

# BAD SPELL BROKEN

**Prison was an answer to prayer for Jenny after she found herself pregnant and completely powerless to change her life.**

**W**hen police arrested Jenny Weaver she was relieved. She was homeless, pregnant to her drug-dealer boyfriend and hadn't eaten in five days. She knew in prison she would at least have a bed to sleep in and food to eat.

In an interview with CBN, Jenny shares that she was born addicted to heroin as her mother was an addict.

Watching her daughter going through withdrawals caused her mother to turn her life around. After this, Jenny was raised in a Christian home.

But life was far from perfect. "What I saw on Sunday was not what I saw all throughout the week," she says in an interview with Cornerstone Television Network. "When we would leave church and go home, there was a lot of abuse, there was a lot of name calling, adultery and things of that nature. It pushed me away from wanting to be in church and wanting to know the Lord."

At 13, Jenny felt depressed and experienced suicidal thoughts. She self-harmed on a daily basis for years. At school she met a group of girls who were experimenting with the New Age.

"I remember watching a movie called *The Craft*. It was about four witches and they had power and they were able to command things."

Living in a home where she didn't have any control and didn't feel accepted and loved, what she saw in this movie appealed to her.

"[I thought], 'Wow, I want this! I'm going to be able to control the bullies at school and be able to have more stability in my life.' So I began to study Wiccan religion and became a practicing witch."

Jenny says this new path thrust her into a dangerous world. She started experimenting with drugs and eventually found herself homeless. "At 17 years old, I was living on the streets by myself ... For nine years, I struggled with meth, I struggled with heroin and [I was] still in witchcraft."

"It was a dark place for me. I had a lot of bitterness, hatred and anger toward my family. I

felt alone, abandoned, rejected."

Then Jenny fell pregnant to her drug-dealer boyfriend. She knew she needed to get off the drugs for the sake of her unborn child but didn't know how. She recalls the desperation she felt one night after she hadn't eaten or slept in days.

"I screamed at the top of my lungs one night, 'God help me!' and I just fell to my knees and just surrendered to God."

Jenny says she knew that if she cried out to God, He would hear her. And He did.

"God got me out of that situation," she says.

"Just a few days later, I was actually I was rescued... I was arrested."

In prison, Jenny was able to get pregnancy care and detox from drugs.

Her daughter was born the day she was released from prison – "Which is a miracle," Jenny attests.

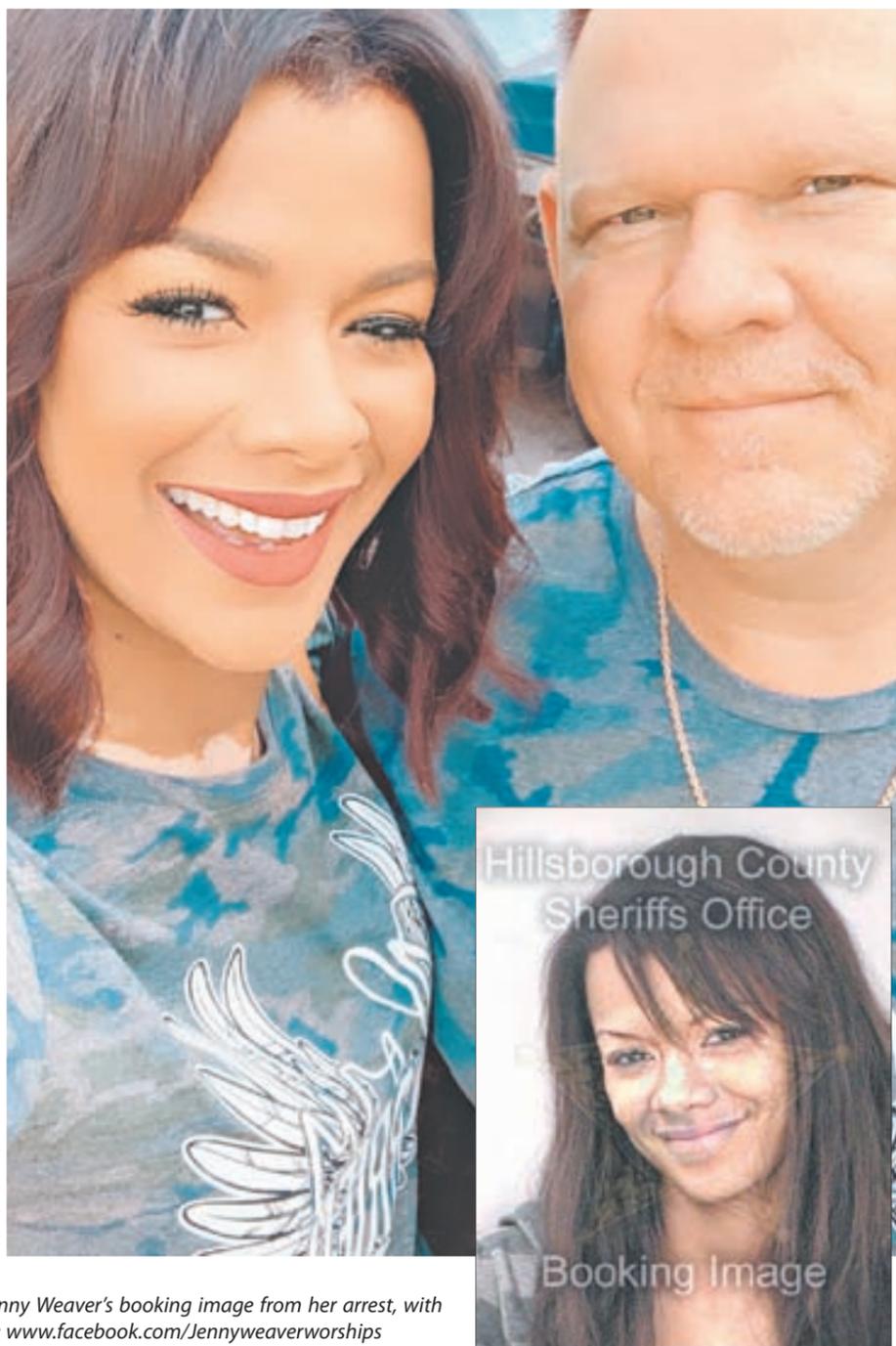
"I was supposed to have [my daughter] before I was released so the state would have taken her and I wouldn't have been able to have her... But the moment they called my name [to be released from prison], I went into labour."

Jenny says she has been pursuing God ever since.

The boyfriend who was supplying Jenny with drugs also surrendered his life to God and is now her husband. Jenny leads worship at her church.

She has written a book called *The Sound of Freedom* about her journey about being delivered from living on the streets, witchcraft, self-harm and drug addiction.

Jenny Weaver and her husband Stephen. INSET: Jenny Weaver's booking image from her arrest, with the sheriffs office watermark over it. Photos: [www.facebook.com/Jennyweaverworships](http://www.facebook.com/Jennyweaverworships)



## I BECAME A PRACTICING WITCH



## Being totally sincere but totally wrong

BY NICO BOUGAS

**CARBON** monoxide, instead of oxygen, was once administered to a hospital patient who passed away almost instantly. The tragedy occurred while the patient was being prepared for a minor operation. A trained anaesthetist was administering a controlled mixture of oxygen and anaesthetic gas when the tank of oxygen was emptied and a new tank, labelled "Oxygen," was substituted. Almost immediately, according to the police report, the patient died. The attending surgeon and hospital officials suspected some type of accident and called the coroner.

