

My life-changing Christmas



David Hamilton had a life-changing Christmas while in prison.

Hate and violence shaped David Hamilton's life as he grew up during the Troubles in Ireland – an era of conflict between Protestants and Catholics. After he joined a terrorist organization as a teenager, he was arrested for bombing a factory, and armed robberies, and was sent to prison – where the hate and violence continued.

But it was also there that one Christmas, David received – and extended – forgiveness.

David became aware of the conflict in his country when he was 14 years old and a group of Catholic boys beat him up and threw him into a river. In an interview with Christianity Today, David says he asked the boys what he did to deserve their harsh treatment. They told him it was because he was a Protestant.

“Until then, I didn't know what it meant to be a loyalist or a Republican,” David says. “Nor did I understand the distinction between being a Protestant and being a Catholic.”

That day was a turning point for David, who vowed to never again have Catholic friends. A couple of years later he joined a skinhead gang. “It was safer to be in a gang

than it was to be on your own,” he shares in a YouTube video. “I would syphon petrol out of cars and make petrol bombs and throw them into the homes of Roman Catholics with the intention of burning them out of their homes.”

When he was 17, David joined an illegal paramilitary organization called the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). In David's mind, he was a “righteous activist fighting for a good cause”. But it wasn't long before he was sent to prison for his involvement in robberies and a bombing. He was released after

a year and rejoined the UVF, which resulted in another arrest. This time he was sentenced to 12 years in prison. To David it was worth it.

“I thought... ‘it's a cause worth dying for so I will be loyal to them.’ I wanted to fight the Irish Republican Army (IRA) – they had injured members of my family and I just wanted revenge for that.”

After David's court case, his mother came to see him. She cried and begged him not to throw his life away. But David didn't want to hear it and told her to leave. On her way home, she visited a woman called Mrs Beggs, who said she would pray that God would change David's heart and that he would come home from prison a new man.

A few years later, David attended a church service just before Christmas, seeing it as an opportunity to get out of his cell. The prison chaplain asked for a volunteer to read a passage from the Bible and another prisoner suggested that David do it.

David thought people would laugh at him if he refused, so he read the passage, which was the account of Jesus' birth in Luke.

“When I finished, I was smiling!” David told Christianity Today. “For some reason, it felt good.”

The following month, David found a folded piece of paper on his pillow. It was a gospel tract called, *Jesus Christ is Coming Back Soon*.

“I looked at it and laughed and threw it out the window,” David admits. But then a thought came to him: “David, it's time to change. Become a Christian.”

“I thought, ‘Become a Christian? No, I don't want to be a Christian. They don't smoke or drink or chase women or do robberies or all the things I'd done.’”

I JUST WANTED REVENGE



But the thought kept coming to him. He picked up his Bible – he used the thin paper to roll cigarettes – and flipped through it. His cell mate asked him what he was doing and David replied, “I'm thinking of becoming a Christian.”

His cell mate told him even God wouldn't want David because he was too bad.

That night another thought popped into David's head: “It's God Who has kept you alive.”

• Turn to page 2

Never alone

BY HARRIET COOMBE

FOR many people, Christmas is about gathering with family and friends, sharing gifts and good food, and celebrating the joy and hope of Christmas.

For many others however, Christmas is a lonely time – a reminder of broken relationships, of physical and emotional distance, and hopelessness.

Loneliness is always painful, but Christmas can take it to another level. This can especially be true for those spending Christmas in prison.

Part of the hope of the Christmas story is found in a prophecy that was written about 700 years before Jesus was born. “Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7.14).

Immanuel may be a familiar word to you – it appears in some Christmas songs like *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*: “Pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel.”

But you may not know there is a wonderful meaning behind the word. Immanuel (often spelled Emmanuel) means “God with us” and is another name for Jesus, a description of His nature. Jesus is “God with skin on” – sent to Earth to live with us and die for our sins.

So Jesus' birth and death don't just mean eternal life for those who put their faith in Him; it also means that we are never alone while we are living here on Earth.

No matter what you are going through, however hopeless your situation may be, or how alone you may feel this Christmas, Jesus is with you.

Sometimes people think that becoming a Christian means that you will never have to suffer again – almost as if you have your own personal genie who grants you all your wishes.

The truth is that Christians still go through hard times, but the difference is that we never go through them alone. We always have the wisdom, strength, joy and love of our Savior, who walks beside us. And the process of going through those hard times with Jesus helps transform us to be more like Him.

In Curt Vernon's song *Invite Me into Wonder*, he writes: “When hope's all but gone and all seems lost, You're Immanuel, God is with us now. When deceit's speaking lies and says I'm all alone, You're Immanuel, God is with us now.”

For me, that changes everything! I'm so thankful that I have the Savior of the World, King Jesus as my best friend, Who never leaves my side.

If you would like to experience this hope for yourself, please check out the box titled “How Do I Become a Christian?” on page 7. •

SETTING ASIDE DIFFERENCES TO BRING JOY



Protestant prison pastor Peter Arenz (l), and his Catholic colleague Deacon Richard Goritzka, pack Christmas bags for prisoners together. More than 400 bags of food and sweets were donated to prisoners and Peter distributed the bags to inmates of Germany's Bremen correctional facility. Photo: Patrik Stollarz/dpa (Photo by Patrik Stollarz/picture alliance via Getty Images).

BACK PAGE

MY SCARS DON'T DEFINE ME

WAYNE SIMMONS

The greatest gift ever given wasn't placed under a tree but nailed to a tree. His name is Jesus!

Pardoned bank robber turns himself around

Jon Ponder was serving his sentence for a third bank robbery conviction, in the early 2000s, when he began reading the Bible and listening to Christian radio. One day, he heard the Reverend Billy Graham on the radio proclaim “Jesus wants to be Lord of your life”.

On that day, Jon decided to dedicate his life to Christ. He spent the rest of his time in prison studying the Bible, until his release in 2009.

Since leaving prison, Jon has become friends with retired FBI Special Agent Richard Beasley, who had arrested him.

The agent told Jon he had been praying for him. The convicted felon also started a program in Las Vegas called Hope for Prisoners, Inc., a non-profit that helps released prisoners transition back into the workforce. According to researchers at University of Nevada, Las Vegas, between January and June 2015, 64% of participants of the program found stable employment while just 6% of participants were arrested again.

In 2020 Jon became famous when he received a full presidential pardon from then-president Donald Trump.

“I can’t even find the words to describe how grateful I was in that moment when the president gave me a pardon,” Jon said. “I had no idea that it was going to happen, so it was just an incredible surprise.”

“Jon’s life is a beautiful testament to the power of redemption,” Trump said in a video.

“I want to thank God for turning my life around,” Jon said at the time. “It was 100% Jesus that turned my life in a 180-degree turn in another direction and I cannot stop thanking Him enough.”



