity to act in Christian films – something he embraces with great enthusiasm: “I’m being used by God to touch others. Hopefully I get to win souls for Christ. I’m a fisher of men,” he says, referencing a well-known Bible verse. In Matthew 4:19, Jesus says to His disciples: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

Today, Michael has acted in over 130 films. One of his most popular roles is John Light, a story about one of the most dangerous inmates in Arizona who accepted Christ and became a new person.

Michael, who is now married and a father, encourages people who are unsure about taking that important step of faith: “What God offers you is freedom and love and I would choose love every day over fear.” ●



Dave Hillier. Credit: Prison Fellowship Australia magazine

Rescued after 30 yrs of drugs

After 30 years of drug abuse, crime and prison sentences, David Hillier decided it was finally time to zip his lips and listen for a change.

He had tried to live on his own terms but all that got him was one prison term after another. By his own reckoning he had been locked up in half the prisons in Western Australia and the sinking feeling that he “would never amount to anything” weighed heavily on him.

“My best thinking on how to do life had landed me in prison time and again,” he says. “But maybe I was the problem, not the world around me. So I thought that if I could shut up and listen for once in my life, maybe then there would be hope for me.”

The odds were stacked against David from the start. He grew up with three different dads, 12 siblings he says he never really knew and a mother who was an alcoholic. Violence, he adds, was never far away.

He robbed his first house when he was eight, took his first drug when he was 13 and was shooting up by the time he was 16. Attempts to come off drugs for good were unsuccessful.

“I had moments of hope,” he shares. “I could get clean, but could not stay clean; I could get a job, but I could not hold a job; I could get a girl, but the drugs and lifestyle always destroyed my relationships. Nothing ever lasted.” While in prison in 2008, he was introduced to Prison Fellowship Australia, a Christian ministry group that runs Bible-based programs for prisoners, but it wasn’t until 2014, when he was sent yet again to jail, that he began to take its message seriously.

“It was in 2014 that I really tried to find out if this Jesus character was real,” he acknowledges. “I wanted to seek the truth, as my whole life was one great big lie.”

“I attended the sessions to the best of my ability with an open mind and for once tried to take my ego and pride out of the picture.”

It was during this time that he decided to break his addiction to methadone, and spent the many sleepless nights that followed reading the Bible in his cell, praying and reflecting on his life. He recalls he “continually asked God to show me if He was really there and if He really loved me – and He showed up when I least expected it.”

“Words cannot express what happened that day at 4pm, in a prison yard. It was real and it was powerful, that is all I know. That is all I need to know.”

Dave’s days are now spent helping others. He has completed a year of studying counselling and community services and puts his new skills to work at an outreach center in Perth, where he connects with people from all walks of life, including ex-prisoners.

“The feeling of forgiveness and love that came over me I hold onto till this day, six years later,” he says gratefully. “Knowing the grace and love of God through his son Jesus has kept me from ever going back to prison and I don’t drink or do drugs anymore. ‘I forgive you’ were the words I had always wanted to hear; it took a prison yard to hear them. Muhammed Ali once said, ‘If you’re 40 and think like a 20-year-old, you have wasted half your life.’ It took a real man, Jesus Christ, to show me how to live and take responsibility for my life. I mean if I was going to spend my whole life trying to be one of the boys, then that is what I would always be: a boy. I mean, Jesus Himself said, ‘When the blind lead the blind, both end up in a ditch.’ Well, in our case, prison.”

“Through Prison Fellowship and other servants of Christ who have guided me since leaving prison, I have now found the purpose, hope and love I was always seeking. All I had to do was swallow the pride that was not serving me anyway,” Dave concludes. ●

Finding God on the bathroom floor

AMERICA’S *Got Talent* singer Jane Marczewski (Nightbirde), who is fighting a third bout of cancer, and whose husband left her when she relapsed, knows what it is to cling to God in difficult times.

“It’s important that everyone knows that I’m so much more than the bad things that happen to me,” she said smiling. “I have a 2% chance of survival, but 2% is not 0%. You can’t wait until life isn’t hard anymore before you decide to be happy.”