### Was sincerity enough?

An autopsy revealed carbon monoxide poisoning. Upon examination, the oxygen tank was found to contain carbon monoxide. The tank had been mislabelled before it had reached the hospital. The manufacturer was sincere, the hospital authorities were sincere, the anaesthetist was sincere, the surgeon was sincere and certainly, the patient was sincere.

No one wanted the tragedy to happen. But all were sincerely mistaken about the "Oxygen".

### Sincerity plus certainty

The incident demonstrates that sincerity is not enough. Sincerity must be coupled with certainty. There is a scripture that says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." - Proverbs 14:12. Too many people are saying, "As long as I am sincere, and my intentions are good, I'll come out alright in the end." But they are sincerely mistaken. One must be absolutely certain when it comes to your eternal destination. The Bible declares that we can be certain and have the assurance of eternal life. The Apostle John tells his readers: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God." - 1 John 5:13.

### Have certainty in Christ

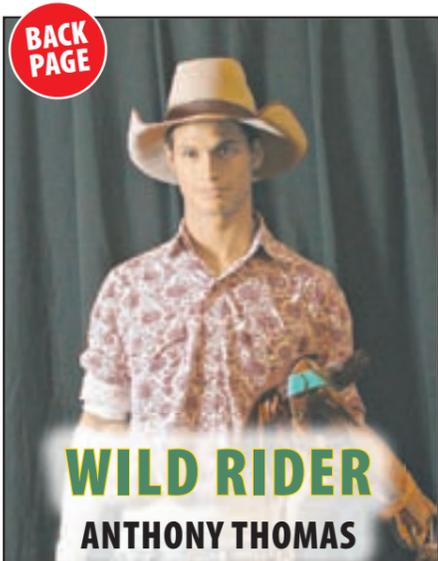
Too many things in our lives are mislabelled, "Forgiveness," "Salvation," "Life," "Peace," "Security," and "Satisfaction". How can one

be absolutely certain in such all important matters? By taking the Lord Jesus Christ at His Word. No one is greater than He is and no one is truer than He is.

He said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." - John 14:6. And He proved it by rising from the dead and appearing to over 500 people over a period of 40 days. He loved us to the point of dying for our sins on the Cross of Calvary. He now lives in the power of an endless life and saves all who come to God by Him.

### There is salvation in no one else

All who make Him their Lord and Savior can say with the Apostle Peter, "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:38-39. Peter also said, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." - Acts 4:12.



# DRUG DEALER FINDS FORGIVENESS

Drug use that started in John Skipworth's teenage years became a full-blown addiction in a short amount of time and he began dealing drugs so he could afford to fund his habit. When a drug-deal turned into a fist-fight and someone nearly lost their life, John found himself behind bars.

In an interview with The 700 Club, John shared that his parents divorced when he was two years old.

His mother remarried and when that marriage fell apart, John decided to live with his stepfather, where he had the freedom to do anything he wanted.

"I went from drinking beer at 15, 16 years old, to smoking marijuana at 17," he explains.

"I ran into somebody that was doing cocaine and 90 days later you know I was an IV drug addict, sticking needles in my arm and shooting up drugs. I think it was an internal void in me — looking for somewhere to belong."

John soon turned to dealing drugs to keep up with his addiction.

One day, he and some associates met some drug dealers in a hotel room.

"A fist fight broke out and several people were hurt but one man, named JP, was brutally beaten and left unconscious," John shares in an interview with Lifetoday.tv.

John and his friends panicked and they wrapped JP in a sheet and took him to the woods.



John Skipworth

John and his friends were arrested.

JP survived, although the knife had been dangerously close to slicing his jugular vein.

"I lied — I said I was innocent and had no part in it," John admits.

His parents believed him and helped fight for his release.

"Seventy-three days later I was walking free and feeling like I was invincible."

But after his release John's drug addiction spiralled out of control.

Over the next four years he was in and out of jail on drug and theft charges. Finally at the age of 23 he was involved in a high-speed police chase.

"I was tired of running and I was tired of living that life," he explains. "I didn't have the answers but I turned myself in because I was ready for a change."

It was John's third strike and he was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

It was then that he cried out to God.

"I laid down on the floor and I just was crying. I was broken. I started

telling God how disappointed I was with myself, how disappointed I was with my life.

"[I said] I was sorry for hurting my mama, sorry for hurting my dad, I was sorry for all the shame, I'm sorry for hurting that guy in that hotel room, I was sorry for being a drug addict and a thief and a liar."

What seemed like moments later, there was a call for the prison church service.

The pastor asked if anyone would like to share their story and John walked up to the front and said, "God just saved me and I'm gonna live the rest of my life for God even if I spend it in prison, cleaning showers."

John was permitted to enrol in a recovery support program called Overcomers.

At Easter the group was allowed to attend church and, while waiting for a ride back to prison, John spotted a familiar face. As he grew closer, he saw a visible scar on his neck.

"I immediately I realized it was JP. He walked up to me and he stuck out his hand and the weight of all of that responsibility just gripped at me — it was on me.

"It wasn't a time to be a tough guy and I just broke down and started crying. He said, 'I forgive you John. I love you man, I'm glad you're here. God's about to change your life. God's gonna use you to do great things,' and he grabbed me and he hugged me."

It was Easter Sunday, five years to the day that the JP was found by the pastor in the woods.

After completing the Overcomers program, the judge gave John seven years instead of the 20 that he was expecting. John is now married to Brooke and has three children.

He is the pastor of a church in Louisiana.

"The largest thing that's changed in me is my identity — who I am flows out of who I am in Christ and slowly year by year more and more of that is beginning to come out of me," John attests.

Then JP regained consciousness and tried to fight again.

"I struck the young man with a big billy club and knocked him down," John admits.

Through his drug stupor, John told his friend to cut JP's throat.

"Before I knew it, a friend of mine pulled out his knife and cut his throat."

The next morning a pastor was working behind his church, setting up chairs for a sunrise Easter Sunday service. He heard JP gurgling and moaning. He called the authorities and not long after that,

## I WAS TIRED OF RUNNING AND ... LIVING THAT LIFE.



## Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

- ACROSS**
- 3 Double babies
  - 8 Retail business
  - 10 Standard
  - 11 Far-flung
  - 12 Steel ingredient
  - 13 Premature
  - 14 TV-filming room
  - 20 Utensil
  - 23 .... Barrier Reef
  - 26 Covering
  - 27 Approval
  - 28 Burnt log remains
  - 29 Fruit
  - 30 Sends via snail mail