Convicted bank robber Jon Ponder is now the CEO of Hope for Prisoners

I wanted a different life

BY JOYBELLE SEPTEMBER

It all started with the Mandrax, dagga (marijuana), and alcohol. I was in my early 30s. Soon after I started abusing, I started missing my work shifts.

You can’t hold down a job if you don’t show up, so I started jumping from job to job.

Eventually, I met a group of shoplifters. That was that. We’d target a neighborhood, lift items, sell them, and then divide the earnings. The work was simple. Better yet, it let me continue to live my life of partying.

Then, I got caught. I was 32 when I first went to prison and I went many times after that.

It got so bad that my own daughter once turned me in. My sentences ranged from a couple of months to six years. I wasn’t thinking about God during the early years. Honestly, I wanted nothing to do with Him. I grew up around Christians and I wasn’t a fan. They preached about the God of wrath, but kept quiet about the God of love.

When I stopped going to church and fell into trouble, they judged and abandoned me. I thought God didn’t want me — why would I seek Him?

And on top of all of that, I didn’t like the rules of the local church.

No lipstick, no pierced ears, no haircuts. I’m stylish. That didn’t work for me!

I didn’t want to go to church in prison, but inmates had no choice under apartheid [in South Africa].

So I went, but I used it as an opportunity to conduct business. Smuggle things in, smuggle things out, that sort of thing.

I was still very much dedicated to crime. And the further I went into crime, the further I drifted from God.

It wasn’t until my longest sentence, my last sentence, that things started to change.

I was in Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison, the same prison where Nelson Mandela once served.



Joybelle September

Soon after I arrived, another inmate started inviting me to Bible study. She kept asking and kept asking and eventually I said: “You know what? To get this woman off my back, let me go to this Bible study.”

When I got there, I saw that there was something in the Christian volunteers.

There was something about them that drew me in. So I went back just to see them. And then I went back again and again and again. Because I wanted that something that they had, I eventually joined their theological class. Without warning, my eyes were opened.

Suddenly, I understood that God

was a God of love. I also realized that He wanted me and that, because His death on the Cross, He could and would forgive me. If someone had told me that I’d end up giving my life to Jesus, I would’ve laughed and walked away. But, it happened, praise God!

MY LIFE HAS NEVER BEEN THE SAME



And from that day forward, my life has never been the same.

I lost all desire for my old lifestyle. My eyes were opened to the pain that I’d caused others and I wanted no part in

it. I wanted a different life — and God gave it to me. I left prison in 2002, never to return.

Now, I lead Bible studies and restorative justice programs in the same prisons that once held me. I relate to the inmates.

I speak their language, so they trust me. They open up to me.

Because of that, I can help them reach breakthroughs.

Many of them think that they’re a lost cause, but I try my best to help them understand that there’s nothing that God cannot change.

There are no lost causes with God. He’s not a quitter.

I’m always telling them, “There’s nothing you can do that will make God turn His back on you.”

So many of these people are being harmed by bad teaching. Many ministers preach salvation, but few preach healing. They don’t talk about human brokenness. So when people slip and fall into sin, churches turn on them. Instead of pulling them out of their trouble, they say: “I knew you wouldn’t make it.”

Churches are ignoring the reality of sin. They must deal with brokenness. They must offer counselling.

The people behind bars are in dark places, but I have hope for them.

I watched God change my life and I know He’ll do it for them, too.

I went from embracing a life of crime and drugs to leading people out of it.

Everything is different now. I’m close to my family.

Against all odds, I’ve lived to know my seven grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. God did that.

And funny enough, the daughter who once turned me over to the cops is the person who drives me to church every Sunday.

As told to and edited by Adira Polite and originally published on Then God Moved



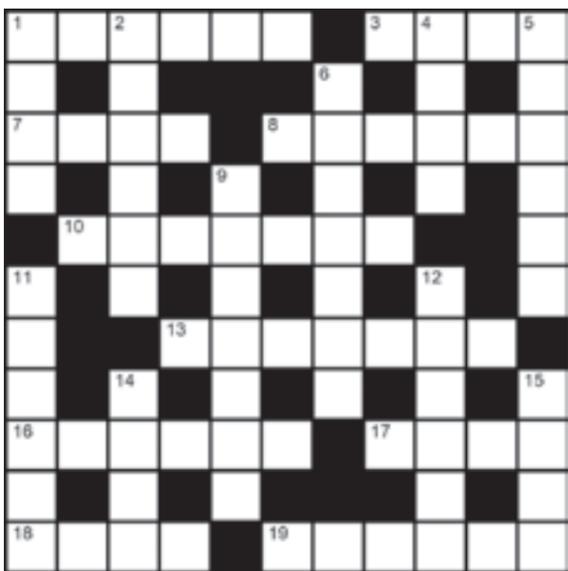
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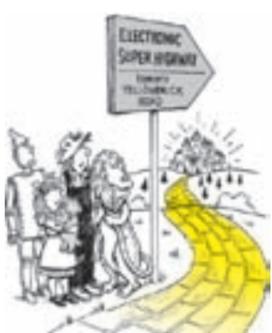
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SOLUTIONS PAGE 7



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My life-changing Christmas

• From page 1

David thought about his near death experiences, including a time when a bomb he had planted detonated early and he woke up with his clothes torn to shreds yet without a scratch.

Or the night when the IRA attempted to kill him while he was eating in a restaurant. Or when someone put a gun to his head but the gun jammed when they pulled the trigger.

As he thought about these experiences, for the first time in his life, David had a sudden desire to change. But he wondered, could God forgive someone like him?

As he flipped through the Bible, he read John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

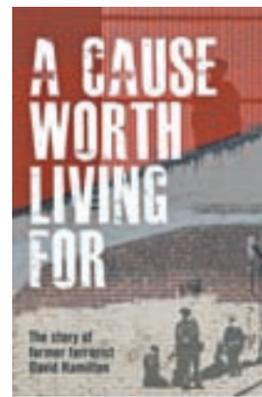
“I thought, ‘I’m going to ask Jesus Christ to forgive me and to save me,’ and I did,” David recalls. “I asked God to take away my sin. I thanked him for sparing my life. And I said, ‘God, if you change me, I will serve you the rest of my life.’”

The next morning he awoke with freedom and joy in his heart. He told his mother, who passed on the news to Mrs Beggs. She said she already knew, because God had “lifted the burden of her heart” and she was now praying for his future as a minister!

Over the next six years in prison, David grew in his faith. He also studied Ireland’s history and gained compassion for those on the other side of the conflict.

After his release, David returned to jail, but this time through prison ministry where he shared his story with both Protestants and Catholics.