“I am God’s downstairs neighbor banging on the ceiling with a broomstick,” she says. “I show up at His door everyday, sometimes with songs, sometimes with curses, apologies, gifts, questions, demands. Sometimes I use my key under the mat to let myself in. Other times I sulk

outside until He opens the door to me Himself.

“I’ve called God a cheat and a liar and I meant it. I’ve told Him I wanted to die, and I meant it. Tears have become the only prayers I know... night and day, sunrise and sunset. Call me bitter if you want to; that’s fair. Count me among the angry, the cynical, the offended, the hardened. But count me also among the friends of God, for I have seen Him in rare form. I have felt His exhale, laid in His shadow, squinted to read the message He wrote for me in the grout.

“And I learn a new prayer: ‘Thank You.’ It’s a prayer that I don’t mean yet but will repeat until I do.”

Jane concludes: “I’ve heard it said that some people don’t see God because they won’t look low enough, and it’s true. Look lower. God is on the bathroom floor.” ●

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 13:18-38

INTRODUCTION

WE have been looking at events in the last week of Jesus' life on earth. He is giving His disciples instruction and encouragement, preparing them for the time when He has gone away. The plot against His life is closing in and Jesus is aware of it. There are lessons here for all of us to learn.

Verses 17-19 *Once you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfil the Scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.' I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am He.*

Jesus knew who would betray Him and He quotes a Psalm (41:9) which predicts that a close associate would do this treacherous act. The disciples would soon see the fulfilment of what Jesus said beforehand, and this would confirm their belief in Him as the Son of God.



The Last Supper painted by Jan Erasmus Quellinus (1634-1715). Judas is on the right leaving the supper.

Verses 20-22 *I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me. After He had said this, Jesus was deeply troubled and testified, "I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me." His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them He meant.*

The first part of this statement may refer to the disciples coming ministry as messengers sent out with the Gospel. Then Jesus announces that His betrayer is one of the 12. We can imagine the scene. There is shock and wonder. Who could possibly do

such a thing? Betraying their Master was an unthinkable thing.

Verses 23-26 *One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to Him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask Him which one He means." Leaning back against Jesus, he asked Him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered it is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon.*

"The disciple whom Jesus loved" was John, the writer of this Gospel. He refers to himself this way a number of times. There must have been a reason for this. Jesus gives a straightforward answer to the question and Judas is pointed out. (The bread was dipped into a dish of herbs as was their custom. So it was an act of courtesy.)

Verses 27-30 *As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him, but no-one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.*

It is clear that Judas had decided to betray the Lord before this. So his attitude was formed and Satan took advantage of it. We see from this that Satan had the desire to destroy Jesus if he could. Jesus, in a sense, sends Judas on his way to bring about the betrayal. Why the disciples didn't see this we don't know. Instead, they thought he was doing something that he was expected to do as the treasurer of the group.

The Feast referred to was the Passover. The words "It was night" have been seen as a fitting description of the soul of the

betrayer.

Just why Judas would do this has been much discussed over the years. Some say he was angry that Jesus was not going to bring about the overthrow of the Roman occupation. Others have said that he showed a love for money that gripped him so strongly that he couldn't resist the opportunity for financial gain. Whatever the reason, his choice was perverse and we cannot offer him sympathy.

Verses 31-33 *When he was gone Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in Him. If God is glorified in Him, then God will glorify the Son in Himself, and will glorify Him at once. My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: where I am going, you cannot come.*

We have seen that the title "Son of Man" applies to Jesus. Notice that He is faced with betrayal and an agonizing death, yet He is able to speak now about glorification. This is all a part of God's great plan. Jesus will be brought low, even to the death of the cross, yet in it, through it, and after it, the glory of God is revealed. Of course, where He is going is back to the Father. A way will be made for the disciples and other believers to enter the Father's presence in due time.

Verses 34, 35 *"A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."*

As we read the record of Christ's life in the Gospels, we can see that He had love for people and despite their failings, the Lord loved His followers. He now places this as a command to be obeyed. There had been rivalry and argument at different times among the 12 but now they are

called to follow their Lord and learn to love. This remains as a mark of true Christianity. There is no other way of life that promotes love like this.