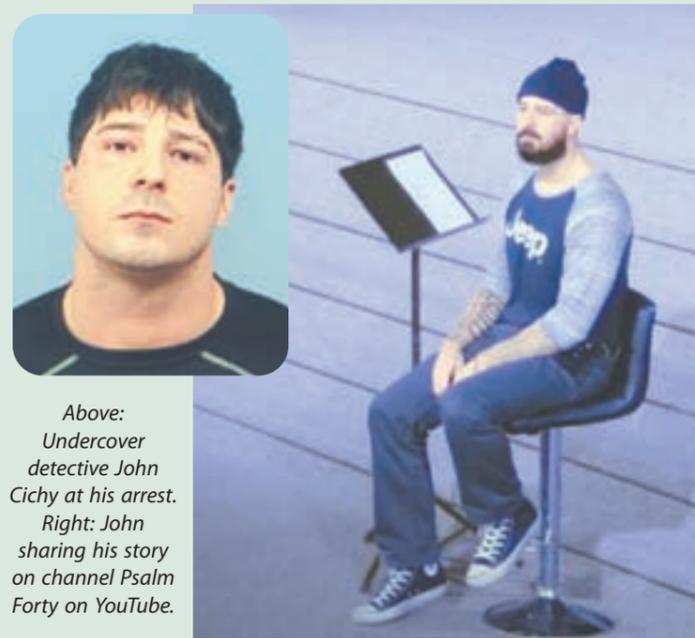
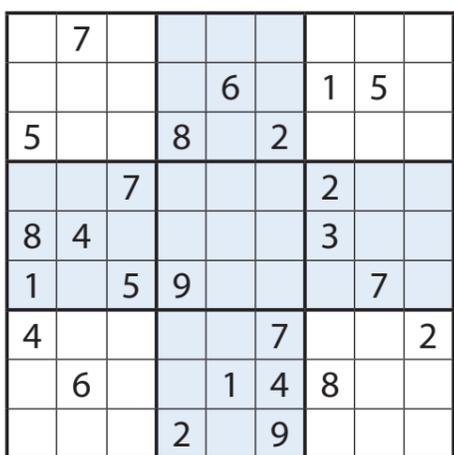
- DOWN**
- 1 Garment
  - 2 Go on a buying spree
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  - 5 Brainstorms
  - 6 Close
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  - 8 Federer's nationality
  - 9 Smell
  - 15 Furniture wood
  - 16 Rock
  - 17 Direct for information
  - 18 Grip or understand
  - 19 Dashes or sprints
  - 21 Snares
  - 22 Nearby
  - 24 Repeating sound in a canyon
  - 25 Trial; examination



### SOLUTIONS PAGE 7



"We are communicating better, but we are still not out of the woods."



Above: Undercover detective John Cichy at his arrest. Right: John sharing his story on channel Psalm Forty on YouTube.

# Flying high to rock bottom

BY MICHAEL ASHCRAFT

On the 17th day of solitary confinement in jail, cop John Cichy broke down and made a confession — not to the crime of which he was accused but to his need for Jesus Christ.

"I realized I needed help because there was no way I was getting out of this, there was no way I was getting through this," he says on a Psalm Forty video.

"January 31st, 2013, right after midnight, I wholeheartedly called out to God. I saw everything that I was doing wrong that was displeasing to God that was harming me, and I realized I got myself into that mess. I said, 'God, I don't want to live that life no more.' I wholeheartedly repented of that life."

The former undercover detective who lived a high-flying life — with spinning rims, free drinks at bars and 19 girlfriends — was accused with two other detectives of re-selling part of the drugs they confiscated from busts.

But while the two other cops accepted plea bargains for lesser sentences, John took his fledgling faith seriously.

He had heard God say to not break down in fear of getting a longer sentence and to go to trial.

He faced 18 counts which, if convicted, could result in a minimum of 24 years in prison, yet he refused every plea bargain they offered because God told him to.

"I was asking God what should I do," he says. "I woke up the next morning and turned on the radio, the very first song was Mandisa, 'Stay in the fight to the final round, you're not going under.'"

He didn't think much of it. But then he turned on the radio at midday, and the very first words were the same from Mandisa. Then at night when he went home and turned on the radio, again it was Mandisa.

The coincidence seemed too much.

"It was impossible, you cannot recreate that," he remarks. "That was God speaking to me through that song, which translates to, 'Go to trial. You're not going to prison. I got you.'"

That's why John flouted his lawyer's advice, his friends' advice, his family's advice, from his Christian brothers; everyone told him he didn't stand a chance in the trial and that the federal case was too strong.

"It made no sense. Everything on paper, judges, lawyers, family, newspapers, Google, said I was going to prison 100%," he remembers.

During one agonizing day, God told him to check his daily Bible verse in the app on his phone. It was Proverbs 29:25: "The fear of man lays a snare, but those who trust in the Lord are safe."

At 3:33 am, God woke him up and quoted him Proverbs 29:25 almost audibly. At Bible study the next day, the leader cited Proverbs 29:25 as part of his message.

Again, the coincidence was overwhelming.

"I had to leave the building and stand outside and cry because God had spoken three times in the same day with the same verse," John recounts.

"The deal was a trap. My fear of prison was a trap. I was dead set on going to trial in the midst of everyone telling me no."

As the pre-trial dickering protracted to years, John turned his church attendance into a ministry with the youth and camps at the Bartlett congregation.

"In the midst of an actual trial facing 24 years in prison, I started preaching about hope in Christ. That's absurd. No one does that," he comments.

"No human being can speak of love and joy and peace in the midst of facing 24 years in prison. God gave me a promise, and I was telling everyone it.

"I'm so crazy that I'm telling everyone, 'God's going to deliver me from this.'"

On several video recordings filmed prior to trial, John declared he would be freed. He had total peace, he said.

On the day of his trial, February 13, 2018, prosecutors stunned everyone when they suddenly dropped charges, citing the recent emergence of new evidence which threw doubt on their case. John walked free, declaring it was "part of God's plan".

"God is absolutely real," he says. "If you're an atheist, help me understand what the heck happened? How can someone say what's going to happen before it happens, unless he has a Source who reveals that to him? God is 100% real, 100% active, 100% personal, and you can 100% experience him every day."

# Drug dealer returns to prison to help others

BY ZOE ERLER

The first day Darryl Brooks entered the Prison Fellowship Academy at the Carol Vance Unit in Richmond, Texas, he was wearing the standard DOC-issued white scrubs. Today, when he walks through the doors, he usually wears khakis and a dress shirt.

It's the typical attire for the director of the program.

Small town Crosby, Texas wasn't exactly a hotbed of excitement, so Darryl and his buddies learned to create their own. At 10, he started using marijuana, selling it to others by junior high. His dad wasn't around, so his mom worked two jobs to support her 12 children. Darryl was the youngest.

"I was practically raised by my siblings," he explains.

He graduated from high school in 1987, but with no one to help him plan for his future, it was up to him to create it – or try to destroy it.

Darryl still remembers the first time he tried crack cocaine. He and his best friend were cruising the streets of their tiny town, drinking, and his friend handed him his first smoke.

"Anything that was going to take me up, up there, I was gonna try," Darryl admits. After that, he descended deeper into the drug scene, and eventually found himself in court. He was 23 the first time he went to prison, in 1991. Even before that, Darryl had resigned himself to failure.

"I would tell my mom, 'Just let me die in the streets.' But as it turned out, prison is what saved my life."

The first couple of times he got locked up were for short sentences, punctuated by more drug dealing and street life.

The third time he was arrested, the law wasn't as kind. Darryl received a 50-year sentence.

He accepted his fate and continued on with the status quo. He even found a way to get his hands on drugs behind bars.

"I lived in prison the way I lived on the streets," he admits.

Meanwhile, his cellmate was pestering him about going to church. "I don't want none of that Jesus stuff," he told him, often ridiculing the man for his faith.

Then one day, five years into his sentence, he woke up.

"I had this epiphany: 'Hey, you're doin' the same things in prison that you was doin' on the outside. Ain't nothin' changed.'"