David attended Bible College and became a minister of a church in England until his retirement. In 2020, he released a book about his story called, *A Cause Worth Living For: The Story of Former Terrorist David Hamilton*.



David’s book about his life

INNOCENT BUT IMPRISONED

BY AARON SALTER

I spent 15 years in prison for a murder I didn't commit.

It all began in 2003, right after my freshman year at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. To save some money, I'd decided to take a year off and return home to Detroit.

Late in the summer, I was riding around the east side with my cousin Rob. Rob was dealing and, like usual, I was tagging along to make some extra coins. At one point, Rob saw a guy named E selling to one of his usual customers. Rob was pretty upset and got out of the car to confront him.

As my cousin approached, E pulled out a revolver and shot him five times, point blank. Rob staggered towards the car, but eventually fell. E disappeared around the corner and I stayed put, shell-shocked. After only a moment, E returned.

When I saw that he had a rifle in his hand, I scrambled out of the car and ran. E shot Rob six more times. He pointed the gun in my direction, but I escaped unharmed.

Because Rob was shot at close range, the bullets ripped right through him, leaving his organs intact. He lived.

Out of fear of E, Rob refused to tell the police anything. I was on probation for a burglary charge and didn't want to get caught up over drugs, so I kept quiet, too. In hindsight, I can see that my silence made the cops suspicious. They thought that I was covering for someone. Working with someone. So when that someone kept killing, they came after me.

The murder I went down for occurred three days later, at around two in the morning. I was asleep at my cousin Gregory's house, where I'd been staying since Rob was shot. Three people were sitting on a porch when E and another guy strolled up. E shot two of the people on the porch, plus a guy riding by on a bicycle. Everyone on the porch survived, but the guy on the bike, a man named Willie Thomas, died.

Immediately after, the survivors told police that the shooter's name was Rob. Rob, meanwhile, was still in the hospital. The witnesses described "Rob" as "a thin man."

They guessed he was around 5-foot-7-inches and weighed between 150 and 170 pounds. I was a 6-foot-4-inch, 250 pound defensive linebacker. They also said that the shooter had a light brown complexion; I'm dark skinned.

Still, six hours after the shooting, the cops took my photograph to one of the survivors.

The police pressed him, asking if I – "Rob" – was the one who shot them, making it clear that they thought I was the one. The witness eventually said yes.

Not a shred of evidence linked me to the crime, but this shaky identification was enough to get a warrant on me. I was indicted on one count of first degree murder and two counts of assault with intent to commit murder. During a preliminary hearing, my attorney asked the head officer why he'd suspected me and presented my photo in such a suggestive manner.

His response: "I had a hunch." The trial began on December 3rd, 2003. The jury was mostly white; nine white, three black. I remember that one kept falling asleep.

My attorney had to be one of the worst. He half-heartedly responded to every claim the prosecutor made, but presented no theories of his own – so, the prosecutor's narrative reigned.

My attorney never presented an

alibi defense, even though my alibi witnesses – my cousin Gregory, his wife, and his kids – came to trial. He dropped the ball over and over, but I couldn't afford to hire anyone else.

After three days of testimony and only three hours of jury deliberation, I was convicted.

When I heard "guilty," my world fell apart. It hurt so bad, but I couldn't even cry for like a week. I just couldn't believe that I was going away for something I didn't do. A month later, I was sentenced to life without parole.

I started doubting God that day. It was easy to do, because I never really knew Him.

I went to church growing up, but only because I had to. I'd never had a genuine relationship with Him and now, I definitely didn't think He could be trusted.

If He truly loved me, as Scripture told me He did, why would He allow me to be railroaded by lies? I was sure that He'd deserted me.



Aaron Salter after being exonerated holds photographs from his high school football days.



INSET: Aaron with fellow exonerees at an Innocence Maintained event.

Fortunately, with time, I would see that He hadn't. On the contrary, He was very, very close.

In 2009, I was appointed federal defenders.

These new attorneys had investigators and their investigators listened to me.

In His own ways, God made it clear that He was with me and I believed Him. As my faith grew, so did my gratitude for life itself. God showed me that, though I was not guilty of this crime, I had been caught up in a dangerous, toxic world. I meditated on this for a while.

The team even searched for evidence to back up my claims, which no one had ever done before.

They eventually made contact with the witness who'd identified me and he recanted! At that point, his eyewitness identification – the only shred of "evidence" linking me to the crime – was void.

My attorneys submitted appeal after appeal; still, I remained in prison.

I was frustrated, but I was also starting to see God.

Out of nowhere, the little seeds of faith that were planted in my youth began to bud.

Then, one day, my faith in full bloom, I told Him, "You gave me this life and I'm going to live it for you." He later took me up on that.

God kept sending help and, with that, more and more good news. Finally, in 2018, my case was reopened by Detroit's Conviction Integrity Unit, an extension of the local prosecutor's office.

The CIU attorneys started working on my case in May of that year. Three months later, I was exonerated. I walked out on my 36th birthday.

From the jump, housing was a struggle. I desperately needed my own place, but it was hard to obtain.

After hearing about the similar struggles of others who have been exonerated, I realized that we have very specific needs, none of which are being met by the system.

I'd promised to live my life for God and I knew He was calling me to help other exonerees. So, two months after my release, I founded a non-profit called Innocence Maintained.

My life is proof that, though God hates suffering, He works through it. Without those years in prison, I wouldn't have the faith that I now have. I wouldn't have this testimony and I wouldn't have my mission!

Because of my experience, I can live boldly, knowing that my life is blessed and that He has my back.

It can be hard to trust Him, especially when you're in the throes of suffering, but I'm here to tell you – hold on. He hears your prayers. ●

As told to and edited by Adira Polite and originally published on Then God Moved

I was a deadbeat dad - now I'm a role model

Andre Stevens was on an ego trip. He lived to serve himself and believed he was God's gift to women. Fathering three children to different women didn't slow him down and his drug abuse caused him to make foolish decisions. When he was finally imprisoned for 52 years to life, he hit rock-bottom and decided to change his life.

Andre tells Challenge News that his childhood was "traumatic." For years he witnessed domestic violence from his father towards his beloved mother. In adulthood, he shares that he put his own selfish needs and desires before buying diapers or milk for his children.

"For the most part I was a deadbeat dad," he admits. "I had a rap-sheet record a mile long for different minor felonies and misdemeanor offenses." He explains that smoking crack-cocaine and abusing alcohol clouded his judgment.

"This ultimately caused me to commit homicide and land in prison... I was convicted for homicide against another man on a small drug transaction

gone bad." Andre was sentenced to 52 years to life. He has served 16 years.

At the start of his incarceration, Andre cried out to God. He had heard the gospel message that Jesus had died for his sins, while he was staying in a rehabilitation home for men in 1987. Before this he had questions about how the world and humans began and he believed in some kind of a higher power. When he heard the gospel message, Andre studied the Bible, which provided answers to the questions he had, and he prayed to ask Jesus into his life.