Verses 36-38 *Simon Peter asked Him, "Lord where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."*

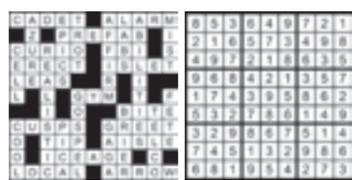
Peter was inclined to rush in without thinking enough about his words. He couldn't see that Jesus was talking about going to the Father, so surely he would go with Jesus to any place.

As always, the Lord knew his men so well, He knew what they were about to do. Not only was Peter going to fail in his loyalty and deny knowing Jesus, but the others were about to run away when the arrest of Jesus occurred. John was an exception.

CONCLUSION

Our readings show clearly the strength of the resolve of the Lord Jesus as He faces His coming sufferings. He has come into the world to do the Father's will and He knows this includes the cross. His men are rather shaky in their resolve. Yes, they love the Lord but are still weak in their convictions. One falls into the hands of the Evil One, another denies knowing Jesus when the test comes.

Once more, the Scriptures hold out a challenge to us. On what ground do we stand? Do we stand with loyal faith in Him no matter the cost? Are we weak in our convictions when we are opposed? May we give Him our whole hearts, trusting Him implicitly.



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. Romans 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 Savior 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

Some 'starting off' literature

Information on a helpful church

* Please tick and write clearly *

Name _____ Age _____

Address _____

Send to: Challenge Literature Fellowship, 2634 Drake Road, Lebanon Ohio, 45036

All overseas enquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

BY GREG LAURIE

GOD brought a series of 10 plagues upon ancient Egypt and the pharaoh, each gaining in intensity as Pharaoh's heart got harder. And the Bible says multiple times that Pharaoh hardened his heart.

But then we read in Exodus 10:1, "Now the Lord said to Moses, 'Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants, that I may show these signs of Mine before him'" (NLT).

So which was it? Did Pharaoh harden his heart, or did God harden his heart? Actually, it was both.

We can translate the word harden in this verse to read "strengthen" or "stiffen." The Lord strengthened Pharaoh's heart. In other words, Pharaoh made his decision, and then the Lord strengthened him in it. Pharaoh was culpable. He was responsible.

Beware!

God has given each of us a free will, the ability to choose, and God honors the privilege that we have.

For instance, He said to the Israelites, "I call heaven and earth as

witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19 NKJV). God told them the best choice to make.

But God will not force us to do His will. Sometimes it seems as though He ought to, but He won't.

The Bible says, "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Hebrews 3:17 NKJV). Every time you hear the Gospel, every time you hear God's offer of forgiveness for you and you reject it and say no to it, your heart gets a little harder.

If your heart becomes hard, it's because you've chosen to harden it yourself. Beware!

Ronnie Faisst in action during the Crusty Demons Nine Lives Tour at the Rod Laver Arena, May 21, 2004 in Melbourne, Australia. (Photo by Robert Cianflone/Getty Images)



MOTOX TURNS MOTO+

Ronnie Faisst grew up racing motocross and has raced professionally since he was 18. But his career soared to new heights when he helped pioneer Freestyle Motocross, a variation of motocross in which riders attempt to impress judges with jumps and stunts.

Ronnie talked about starting the sport in a video on his YouTube channel. He said at age 20 he moved to California where free riding was being birthed. With nothing but \$200 and an old, raggedy van, Ronnie drove across America and found a job in construction with fellow motocross rider Mike Metzger's father. When he wasn't working, he was riding and going on film trips.

"Little did we know, we were actually pioneering and birthing a whole new sport called Freestyle Motocross," Ronnie says.

Ronnie took that sport around America in 1998 on the Vans Warped Tour and his career took off.

"Before I knew it, I was traveling all around the world, tours, film trips, competing against the best riders in the world, sponsorship dollars came in, contracts came in, and I would ride that way for the next 20 years," Ronnie explains.