He decided to go to attend a church service. About a week later, he found himself at a discipleship class. It was there that, "God wrecked my life and



I ain't been the same since."

"Instantly, I started walking the compound and telling people about Jesus Christ."

Darryl stopped dealing drugs and started going to church, even though his old associates told him he was crazy. "After I got saved, I started living my life for the Lord, but I was still struggling to figure out how to live life the way God designed me to live."

In 2000, Darryl was transferred to the Carol Vance Unit, so he could participate in the Prison Fellowship Academy. The Prison Fellowship Academy is a holistic life transformation and pre-release program.

It was here, through life skills classes, intensive Bible study, and counseling that the pieces started falling together.

"This program really instilled in me the tools I needed to operate back in society," Darryl says.

For one thing, he discovered what it meant to be a real father.

When he went to prison, he had a three-year-old daughter. She was growing up while he was in prison, and Darryl hadn't done much to foster the relationship. But through the help of a parenting class, he began reaching out to his daughter through letters. One year his daughter even came to the prison for a party sponsored by Angel Tree.

"I always had the desire to be a dad," Darryl explains. "This program gave me the tools I needed to be a parent." He also learned the impor-

tance of creating limits and boundaries for his relationships and habits – something that many incarcerated people struggle with.

But perhaps the most significant thing the academy gave Darryl were healthy relationships.

"I saw so many volunteers come through the gate and begin to express the love that I never felt growing up. And that really put the icing on

the cake – just those [people] coming in, wrapping their arms around me and saying, 'Hey man, there's a better way to live.'"

One of those volunteers, a man named Jim Oliver, became his mentor. Jim met

Darryl for the first time at a worship service at Carol Vance, and was stunned when he heard Darryl stand up and pray.

Not long afterward, the two men were matched for a mentoring relationship. When Darryl was released from prison in 2002 (serving less than 11 years on his 50-year sentence), Jim was the one who picked him up and drove him to the parole office. Darryl followed Jim to his church in Sugarland, Texas. And then Jim was a groomsman in Darryl's wedding when Darryl married Rosalind, a woman he had met through another prison volunteer.

The couple later asked Jim to be a godparent to their youngest daughter.

"I don't know too many people better than Darryl," says Jim. "He talks the talk and he walks the walk."

After Darryl paroled to Houston, he got a job emptying grease trays for a cleaning company for another one of the volunteers he met through the academy.

A year and a half later, he began work as a janitor. In 2004, two years after he was released, he decided to return to Carol Vance – this time as a volunteer.

"Coming back in as a volunteer, coming back through that gate, it was an emotion that I cannot really explain," he says.

"Coming back and giving back – it was always a reminder that [being in prison] was what I [didn't] want."

Darryl served as a volunteer for seven years, ministering to and sharing Christ with men who looked a lot like he did a few years earlier.

This experience prepared him to come on staff with Prison Fellowship as a program counselor in 2011.



And then five years later, in the summer of 2016, Darryl was asked to take the position of director of the entire program. It was an honor he could never have imagined receiving.

Had you told the former drug user and convicted dealer 20 years ago that he would head the very organization that helped him turn his life around, he would have said, "No, not me."

But who better to lead the program than one who wore the same uniform, and ate the same prison food as those he was serving?

Darryl's is a full-circle story, one that centers around a very faithful God who is using Prison Fellowship Academy to rebuild broken lives from the bottom up.

Story from Prison Fellowship

## Two yrs old and on the streets

My name is Mez. My mother ran away with the best man in my parent's wedding. My father was an alcoholic and a gambler who abandoned me and my disabled sister. I was left to the streets at age two, and then left to foster and children's homes until my teens. I was back on the streets when I was 16 and in prison at 21, and I was a drug addict for six years.

A group of young men from a local church presented me with the Gospel [the account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ] when I was living on the streets. They started playing football in our area and told us about the Lord.

At the time I was dealing drugs outside the community center. They talked about God's love but also my rebellion and God's wrath. I kicked against it. Later, men came to see me in prison. Once out of prison, they gave me a place to live. Their witness was crucial, but the moment of conversion came when reading a Matthew Henry commentary.

I realized I had to take responsibility for my own rebellion against God and not blame it on my terrible childhood. For the first time I believed.

By God's grace, I went back to school and Bible College, and am now married with children. I planted a church for street children and prostitutes. I recently finished my second church plant and am now looking to train other men to do likewise.

Praise God for those men who brought the good news of Jesus Christ to me. Don't underestimate the power of the gospel!

Used with permission from Alpha Prison Ministries.

*Verse of the month*

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

Hebrews 3:12-13

### 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: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ MM DD YYYY      Earliest Release Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ MM DD YYYY

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_      Complete Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Referred by: CHAL      Institution: \_\_\_\_\_      Housing: \_\_\_\_\_

Prefiero el curso en español.      Street or PO Box: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_      State: \_\_\_\_\_      ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

### 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 5837 | Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8

# Steve takes granddad's advice

When Steve Hopper was 17 years old he was involved in a fight at a party. Three days later, the sheriff showed up at his parents' home in Tampa, Florida, with a warrant for his arrest and he was sent to prison. A year into his prison time, he experienced the darkest night of his life and he contemplated suicide. But then he remembered some advice his grandfather gave him as a child.

Sharing his story on the 100huntley YouTube channel, Steve explains that one of the teens he hit during the fight had slipped into a coma.

"My father turned me in and I sat in jail for three months my senior year of high school, waiting to find out if this young man was going to live or if he was going to die – waiting to find out if they were going to charge me with murder or attempted murder."

The young man came out of the coma and Steve was overjoyed. But that didn't mean his prison time was over.

"When you make bad choices in life there are almost always bad consequences that come along with those and for me those consequences were going to be great."

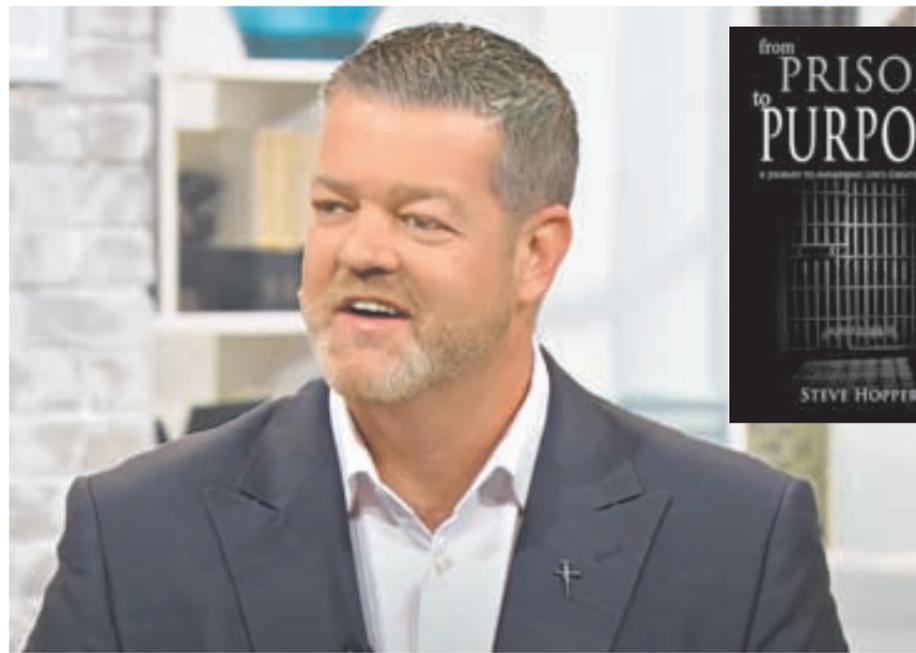
Steve was sentenced to 10 years in prison. "There had been a lot of that fighting and stuff going on in Tampa at the time and I

became the example [the cops wanted to set]," he shares. "I got sent to one of the worst prisons in Florida. The gang violence was daily, riots were weekly. I fought for my life on numerous occasions, watched people get stabbed to death, beat to death right in front of me."