"I called myself a Christian but I was not following the Christian standards," Andre admits.

Sixteen years ago, as he was facing the rest of his life in prison, Andre had hit rock-bottom.

"I needed guidance in my life and got a little more serious about my relationship with God,"

he recalls. It was then that he rededicated his life to the Lord. "I believe by faith that the only way to heaven is through Jesus Christ. I respect other people's religions, however, I choose to stick with

Jesus. I'm not the same person as when I first came to prison. I've changed my ways for the better with God's direction and purpose. Over the years of incarceration, I've applied myself to a number of self-help programs all driven by Christ in my life. Since my incarceration God has led me to lead a clean and sober existence in the prison community. Some guys look up to me for guidance and being a good example to follow. I'm no angel by any means, but I have overcome many sins."

Andre now encourages others to call out to Jesus.

He finds strength and hope in his favorite Bible verse, Proverbs 3:5: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." ●

I'VE CHANGED MY WAYS FOR THE BETTER

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: _____ | _____ | _____ | _____
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Earliest Release Date: _____ | _____ | _____ | _____
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Gender: _____

Referred by: **CHAL**

Prefiero el curso en español.

Complete Mailing Address:
 Institution: _____ Housing: _____
 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



Cody Bates and the portrait of Jesus that captivated him. The painting is called *Prince of Peace* and is by Akiane Kramarik, who painted it when she was seven.

Darkness had taken over my life but I found the light

BY JALEN JENKINS

Without a supportive, loving family behind him and virtually without friends, Cody Bates came to even hate himself.

"I spent my whole life being bullied. I spent my whole life clawing my way, desperate for people to show me affection, desperate for people to treat me like an equal and I never got it," he says on a *The Meeting House* video. "When I was in prison, all of a sudden for the first time in my life, guys that were cool guys in the institution liked me and wanted to be around me. So I decided I would do anything for them."

Cody grew up with three different dads in Calgary, Alberta. "At a very young age I learned that loving people is dangerous," he says.

He acted up in school, got into trouble and went to juvenile hall. When he was 15, he was taken to an institution for high-risk youth, Calgary Young Offenders Center.

That's where he finally made friends. While they were the worst kind of friends, they were the only friends he'd ever made. Acceptance from gangbangers made him want to become a gangbanger.

Once he was released, he sold narcotics, participated in home invasions, and got involved in kidnappings — all for his "friends".

At the age of 22, he killed a rival over drug turf. It was a natural progression of violence in his life. But it was also a terrible milestone. It detonated an immense explosion of darkness in his mind and heart. It happened on June 6, 2006. "Oddly enough, 666," he says. [666 is a number commonly associated with evil and the devil.]

"Something happened inside of me after murdering someone that just shut off completely," he says. "It was a very evil day. The darkness that took my life over that day was all-consuming."

Police caught up with Cody and arrested him. He was charged with first degree murder, sentenced to 25 years, and taken to Calgary Remand Center, a maximum security facility. "I was looking at spending the rest of my life in jail," he says. "My heart just went black."

"Every time I went into a cell with somebody, it was always coupled with a masked statement that I wanted to move up within the ranks of the gang," he remembers.

Cody says he rose within six months to the highest-ranking gang member in the prison.

His gang was at war with the largest prison gang in Alberta.

"It was literally 24/7, a gladiator school and knife fight," he says.

Because he became so dangerous, he was confined to super max classification and placed in solitary confinement. He had belly shackles and private escorts to court.

Then he was transferred to Edmonton Institution, the most violent prison in Canada. All the 150 inmates were "violent brutal killers, everybody," Cody says.

"Any weakness you have, you have to just destroy before you get there, because those guys are well-versed in people reading, and they can smell fear a mile away," Cody relates. "When you walk into that place, you gotta walk in void of emotion, otherwise they'll eat you alive."

In 2009, his murder charge was dropped after he

worked out a deal with prosecutors in which he pleaded guilty to manslaughter. He was released after six-and-a-half years. Cody wanted to put the gang life behind him so he went into car sales.

"I made lots of money," he says. But being sober was an agony for him and he fell back into cocaine.

"My goal was to stay high until I died," Cody says.

To support his habit, he built a cocaine distribution network that grew from a 100 or so to more than 1,000 customers. Dozens of dealers worked for Cody.

His own addiction ballooned to \$1,500 a day. He only slept once every six days, the rest of the time he spent getting high.

"It was deep. It was dark. It sucked," he says.

One day a customer showed him the portrait of Jesus painted by Akiane Kramarik, a seven-year-old artist prodigy. Cody was captivated by the one named "Prince of Peace."

"I remember looking at this painting and looking into his eyes, and for the first time in my life I believed that God was real," Cody says.

But he believed there were too many barriers to becoming a Christian. He didn't understand that he could be forgiven and freed of his sin. He thought the onus was on him to do it all.

He had sinned so much. "What would Jesus want with someone like me?" he asked, disqualifying himself. "Up to this point, I was a convicted killer, a diagnosed sociopath, a gang member and drug dealer."

So instead, he plunged deeper into sin and hopelessness. Predictably, it led him to think suicide was the only answer.

On January 4, 2017, Cody decided to kill himself. He took a butcher knife to his room and slit his wrists.

"I was just so filled with pain, with shame, guilt and hurt," he recalls. "It felt like the world was on my shoulders."

But as he looked at the ceiling with blood all over the place, something remarkable happened.

He heard a voice from Heaven announce: "It's over. It's over. Your suffering has come to an end."

Cody had never attended church. He had never even opened a Bible. But somehow, he recognized the voice of Jesus.

"My addiction was gone," he recounts. "I went from \$1500 a day to not even craving."

To be sure, it was a rough detox. "But I found myself in pursuit of Jesus," he says. "I knew that he had saved me."

Cody went along to a church service with his uncle, who was a Christian. "At the end of the service, I got up and went running out," he says. "The pastor chased me out and put a Bible in my hands."

"When he put the Bible in my hands, I knew that every single word in this book was as good as gold, that this book was perfect."

"I've had all kinds of money. I've had all kinds of narcotics. I've had all kinds of things in my hands that I thought would make me feel good," he says. "But in that moment I knew that I had never possessed something so priceless in my entire life."

God spoke to Cody through the Bible. His mind started to clear as weeks turned into months.

"It was all Jesus," he says.

NO LONGER HOPELESS

J.C. is 61 years old now but he still recalls vividly being dragged into the woods by a big neighborhood kid and molested at age eight. That incident and his parents' divorce when he was 14 were formative in his future destructive behaviors.