It was a fast-paced lifestyle on the road travelling with his friends.

"About everywhere we went there were after parties and a wild lifestyle," Ronnie remembers. "And I was just in it to win it... I was known for being the committed guy who trained hard and was always into fitness, but was also known as the guy who got loose and partied a lot and chased all the girls."

One day at home, where he was living with his girlfriend at the time, he saw a snippet of a preacher on television that caught his attention.

"He was talking about fear and I thought, what does this dude know about fear?" Ronnie says. "I deal with this on a daily basis in my sport, so I decided to listen on. I actually liked what he had to say and I decided to watch him the next weekend."

Ronnie started watching the preacher on TV every week for the next year or more. He said he liked that he was really positive, always had a good message about faith and how God was on our side and God loved us and wanted to bless us.

Despite this, Ronnie's lifestyle continued as it had been.

"I was listening to him and I was being encouraged

by what he was saying, but my lifestyle never really shifted," Ronnie admits. "I was still sleeping around and doing whatever I liked and not even feeling guilty about any of it and just thought that was what everyone was doing."

He said he thought of himself as a good person and that the good outweighed the bad in his life, which meant if he died, he thought he deserved to go to heaven. But when a friend gave him a Bible for Christmas, things began to change for Ronnie.

"When I began to read the Bible for the first time for myself, God really started to speak to me," Ronnie says. "It was like the Word of God was alive, because I couldn't put this book down. I never read books, never even read Motocross magazines, I don't like to read anything and yet I could not stop reading this Book."

He said as he read, verses began to almost jump off the page and challenge him.

"I realized, I say I believe in this faith, but I don't live like I do," Ronnie recalls. "One of the verses that really hit me says, 'What will it profit a man if he gained the whole world but he lost his own soul' (Mark 8:36). [I was] thinking, I'm living my dream, I've got everything I ever wanted and things are good, yet I might be missing the one thing that matters."

A theme Ronnie kept seeing in the Bible was repentance (turning away from doing wrong things).

"The Bible kept saying repent, and repent simply means to change your direction," Ronnie explains. "If I'm walking this way, if I was to repent that means I would turn from the way I was headed and I'm going to turn and go a different direction, and I never did that."

Ronnie said although he watched the preacher for over a year, it

wasn't until he read the Bible that he began to feel challenged and had a desire to make a change and follow Jesus.

He said he spoke to a Christian friend in the freestyle industry, Nate Adams, and started attending church with him.

"It wasn't long before they gave a message that challenged me and I just knew, it's time to make a real commitment," Ronnie remembers. "I went forward, responded to the altar call, went up

to the front, and gave my life to the Lord. And from that day on, I said, man I'm going to be committed to this. I'm going to go for this. And I remember I did a complete 180 turnaround in my life. I was like, I'm done chasing the girls, I'm done living this crazy lifestyle, I'm done with all the partying, all the alcohol, the drugs, all the stuff, I'm done! I'm going to go for Jesus. And that's where my journey began."

Ronnie said actually making the decision to follow Jesus and pray a prayer of salvation in 2006 wasn't the hard part. He said it has been a lot more challenging to actually

walk it out and stay faithful to his commitment to Jesus.

"I had my challenges, I had my weaknesses, my mistakes and my failures along the way, but God remained faithful and He was able to love me right through it," Ronnie explains. "I'm not here today

because I was able to do it perfect. I'm still a believer and I'm still following Jesus mainly because I never quit. His love is perfect and He loved me through my weaknesses. Even when I failed Him, He never

gave up on me."

Ronnie refers to the change in him since becoming a Christian as a miracle. He said he has been blown away by what God has done in him.

"I experienced something so real that it shifted everything," Ronnie says.

"The desires of my heart have changed, the way my mind thinks has changed, the way that I actually choose to live my life has changed."

Ronnie is married to ex-motocross model Mel and together they run an online Christian ministry and YouTube channel called Ronnie and Mel.

I DID A COMPLETE 180 TURNAROUND IN MY LIFE



Ronnie and his wife Mel.

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