One year into his incarceration, Steve had a powerful experience that changed the rest of his time in prison.

"That particular night the weight of the world just came crashing in on me all at once," he recalls. "I felt every emotion you could imagine – hopelessness, helplessness, regret and fear. I was one year into a 10-year sentence. I didn't know how I was going to survive the next nine."

## WHEN YOU MAKE BAD CHOICES THERE ARE ALMOST ALWAYS BAD CONSEQUENCES



Steve Hopper was imprisoned as a teenager. Photo: YouTube/100huntley. INSET: Steve's book *From Prison to Purpose*.

Steve remembers crying in the corner of his cell and for the first time in his life, thoughts of suicide crossed his mind.

"I felt like my life had no meaning and it had no purpose and in that moment I remembered something."

Steve remembered something his grandfather had told him when he was 10 years old.

"He said, 'If you're ever at your darkest moment in life and your back's against the wall and you don't feel like you have any way out, just promise me you'll drop to your knees immediately and cry out for Jesus.'"

Steve had forgotten about it until that moment.

"I took his advice and I laid my face on that cold, hard, dirty concrete prison floor and I cried like I've never cried before in my life. And when I called out His name in an instant everything changed. All of the feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and fear subsided in that moment and I had this overwhelming

feeling of peace ... When I went to sleep that night I slept like a baby for the first time in a year. I woke up the next morning and I had a new lease on life."

This encounter started Steve on a new journey – a relationship with God. He began to read the Bible as well as some self-development books.

"I even started doing some teaching and training when I was in prison with some of the other inmates, so it was pretty exciting."

Ten years later, Steve was released from prison. It is a tough transition for many people but Steve had support, and opportunities opened up for him to succeed.

"God opened some amazing doors and I walked through them and I started having success."

But Steve's relationship with God was deteriorating.

"I got to a point where I started to lean on my own understanding of things again," he admits. "I started to feel like I was in control of my own destiny and I got caught back up in the world... Because I started to pull away,

I wasn't reading the Word, I wasn't praying like I should be, I wasn't going to church. I was slowly but surely just kind of pulling away and God's voice got further away from me."

In a matter of a few months, Steve lost his six-figure-a-year corporate job and he went through a heartbreaking divorce.

"I began to lose everything and that situation was more emotionally devastating for me than prison was. I found myself there again at a crossroads in my life, on my knees crying out."

Once again Steve cried out to God. This time he prayed to God: "Take me back."

"Immediately the answer I received was, 'I never let you go. But it's time for you to get off the bench and get in the game.'"

Steve embarked on a mission to discover what God wanted him to do with his life. One day he was walking through the mall and a woman passed by him and as she did, she handed him a piece of paper.

"I opened up that piece of paper and on the inside it said, 'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:10). It was a message that impacted me powerfully because I knew that I needed to take a step back ... I took the message literally. I got up every morning, had a cup of coffee and sat on the porch and prayed and I listened."

Steve realized as he looked back over his life and his experiences in prison and in the corporate world, that speaking was the common thread. When he was first released from prison he was under the impression that telling his story would hurt him and prevent opportunities in his life. But he found that when he did share his story it had the opposite effect on his life. Steve recalls one of his first speaking engagements when he shared his story with 500 high school students.

"At the end I offered them an opportunity to accept Christ and 250 kids stood up in that gymnasium that day and made that decision," he says with tears in his eyes.

Steve is now a motivational speaker and has written a book about his journey called *From Prison to Purpose: A Journey to Answering Life's Greatest Question*.

# Life of chaos transforms into life of hope

BY EMILY ANDREWS

"I was 6 feet tall at 12 years old," says Kevin Bruno. "I had a grown man's body and a child's mind, and that led me to be persecuted in school, beyond belief. By the time that I got to high school I wanted to be somebody who didn't get persecuted." So he started spending time with a tougher crowd, mimicking their behaviors and hoping never to feel vulnerable again.

Kevin pulled off his first robbery at a savings and loan association in Texas. He lay in the back of the getaway vehicle, enthralled by the bag of \$42,000 beside him. While his partners weren't looking, he shoved some of the cash in his shoes. Later they divvied up what was left in the bag.

In the moment, stealing felt good. "I was hooked," says Kevin.

That robbery led to his arrest and a 25-year sentence. He served eight years and four months, returned to the streets, and landed back in prison. This time, Kevin faced 60 years. He wouldn't be eligible for parole until he'd served 15. Kevin says, "That's when my life changed – in prison."

For years, Kevin had only known

turmoil. Then he got to see the worst of prison life. Violence and hateful speech abounded. Officers often contributed to the chaos rather than curbing it.

"It was violent. It was racist," Kevin says.

Once, he stepped in another prisoner's pool of blood in the hallway.

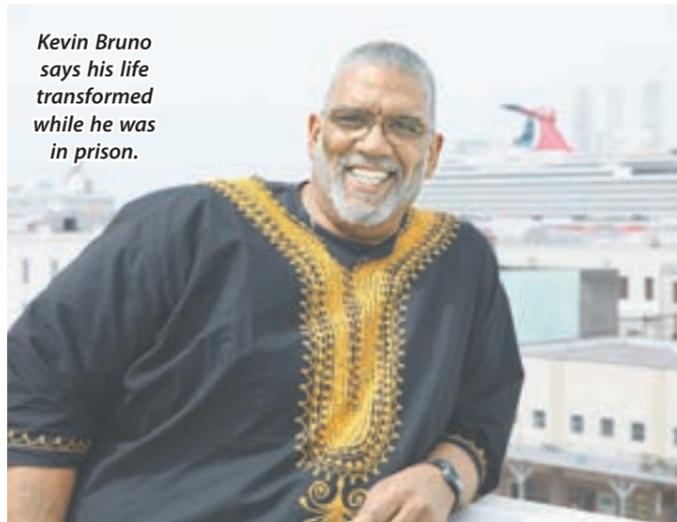
"That was probably the worst day that I had in prison," he admits.

Change came when Kevin received the opportunity to join Prison Fellowship Academy. Although he was not a Christian at the time, he decided he was willing to engage with a curriculum based on Christian teaching, if it would help him prepare for life on the outside.

Kevin wasn't thrilled to be in the program at first, and he struggled with the reasons behind his resentment. He finally begged God to show him some purpose.

"God, what is this?" he prayed. "What is this you're trying to tell

Kevin Bruno says his life transformed while he was in prison.



me?"

Although he didn't share their Christian faith, Kevin developed a sense of belonging in the Academy. Staff, volunteers, and fellow participants made him feel welcome and worthy.

He knew the classroom was a safe place to bring questions and doubts. Surrounded by love and support, he discovered his own dignity – the one thing, he says, that prison can strip from anyone.

And along the way, he decided he wanted to open up to Jesus for himself.