"After I was molested, I started shutting down and distancing myself from anything good. It's as if I didn't feel worthy of good, not with so much dirt inside. I was broken and I didn't even know it," J.C. shares.

Initially, J.C. made something of himself. He worked a well-paid job, met a good woman, and became a father at 23. He had cars, boats, money, a house, family and two dogs.

"I had it all, yet I wasn't happy and I didn't know why, so I did what I do best — I destroyed everything, by cheating on the woman I loved."

"I was so ashamed, I just up and left. No goodbyes. Doing exactly what my dad had done. I left my daughter when she was five, not even thinking of the damage I was doing to her life. Yeah, I was a real jerk," he admits sadly.

As a young man, J.C. had started smoking weed, which snowballed over the years into drink, cocaine, prescription drugs and crack. After he left his family, he went to work fixing cars for his dealer. Initially things went well but the constant run-ins with the law, sometimes landing J.C. in county jail, eventually drove him to vow to change his ways and try to give his boss notice.

"I was shocked when my dealer said he owned me and I'd never work for anyone else, even saying he'd hurt my daughter!" J.C. recalls.

For the next six years J.C. was the virtual slave of this man, doing his bidding, living in a trailer on his property and enduring his mental and physical abuse. Until one cold snowy morning, J.C. snapped after he was punched in the head, and shot his boss several times with the man's own gun. J.C. took a plea bargain and is currently serving 17 years for first degree manslaughter.

While on trial, in county jail, he continued to lash out. The drugs, gambling, porn and swearing led to four fights, two of which ended in hospital visits.

After returning from hospital one time, "two guys took me aside and asked 'What are you doing, Dude?' and proceeded to read me a passage from the Bible. One guy was head of the Latin Kings, and the other a muscle-bound black man. It was then that the seed (of faith) was planted," J.C. tells *Challenge*. Shipped up state to Sing Sing prison, J.C. was terrified and sought refuge in the prison chapel.

"There I heard God speak to me in a clear, loving voice: 'Now do I have your attention?' ... Absolutely!"

J.C. explains it wasn't like he "decided to become a Christian"; "it's just that I saw Jesus, Someone who finally cared about me and loved me as I was, and I wanted to know all I could about this Man. And the more I learned, the more the things that I 'had' to do, became the things I wanted to do. I finally broke down in my cell one day and asked God if He truly existed to come into my life and save me. My life did a 180-degree about turn from then on, but the journey to complete recovery had just begun."

The biggest difference, says J.C., is that his life is no longer his own and he is no longer hopeless.

"I thought I knew it all and was in total control, but I hadn't a clue! Now God is my Father, Jesus is my Savior, and God's Holy Spirit is in my heart, guiding me every step of the way."

He particularly likes the Biblical image at the beginning of Jeremiah 18 about God as a potter. "For He is the potter, and I am the clay. He picked me up from the dirt, put me on His wheel and began to shape me into the perfect vessel He made me to be," J.C. explains. "But it's painful as God removes each stone and bit of gravel (i.e. addictions, anger, unforgiveness, hate, selfishness etc.) All I can say is I'm still on that wheel, and my Father continues to mold me."

"Don't waste another moment," he urges others. "Seek out God for yourself. In John 8:12 Jesus says: 'I am the light of the world, he who follows me will not dwell in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"

Ten years since he gave his life to Jesus, J.C. is now studying business management and is hopeful for release within the next year.



J.C. says God is like a potter and is molding him into a new person.

PRISONERS RAISE THEIR FAITH



Inmates at the Central Prison in Freetown, Sierra Leone, pray together. (Photo by Anne-Sophie Favre Le Cadre/AFP via Getty Images)

"The Lord is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth." Psalm 145:18.

I was still in prison after my release

By 13 Ashley Nixon was drinking alcohol, using drugs and had been picked up by the police for shoplifting, criminal damage and theft. By 19 he was a member of a gang and had been imprisoned for his crimes. But while in prison he was introduced to a different way of life which set him on a path to true freedom.

Sharing his story in a YouTube video on Hope Church Leeds' channel, Ashley says he was born in England and raised without his father in his life.

When Ashley was 10 his mom met a man, they married and the family moved to a new town for a fresh start. With a new man in the house, a new school and being away from his friends, Ashley found the changes hard to bear. He felt angry and, as a result, he gravitated towards other angry kids at school.

"Before long I'm getting into fights at school and getting suspended... I began smoking in between lessons behind the bike sheds because it was cool and I needed to fit in. By the time I was 13 I was smoking cannabis, taking ecstasy on the weekends sometimes and drinking alcohol with friends," he confesses.

At 16 Ashley was expelled from school and had been picked up by the police for burglary, arson and handling stolen goods. He had a serious drug habit, which included cocaine, when he could afford it.

"That needed to be funded," he explains. "I learned that drug dealing was the way forward. This began a downward spiral into the world of drug dealing, gangs and violence."

By 19 Ashley was selling a variety of drugs in most of the nightclubs in his local area. He was then noticed by some guys in a gang and he started to sell drugs for them.

Eventually the law caught up with him and Ashley was sentenced to six months in prison for aggravated bodily harm, witness intimidation and possession of drugs.

In prison, he quickly tried to build his reputation and work with the prison gangs. When he was close to being released, he was unexpectedly transferred to another prison.

At the new prison, Ashley was involved in a serious fight with a gang which resulted in the gang putting a price on Ashley's head. He explains this "normally means 24 or 48 hours later, you're going to end up with a kicking, a serious beating and stabbing and you're going to end up dead."

At that point, another prisoner came to Ashley and said, "I think you need God." Ashley just laughed. But a couple of days later he saw a signpost for the prison chapel service.

"As I'm walking towards it, there's like in a sense of adrenaline growing within like a sense of excitement, beginning to stir within me. [I



Ashley Nixon

thought] why would I want anything to do with that? How can God help me? Why would God want anything to do with me? I'm a mess, I'm getting exactly what I deserve. As I went to walk away it's almost like I felt a tug."

Ashley decided to check it out. As he wrote his name on the signpost sheet, he felt a sense of peace he had never experienced before.

"It was almost like an awareness of the presence of God came over me and I realized there was something more to life than the life that I had lived."

As the next few weeks went by, Ashley attended the chapel service and heard about a God who loved and cared for him.

When he was released from prison he had home detention and was not

allowed to leave the house after 7pm. A member of his gang visited him the first day he was home, bringing with him a packet of cocaine. The temptation was too much for Ashley.

"That started a 10-month period of going out, getting in trouble, getting into fights and taking drugs and then coming home and reading my Bible and praying ... I knew that God was real, I knew that only God could save me, only God could set me free. I was crying out to Him for that help but I was just trapped in the status, this reputation I had built."

Then Ashley's gang was caught in a £1.2 million (US\$1.6m) drug bust and removed from the streets. Ashley also discovered his partner was being unfaithful with his best friend.