"When God revealed Himself to me, it was in a way that I could not deny that it was Him," says Kevin. "I could not deny that He had changed the course of my life."

Despite a state-issued ID number. Despite a lengthy rap sheet. Kevin's life wasn't over yet.

"The Prison Fellowship Academy, through the teachings of Jesus Christ, shows each person

that encounters it that you're still worthy," he says. "Doesn't matter what you've done. Doesn't matter who [others] say you are. You're still worthy because Christ died so that you would be worthy."

Kevin began to understand his rocky relationship with his earthly father. He realized how the relationship had shaded his view of his Heavenly Father. In a class called Embracing the Father, Kevin saw that he'd never forgiven his dad for past hurts. Volunteers guided him to understand what healthy forgiveness – and the inner peace that fol-

lows – can look like. Kevin realized he needed to be forgiven, too.

Soon, Kevin was sitting across from his parents in the prison visitation room, and he'd made up his mind. They talked about forgiveness and extended grace to one another. It was a moment of profound healing. That became one of his fondest memories in prison. Best of all, Kevin says, was the day he found Christ: "It may be cliché, but it's the truth."

Kevin is still making memories in prison today, as a free man. He serves as a Prison Fellowship re-entry specialist for the same academy site where his life changed forever.

The men Kevin mentors remind him of his past self, in many ways. He guides them to take ownership of their transformation and embrace core values like community, integrity, and productivity. And he shows them the way to deepen their sense of self – or, as he puts it, "a deeper sense of their ability to get out there and succeed."

"It gives them a sense of, 'If he can do this, I can do this,'" Kevin adds.

It's a responsibility he doesn't take lightly. He wouldn't have it any other way.

Story from Prison Fellowship



Kellie Thimmes

# Mirror, mirror, who have I become?

As told to Emily Andrews by Kellie Thimmes

**H**ow did this happen to me? How did my life go from being a little girl, playing with my sisters, having great parents, being a nurse with a family... to being in prison?

I came from a really good family and did well in high school. With a four-year scholarship for swimming at the University of Northern Colorado, I got my biology and nursing degrees. I married my high school sweetheart.

It seemed like my life was really good – but I was missing something. I was constantly searching for something to fill the void I felt. Then I just started shopping a lot, eating a lot, exercising a lot. Anything I did, I did in excess to try to fill that void. It got worse when I started going out after work with the doctors from work.

I lied to my husband that I had to work late, when I was just drinking and partying. At one party, a tray was passed around with lines of cocaine on it. I had never seen that before. When I saw it coming my way, my mind was racing: “Is this cocaine? Am I going to do this? What is going on? Am I going to do drugs right now?”

Before I could talk myself out of it, I did it. Immediately I felt like I had arrived. [I felt like it] filled that emptiness. When they say you can become addicted from doing a drug just once, it’s totally true. That happened to me. I walked away from my job and family, and started living on the streets. When my family sent me to rehab, I would get clean for a little bit, giving them a little hope. Then I would relapse, and every time I relapsed, I would get so much worse.

I ended up going from cocaine to crystal meth. I was shooting up, stealing, burglarizing homes, prostituting – whatever I had to do to get money for drugs.

I can remember looking in the mirror in the final weeks of my addiction.

I was 88 pounds and bruised up and down my arms from shooting up. I didn’t even recognize myself. I didn’t know who I had become. I was in my early 30s, and I didn’t want to live like that anymore. But I couldn’t stop. I wanted to, and I tried so many times. I would last like a day. I literally hit my knees and said, “God, if You’re real, You need to show up – and show up now – because I’m going to die. I don’t want to live like this anymore. Just help me if You’re real.”

Two days later, I was arrested. I knew I was going to do some time, but I had this overwhelming sense of peace, like a warmth inside me. It’s like God was saying, “It’s over. You’re in My hands. You asked for help, and I’m helping you.”

I finally got to Denver Women’s Correctional Facility with a six-year sentence. I remember pulling up in the white van, and looking at these tall fences with barbed wire and guards with guns. I was so terrified.

But I made a vow walking through those gates: “Kellie, you’re going to hold your head up. You’re going to come out of these gates a better woman. A strong woman. Not this empty, broken person that you are right now.”

Getting used to prison was not easy. I kept to myself and only hung around people who were going the same direction as me. I took all kinds of classes.

One day, this officer came in and said I signed up for this other program. I told him I didn’t sign up for anything, and he’s like, “You did, and you have to come.”

I went, and it was the Prison Fellowship Academy. I don’t know how I got in there, but God does.

It was a year-long program. I waived parole to complete it. I loved the teachers, the volunteers, and just getting to know a different God than I thought I knew – not condemning and scary, but forgiving. They told us we all are redeemable, and that God’s been

searching for us.

Going in, I thought I was a lost cause.

I didn’t feel like I qualified for the program because of all the mistakes I had made, like no one could be as bad as me. I was shame-faced for so long. The academy helped me to look at that and other issues – to set boundaries and to love myself.

I was running from God because I was just scared of Him seeing what I was doing. I learned that God was not only waiting for me but running towards me. He knows everything I did. He knows everything I’m going to do. But He sent His Son to take care of all of that.

Before prison, my parents sent me to so many rehabs. I wasn’t ready to change until I hit my knees and called on God. He had to be the one to say, “Look, you’ve tried every other power, and nothing worked. I’m going to show you I’m the answer.”

It was in the academy that I really got saved. The month after I graduated from the academy, I made parole. I had served about three years.

When I walked out of the gates, I looked back at the prison and hit my knees again. I never, ever had to come back here. But I told myself, “I will be back here – just not as a prisoner. And I will speak. And I want to be part of a solution, and not the problem anymore.”

Life today isn’t perfect, but it is so good. When I got out, I was hopeful that everyone was going to be like, “Oh great, she’s home! Welcome home!” And it wasn’t like that at all.

I knew God had gotten me through so much and was going to continue.

So, I’m being patient and learning to trust God’s timing. Knowing my addiction didn’t just happen in one day, I understand that people’s trust in me isn’t going to be rebuilt in one day.

But I’m just so grateful for this new life and that I got to experience the academy.

I wish I could tell the old Kellie to hit her knees quicker because the minute I asked God for help, literally two days later, He rescued me.

Story from Prison Fellowship

# Career criminal gets wake-up call

BY STACIA RAY

**A**t one point in Don Caballero’s life, he seemed to be on the fast track to becoming a “career criminal”. After his parents divorced when he was in middle school, Don struggled with addiction, insecurities, and academic issues. First incarcerated at age 18, he spent years in and out of jails and recovery programs, homeless and running the streets. He was in custody in Fresno, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland.



Don Caballero was forever changed after attending his brother’s funeral.

“There was a point in my life where I honestly didn’t think I was going to see the age of 21,” recalls Don. “And there were some days, honestly, where I wish that I didn’t, because it felt so bad.”

The police would arrest Don, he’d be released, and then he’d commit more crimes. “Every month, I was going either back to court or back in custody,” Don says. He once was on the run for about a year. During that time, the police were compiling more than 20 cases against him for 38 felonies. When he was finally arrested, he was facing up to 94 years in jail.

During this time, Don’s brother was in a fatal accident.

While his brother was riding motorcycles with his church group, he was hit by a truck. Through a temporary bail allowance, Don attended his brother’s funeral. That’s when his life changed forever.

At the funeral, Don stood in the front of the church, about to speak to more than 500 people. Looking out over this huge crowd of his brother’s friends and family, he suddenly realized what a mess his life had become.

“God spoke to me, and He was very clear. He said, ‘If you were to die today, where would you go?’” Don recalls, saying how God spoke right into his heart.

“And then He said, ‘If you were to die today, who’d be at your funeral?’”

It shook him up. In the parking lot after the funeral, he told his ex-wife, “I’m done running from God. I’m done hurting people. I’m not doing this anymore.”

She questioned his sudden turnaround, but he felt forever changed. The next day, Don participated in a motorcycle run for his brother while his kids stayed behind with a relative. When he returned home, the police arrived at his door to take him back to jail.

But this ride to jail was different than any other in the past.

In the back of the squad car, Don said to God, “I meant what I said, and I’m going to serve You the rest of my life.” Later in his cell, he added, “And if I have to spend the rest of my life behind walls, I’m going to serve You.”

His sentence was bargained down to 64 years, then 34, 32, and finally 16. Don was ready to jump at that 16-year offer, but his ex-wife, who was his co-defendant, refused and said she wanted trial.

“They had like 32 eyewitnesses,” says Don. “We were never going home.”

But by the grace of God, the district attorney came back with one final offer: seven years. Don gratefully took it.

While in custody, Don participated in many Bible studies and soaked up the Word. But the prison yard was small with few chapel offerings.

One day, the chaplain approached Don and asked, “Hey, do you want to start doing services here? I’ll have them open up the chapel for you.”

That’s when Don started to get involved with Bible college correspondence courses. His relationship with Jesus took off.

During his sentence, he also participated in Prison Fellowship’s Angel Tree program, where his three toddler children received Christmas gifts while he and his ex-wife (their mother) were both behind bars.

“It was nice to be able to do that,” says Don. “It’s not like just one parent was gone. We were both gone. And so to be able to give the kids something, it meant a lot.”

After Don finished his seven-year sentence, he made sure to stay busy with healthy activities to finally break the “career criminal” cycle. He got involved in a church, eventually becoming an associate pastor.

He was also program director for ministry for people with a history of trauma. In addition, he co-founded a re-entry service and helped design a custody program for Madera County Corrections.

Don is now happily remarried to a wonderful Christian woman who has helped inspire him to be the man he is today.

He looks back at all the pain and struggles of his younger years and sees healing, by the power of God. Don says his story is “an opportunity to help others realize that it doesn’t matter where you come from and what you’ve done. It’s about where you’re going.”

Story from Prison Fellowship



## GOD ON THE INSIDE

Jonathan Willis (left) prays for God’s forgiveness during Sunday church service in Limon Prison in 2008. Willis experienced a jailhouse conversion while in lockup before beginning his life sentence at Limon. Now he’s determined to spread the Word to other inmates. (Photo By Joe Amon/The Denver Post via Getty Images)

# 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 14:1-15

#### INTRODUCTION

John's Gospel is comprised of much teaching of the Lord Jesus. Chapters 14, 15 and 16 are teachings given in the Upper Room, a place used by Jesus and the disciples with the owner's permission. The chapters have been called "The Upper Room Discourse".

The messages He gives are for His disciples, given to prepare them for His forthcoming absence. We need to see the intimacy with which He speaks, showing that it is God's will for believers to be close to Him in a loving relationship. We could ask "How do these words apply to me?" They apply to all who know Jesus as their Savior. They are just as true today as when He spoke. In chapter 17 we will see more about this point.

**Chapter 14 Verse 1** "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me."

In previous verses, mention has been made of Jesus' departure, and the treacherous betrayal that was

looming, and the coming denial of Peter. This was enough to produce sadness and disappointment.

Instead, Jesus speaks comforting words. He tells them to trust the Father and to trust in Himself. This is something all believers must do, not only when times are bad, but always.

**Verses 2-4** *There are many rooms in my Father's house; otherwise, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.*

This is a precious word which comes to all true believers. It is a promise. Jesus was not able to tell us about the time it will happen but we know that it surely will.

Jesus is going to come in the clouds and raise all who belong to Him so that they will always be with Him in heaven.

A description of this coming is given in the first book of Thessalonians 4: 13-18. Just as the promise was meant to encourage the first disciples, it is meant to encourage us today.

Yes, much time has gone by but this means we are drawing closer every day to this great event.

**Verse 5** *Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"*

Thomas failed to see that Jesus was talking about His departure through death and His return to the

Father in heaven. Jesus' meaning was clear — you know the way to heaven.

But Thomas didn't know the way or the destination.

**Verse 6** *Jesus answered, "I am the way—and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

The way to the Father and the heavenly home is the Lord Jesus. This is plain language and its meaning is highly significant. The Saviorhood of Jesus is the only Saviorhood that there is or ever can be. The Son of God is unique and His death on the cross is unique. There is no other Savior and no other way. This puts a line through all the claims of the world's religions and sets aside claims by false Christ's and false doctrines. Any idea of "all roads leading to the same destination" is thrown out by this verse. Note, Way, Truth and Life. This encompasses all questions and points to Christ as Lord of all.

**Verses 7, 8** *"If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him." Philip said "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."*

Jesus is introducing the subject of His Father for the purpose of teaching important truth.

But Philip wants to have a personal view of the Father. All along, Jesus has taught them about acceptance by faith of so much that is not visible to our eyes. Now Philip asks for what cannot be. It is so much like the unbeliever asks when he says "Show me God and then I will believe."

**Verses 9, 10** *Jesus answered, "Don't you know me Philip, even after I have been among you for such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing His work."*

This is a lesson which concerns the question of the Trinity. That is, that God is three persons in one being. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not three Gods. Not three parts. There is complete unity and yet distinct personality. Jesus shows that there is no division. All the nature of the Father is found in the Son and the Spirit. So acquaintance with Jesus is acquaintance with the Father. Jesus says that what He does and says comes from the Father.

**Verses 11, 12** *"Believe me when I say when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."*

The miracles of Jesus show that He is no ordinary man doing ordinary things. The blind seeing, the dead being raised, and so many other things are evidence of the power of God at work. Now Jesus is teaching that followers of Him will do similar things. Not only similar but even greater. After the resurrection of Jesus, when the disciples were

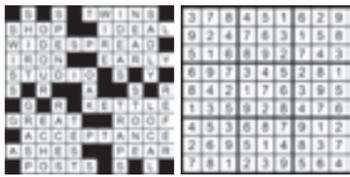
filled with the Holy Spirit, similar miracles took place as we read in the book of Acts. The "greater things" could be the transformation of thousands of lives through their preaching, even in a matter of days. Many opponents were turned to Christ, even Jewish priests. The establishing of the church was based on the supernatural working of God through men.

**Verses 13-15** *"And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. If you love me, you will do what I command."*

Again, Jesus is preparing His men for the future ministry which they will have when He departs. The promise of answered prayer sounds like a blank cheque which we can fill in with anything. This can never be, of course. The Lord is speaking about followers who are moved by the Spirit to do the will of the Father. There is no suggestion that selfish desires are met. The prayers are in the name of Jesus, coming out of a heart of love and obedience.

#### CONCLUSION

So far in this long address we have seen the close relationship of Jesus with His Father, the desire of Jesus for His followers to draw near and experience closeness also. He has made it clear that no-one will reach the Father by any other way but Himself. Now He is going to lead His men in understanding the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He will also be close to them, even within them.