"I found myself isolated and alone with nothing more than the Word of God."

Ashley started reading the Bible at the beginning and it took him a while to get to the Gospels, which recount Jesus' time on earth.

A girl Ashley knew through the gang got in contact with him and explained she'd had an encounter with Jesus. She invited him to come to church and Ashley agreed. It was there he heard about the good news

of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. One Sunday, Ashley committed his life to Jesus.

"From the moment that I gave my life to Christ, there were no more drugs. The drugs just fell away... Jesus set me free. He completely changed my life."

Ashley went on to do an internship at the church. He started out painting walls and cleaning toilets. Before long he took over the youth group, where he shared his story with young people and encouraged them not to make the same mistakes he did.

"From there I went to Bible College and university. I got a first class honours in applied theology and church leadership... And on the way I met my now wife, who's been on a similar journey to myself."

Ashley now lives in South Wales and is training to become a reverend. He also works as a recovery coordinator in a drug rehabilitation program.

"There have been some ups and downs along the way," he shares. "It isn't always easy. It's not like God clicks His fingers and all your problems go away but He walks you through those problems and promises to be with you every step of the way." •



HATRED AND RACISM NO LONGER RULE MY LIFE

I lived 25 of my 43 years behind the walls and fences of the prison system of Michigan. But my life didn't start out on the hard streets. I can point to no hungry nights, bad neighborhoods, or anything of that sort, and in fact, my early years were spent living in an affluent neighborhood where the biggest problem was me.

At the age of 12, I started running away from home because I didn't like living by any rules. I slept in tents and broke into houses and schools in order to feed myself. It wasn't long before I found myself in the juvenile home, which actually became my home away from home. Every time I was let out of juvenile home, it wouldn't be long before I was truant from my home. My truancy from home and my criminal behavior resulted in my being sent to several state facilities. I was sent to these facilities to be rehabilitated. However, the people I met there only prompted me on in the way I was going. At the age of 16, I was arrested for breaking and entering while on escape from Boys Training School. In normal situations I would have been taken back to juvenile home, but instead was jailed and charged as an adult. Four months later I was in Jackson Prison. Strangely enough, I found that I liked the prison setting because it gave me the chance to be as mean as I wanted to be and people would respect me.

Two years later I was released on parole, but was returned to prison within 30 days for robbery. It didn't matter to me because everything I wanted was in prison – all my friends, the crime, and all the other trappings of convict life. This cycle went on for two decades, and through it all, I only learned to distrust and hate.

In 1998 I was sent to maximum security for being the leader of the white supremacist group known as the Aryan Brotherhood. While at maximum security, I was actively suing the prison system for racial discrimination against whites and religious discrimination against Christian Identity adherents who were not allowed to openly proclaim their beliefs, which were openly hostile to other nationalities and races.

It was in the midst of all this hatred and racism that the Spirit of Truth started dealing with my heart and mind. I began to see the error of my ways and how far I was away from God. Slowly, He moved into my life as I found myself surrendering more and more to Him. Then on December 18, 1998, I surrendered all to Jesus Christ and founded my commitment to Him in Job 14:13, "Whether God Himself slay me, I will still trust in the Lord."

My life since then has so drastically changed that I have a hard time seeing myself as that hate monger or the same person who did all those years in prison. God has so blessed my life that I honestly question Him as to why. But He always reminds me that it is not by my actions that I receive His blessings, but rather by His choice. I know that I serve the God who loved me so much that He sent His only begotten Son to die for me so that He could have fellowship with me! What an awesome God he is!

- Billy

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A turbulent life now full of peace

Bouncing between houses and boyfriends, thinking only of her next high, 16-year-old Melissa Green just wanted to die. What began "as a bit of fun" and a way to shed her shyness, had become a full-blown addiction to intravenous amphetamines. She became so depressed she often prayed when she shot up that she would overdose – "I just didn't want to live anymore", she tells *Challenge News*.

"I was in a relationship with an older guy who was into crime to support his habit. I was soon breaking into cars, shoplifting, and cheating drug dealers out of money to keep my habit supplied."

Fearful of the law – and of being found by the dealers who wanted their money back – Melissa says she lived in a constant state of fear and paranoia. "I was living in real darkness – an emotional train wreck; I just wanted out."

The irony was Melissa swore she would never live like this. Both her parents were drug addicts. Her father had dealt drugs and his consumption triggered epileptic seizures.

"I saw what drugs did to my parents, but when I was about 14, I started experimenting. As my parents were both involved in the scene it was very easy for me to get drugs. I was actually a very shy girl, but I became very sociable when I was drunk; marijuana made me paranoid, so I'd prop myself up on amphetamines and alcohol to cope socially."

At that time, Melissa lived near a church and she would occasionally break into the cars there on Sundays. Yet it was a family from this same church that took her in when things turned dangerous at home.

"When I was about 16, drug dealers came to my house and tried breaking the door down," she recalls. "We had to leave that house – and that's when a family from that church took me in and hid me at their place for a while."

This family introduced her to God. "The father used to read the Bible to me and he taught me how to pray," Melissa says. "Today I know it was the love of Jesus pouring out of him. That's where the seed of Christ was



Melissa Green

planted. That kind of unconditional love was what I wanted for my life."

Wanting to better her life, Melissa entered a rehab program when she was 17 but left after three months, still not fully freed from her addictions. She moved to a new town, where she fell in love with her neighbor Mick, himself an addict.

It was when Melissa got pregnant with their first child – Seth – that she kicked her habit.

But life was still turbulent for the couple and Melissa fled to a women's refuge while Mick carried on with his drug addicted lifestyle.

Relating how she became a Christian, Melissa says: "In 2006, I remembered prayer time with the family that looked after me, so I prayed and prayed for God to help

me. That's when I started going to church. After a while, I committed my life to the Lord." Change came very gradually for Melissa, now 37. She and Mick eventually reconciled and today are happily married with four sons between 10 and 18. The family is committed to serving the Lord. Melissa says while she believed in God, she found it difficult to fully trust Him.

"It took me a very long time to surrender to Him because of what I'd been through.

"I found it really hard to believe that He was a good God and that He had my best interests at heart. I kept trying to take control back from Him. My faith was built more on what I thought God could do for me rather than for what He had already done for me.

"I was baptized 12 years ago but it wasn't until 2012 that I truly surrendered. By this time I had experienced His faithfulness and His goodness so one day I decided it was time to drop my guard.

"I told Him: 'God I'm not a good person. I need You. I cannot do this in my own strength because I just constantly fall.' And you know what? When I finally did let go, all I felt was absolute peace, comfort and relief. No more fear."

Today she is totally drug-free and gives God all the glory for that. "I know God was with me because there's no way I could have gotten off the drugs by myself," she admits. •

WHEN I FINALLY DID LET GO, ALL I FELT WAS ABSOLUTE PEACE



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 18:1-24

INTRODUCTION

WE have been following the teaching Jesus gave to His disciples in what was called “the Upper Room.” He was preparing them for what was to come — His own death and then the task of taking the Gospel to the world. We now have arrived at the point where Jesus is to be taken and put to death. John, the writer of this book we are studying, was an eye-witness of all that took place.

Chapter 18

Verse 1 “When He had finished praying, Jesus left with His disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side was an olive grove, and He and His disciples went into it.”

The prayer of Jesus takes up chapter 17. With His disciples He went from the city to the garden, known as Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives. That garden is there to this day.

Verses 2, 3 “Now Judas, who betrayed Him, knew the place, because

Jesus had often met there with His disciples. So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons.”

The other Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) tell of the prayer Jesus prayed before His arrest occurred. He faced the awful prospect of death by crucifixion and the great burden of mankind’s sin that was to be put on Him. Judas had made arrangements to lead the group wanting to arrest Jesus. It was still night but very early morning. They seemed to expect resistance from the disciples as they brought soldiers and weapons with them.

Verses 4, 5, 6 “Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to Him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’ ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied. ‘I am He,’ Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said ‘I am He,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.”

There was no conflict, for Jesus was following the plan of God, as always. His reply “I am He,” had a strange effect upon the group, or at least their leaders. They fell over backwards. This reminds us of times earlier in His ministry when the Lord simply walked

through angry crowds that were wanting to hurt Him.

Verses 7, 8, 9 “Again He asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’ And they said ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ ‘I told you that I am He,’ Jesus answered. ‘If you are looking for me, then let these men go.’ This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: ‘I have not lost one of those you gave me.’”

Apparently, the leaders of the group seemed somewhat dazed by what had happened. The Lord is now telling them to take Him and allow His disciples to leave. He had said in His prayer in chapter 17 that He had not lost any disciple. (Which also shows that Judas was never a true believer.)

Verses 10, 11 “Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the High Priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.) Jesus commanded Peter, ‘Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?’”

We have seen earlier that Peter was an impulsive person who often did not think before he acted. In this case he was out of place entirely. The Lord was the willing victim doing what He came to do. Swinging wildly with a sword was not going help in any way. Other Gospels tell us that Jesus immediately healed the servant Malchus.

Verses 12, 13, 14 “Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound Him and brought Him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it would be good if one man died for the people.”

It was plain the Jesus was not a criminal, breaking the laws of the land. So the Jews were looking for something they could accuse Him of. It had to be related to His claim to be the Son of God, so the high priest



The garden of Gethsemane today

would be needed to charge Him with something like blasphemy. The prophecy of Caiaphas concerning one man dying for the people had some truth but not understood by the speaker.

Verses 15, 16 “Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there, and brought Peter in.”

From the other Gospels, we understand that all the other disciples left the scene. The two following were Peter and John. John in other places refers to himself in this indirect way. Just why he had acceptance by the high priest we don’t know. So Peter too, was now inside the courtyard.

Verses 17, 18 “Surely you are not another of this man’s disciples?” the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, ‘I am not.’ It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.”

The Lord had earlier warned Peter that he would deny knowing Him. Peter could hardly believe such a suggestion. Now, after showing some courage at the arrest, Peter is fearful, surrounded by enemies of Jesus, but now acting as though he was one of them. The test was to be repeated as

we will see.

Verses 19, 20, 21 “Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about His disciples and His teaching. ‘I have spoken openly to the world,’ Jesus replied. ‘I always taught in the synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. Why question me?’ Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.”

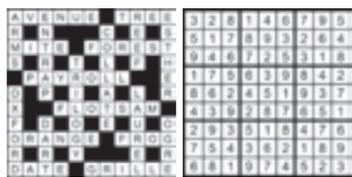
Throughout His long trial, before these leaders, and later before the Roman, Pilate, Jesus said very little in His defence. What He says here is to point out that He and the disciples were not a breakaway cult, doing offensive things, but were law-abiding. There were no grounds for His arrest and interrogation.

Verses 22, 23, 24 “When Jesus had said this, one of the officials struck Him in the face. ‘Is that the way to answer the high priest?’ he demanded. ‘If I said something wrong,’ Jesus replied, ‘speak up about it. But if I spoke the truth, why did you hit me?’ Then Annas sent him, still bound, to Caiaphas, the high priest.”

This blow to the face of Jesus was just the beginning of the unjust treatment He would receive. Men in their blindness were persecuting the Son of God. Mere humans, maltreating the one who was God in the flesh. What a strange, totally inappropriate happening!

CONCLUSION

We close this study with the story of Christ’s passion unfolding. We feel something of the suffering He underwent, but it reaches heights and depths we will never comprehend. Peter’s testing time is a warning to us all. How easy to give in to the pressure people put on us to conform to what they expect. How hard to stand up for what we believe. But the Lord will give strength when we need it. Let’s be on the side of truth and remain there!



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

Adopted as you are, as His child

BY GREG LAURIE

GROWING up, I didn’t know my biological father. But my mother married a man named Oscar Laurie, who adopted me formally. He treated me as a father should treat a son. He disciplined me when I went astray. He did the best that he could in helping me to be a good boy. But tragically my mom left him, and I didn’t see him for the rest of my childhood.

However, I did have the privilege of reconnecting with him as a young adult, after I became a Christian and a pastor. I also had the privilege of leading him to the Lord.

Just as Oscar Laurie adopted me, God has adopted you, if you have put your faith in Christ.

The Bible says, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Romans 8:14 NLT).

Are you a child of God? That comes through believing in Jesus Christ. He can pardon you of every sin you have ever committed. Maybe you’re thinking, “I’ve messed up and made mistakes. I have sinned.”

You don’t have to be controlled by your past. And you don’t have to be crippled by it, either.

You can put it behind you. You can become a new person in Jesus Christ.

This is your moment to come into a relationship with the God who loves you. He loves you so much that He sent His only Son Jesus Christ to come to this earth, die on the cross for your sin, and rise from the dead. Now He stands at the door of your life and

knocks. And if you hear His voice and open the door, He will come in.

Are you worn out and exhausted? Are you filled with sadness and depression?

There is hope. But this hope is not in religion or in rules and regulations. It is hope in Jesus Christ coming to live inside of you.