## 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



## Unshakeable Joy

BY GREG LAURIE

THERE are more than 2,700 passages in the Bible containing words such as joy, happiness, pleasure, laughter, gladness, feasting and celebration. This comes as a revelation to some people, but here's something to consider: we follow a happy God, and He wants us to be happy as well.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about "the glorious Good News entrusted to [him] by our blessed God" (1 Timothy 1:11 NLT). The word blessed can be translated "happy." In other words, this is "Good News from our happy God."

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul mentioned joy or gladness 19 times in four chapters. When he thought of the Philippian believers, for example, it brought a smile to his face. He wrote, "Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy" (1:3-4 NLT). Paul wrote the book of Philippians because he was under house arrest, chained to a Roman guard. He had lost his freedom to go out and preach as he normally did. Yet this great epistle overflows with joy.

He laid out the bottom line of the entire letter when he wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4 NKJV). Paul didn't say to rejoice in our circumstances. Rather, he said to rejoice in the Lord.

Paul didn't know what his future held. He had appealed to Caesar, and his case could come up shortly, or he could be there a lot longer. He might be acquitted, or he might be beheaded. He was stuck in what we would call miserable circumstances.

Even so, Paul had joy. That's because he knew that God was in control of his life. And God is in control of your life as well.

## The duck and the devil

THERE was a little boy visiting his grandparents on their farm. He was given a slingshot to play with out in the woods. He practiced in the woods, but he could never hit the target. Getting a little discouraged, he headed back for dinner. As he was walking back he saw Grandma's pet duck.

Just out of impulse, he let the slingshot fly, hit the duck square in the head, and killed it. He was shocked and grieved. In a panic, he hid its dead body in the wood pile, only to see his sister watching! Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing.

After lunch the next day Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Grandma, Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen."

Then she whispered to him, "Remember the duck?" So Johnny did the dishes.

Later that day, Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing and Grandma said, "I'm sorry but I need Sally to help make supper." Sally just smiled and said, "Well that's all right because Johnny told me he wanted to help." She whispered again, "Remember the duck?" So Sally went fishing and Johnny stayed to help!

After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, he finally couldn't stand it any longer. He came to Grandma and confessed that he had killed the duck. Grandma knelt down, gave him a hug, and said, "Sweetheart, I know. You see, I was standing at the window and I saw the whole thing, but because I love you, I forgave you. I was just wondering how long you would let Sally make a slave of you." - Original author unknown

**The Lesson:** Whatever is in your past, whatever you have done that the devil keeps throwing it up in your face (lying, cheating, debt, fear, bad habits, hatred, anger, bitterness, etc.), whatever it is; you need to know that God has seen your whole life. He wants you to know that He loves you and that He will forgive you if you repent.

He's just wondering how long you will let the devil make a slave of you. The great thing about God is that when you ask for forgiveness, He not only forgives you, but He forgets. It is by God's grace and mercy that we are saved.

From www.CreativeBibleStudy.com



Anthony Thomas of The Kimberley, Australia competes in the bareback riding at the Prescott Frontier Days "World's Oldest Rodeo" in 2016 in Prescott, Arizona. (Photo by Christian Petersen/Getty Images)

BELOW: Anthony Thomas poses for a photograph before competing in the Australian National Finals Rodeo Championships at the Gold Coast Convention Center in 2011 on the Gold Coast, Australia. (Photo by Chris Hyde/Getty Images)

# ON A WILD RIDE

If ever there was an illustration of a life full of ups and downs, rodeo riding would be it. Hanging on for dear life on 2,000 pounds of pure muscle as it bucks and heaves to dislodge you would be a fitting description for Australian rodeo rider Anthony Thomas' early life in Perth.

"I was a troubled kid that ran away from home," the 32-year-old professional rodeo cowboy and bareback rider says. "I had a pretty traumatic childhood. My parents had me doped up pretty bad on several different types of drugs."

"I knew that I was troubled and confused and I would've ended up in organized crime, or in jail, or dead if I had stayed there."

At 12, the indigenous Australian boarded at an agricultural college in the Kimberley region, 250 miles north of Perth in Western Australia.

During school breaks, Anthony worked at cattle stations - and felt an instant connection with the animals. "Being with the horses, the cows and the sheep, that's what gave me a sense of belonging. It felt like home from the first time I stepped out of the car onto a station [ranch]."

He continued breaking wild horses on cattle stations after graduation and was soon competing in local rodeos.

"It was from the bush I got my grit and determination," he told the ABC News program *WA Country Hour*.

Anthony did well in the arena and in 2011 was crowned the Australian Professional Rodeo Association bareback riding champion at the largest rodeo in the Southern

Hemisphere.

By now, he was champing at the bit to break into the meat and bones of pro rodeo - the American and Canadian circuit, home to some of the toughest bucking horses and richest rodeos in the world.

"The American horses are some of the strongest, most well-bred bucking horses in the world," he explains. "You're getting on an 1,100-kilo [2,000 lb] trained athlete."

So determined was he to make it to the top that even a life-threatening injury that left him with a shattered skull and a face full of steel from 16 major surgeries has not deterred him. He cannot imagine doing anything else.

"It's definitely an adrenaline rush when you're down in the chutes, look up in the arena and there's 60 to 100,000 people cheering you on," he admits.

However, success in such a macho sport comes with predictable diversions. As Anthony elaborates: "There's always a bar, there's always womanizing and partying and making bad decisions."

"For probably a good ten years of my life, I was as guilty as any man on earth, fighting and drinking and just all of the debauchery that comes with being in a party scene all the time. I remember being down in the dumps, at the lowest of lows."

By 2018, Anthony was among the world's top 15 bareback riders. He was riding high professionally - but at an all-time low personally. Life felt meaningless, he confesses.

Then, on a second date with a woman named Amanda, who is

today his wife, she asked if they could visit a church in Houston.

What happened at church made Anthony buck up - "I started crying. I don't know where it came from," he says in an interview with the 700 Club.

"Now I know it was the presence of the Holy Spirit. It just almost knocked me off my feet. God was just speaking to me and it was an undeniable sense of conviction (over my sin), hope and renewal, a transformation of my life."

He says he now realizes it is possible to have a real relationship with Jesus Christ. "I can talk to Him as a friend. He's always going to be there for me. He's always going to provide for me."

He now lives in Humble, Texas and urges Christians: "Be loyal to God and show Him all the glory for everything He's done."

"God is true and God is real and He's a real savior and He saved my life. And He's provided for me in every situation. Every one of us has a platform right where they are to teach others about the love of Jesus. No matter what - there's a God that's always there for you. He has more for you than you could ever imagine."

"I should have been a statistic with the childhood I had. I should have been drunk, on drugs, or in jail or dead," says Anthony. He hopes his story will inspire other youth in The Kimberley, Western Australia, which has one of the highest indigenous youth suicide rates in the world.

He now has his sights set on the

world champion bareback title and has qualified for the American Rodeo, and Rodeo Houston in March, two of the biggest and richest rodeos in the world.

"They say bareback riding is taking control of a completely uncontrollable situation," Anthony says. "The horse bucks, jumps in the air, is wild, changes directions and we just have to react and respond."

"I really do believe this is what God put me on Earth to do. I think He prepared me to be a professional bareback rider because I need to trust the Lord and the Holy Spirit's plan 100 percent. Then it's not up to me what happens," he says, surrendering the reins of his life to God.



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