GIFT OF JESUS

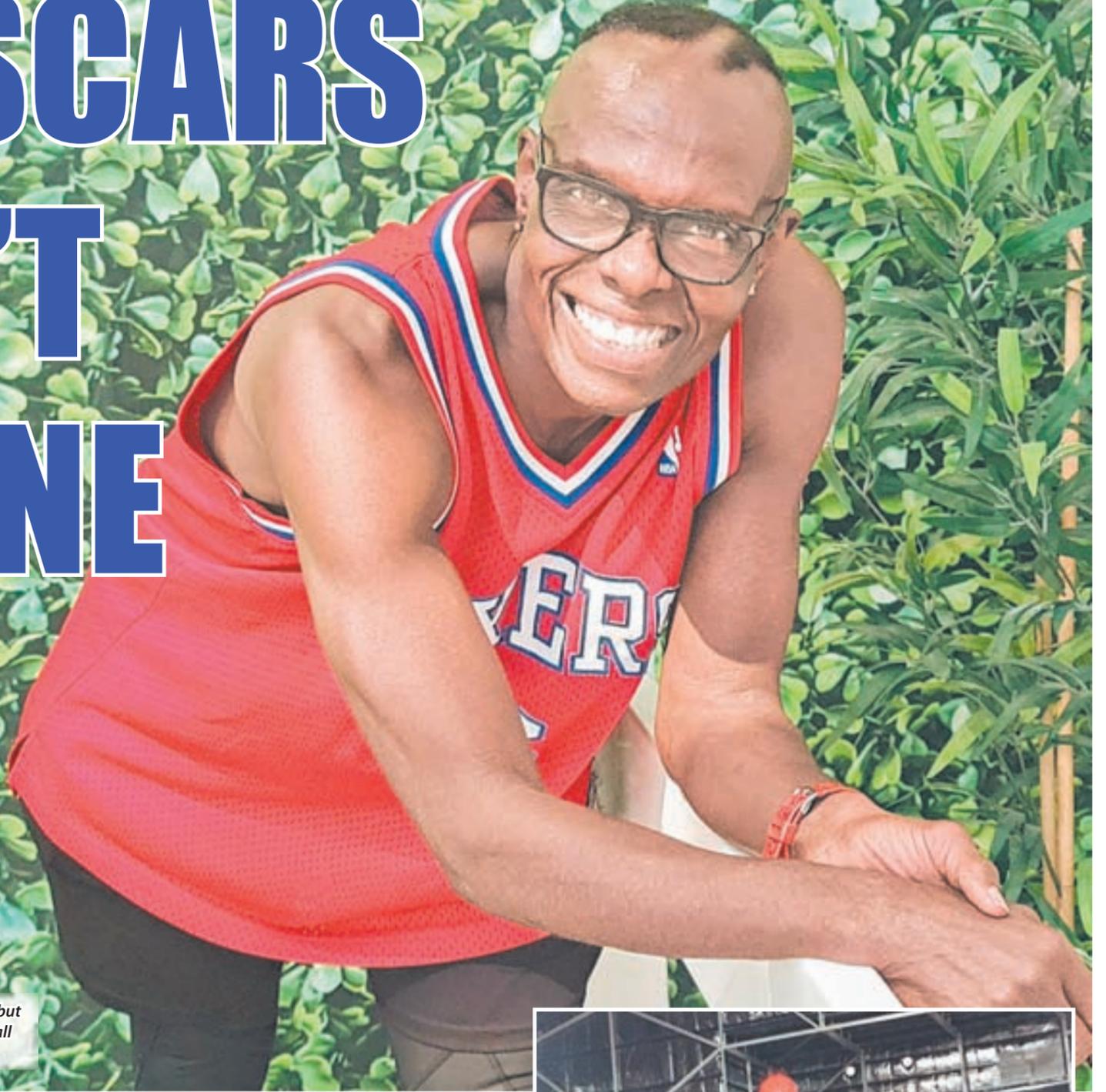
A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

– PSALM 107:8-9 NIV

MY SCARS DON'T DEFINE ME



Wayne's competitive days are behind him but he stays in the game as a youth basketball coach and activity development officer.

It doesn't take much to remind 64-year-old American basketball player Wayne Simmons that he's cheated death more times than he's comfortable with. All he has to do is start walking or look in the mirror.

The limp when he walks reminds him of the bullet that missed his forehead by a whisker and hit him in the hip instead during his tour of duty as a Marine in Beirut in 1983 when he was 25.

The deep scar on his right leg brings back memories of the night he was at a party at the Sari Nightclub in Bali on October 12, 2002.

At 10.30 pm, in the middle of the celebrations, Wayne says he had "a strange feeling in my gut" and went back to his hotel.

Half an hour later the bombs that would kill 202 people ripped through the club.

He has that scar because the explosion was so powerful it shook his hotel and sent him catapulting into the bedpost in his room.

Then there was the time he was 14 and at a friend's house. While they were chatting on the front porch, a car slowed down and drove past several times.

When his friend, who was a gang member, ducked into the house and re-emerged with a baseball bat, Wayne knew it was time to go home.

Forty-five minutes later that friend was dead, shot by the gang in that car. While Wayne has no physical scars from this incident, it made an impression on him that will never be erased.

Wayne grew up in a ghetto neighborhood in New York, but managed to stay out of the gangs and drugs culture that many fell prey to.

A talented basketball player, he

was spotted by the Spanish basketball team FC Barcelona and played for them from 1980-1983.

He visited Perth, Western Australia on a holiday in 1987, fell in love with the place and has been there ever since.

Within weeks of arriving in WA, he contacted basketball team the Perth Wildcats and signed on with them from 1987-1989. Not bad for someone who was told he would never walk again after the Beirut shooting four years before.

Wayne's competitive days are behind him but his love for the game remains and he is now a youth basketball coach and activity development officer for a city council in Perth.

Life has been good for Wayne in WA, but he carried scars on the inside from his life in New York, scars that were invisible but just as real as his physical injuries.

His father was an alcoholic and his mother struggled with mental illness. She would often "hear voices". Neither parent was very present for Wayne and his siblings — it was their grandmother who took care of them.

"I remember my grandma would buy groceries for us and walk five kilometres carrying those bags to our place," he shares. "We lived in a ghetto, yet she was never robbed or troubled by anyone."

"I know God protected her. Without her, we would have eaten a lot more sugar sandwiches. Even today, every time I get tired in life, I think about what she did and I suck it up and keep going."

"I know she prayed for us. She

would read the Bible to us and teach us about Jesus. She was an amazing Christian woman."

Wayne had grown up going to church, but, in his own words, "went off the rails later on".

"I had some things happen to me that made me question my faith," he admits. "There were a lot of family dramas and I asked myself if this whole church thing was really working for me."

"I was getting racist treatment at work too. So all in all, I wasn't in a good place."

Yet through his work as a youth basketball coach Wayne realized he needed to live the values he was teaching his students — that life would always throw tests at you but not to give up.

It was at these training sessions that one of the mothers invited him to her church. That Sunday, after an absence of 20 years, Wayne went to church.

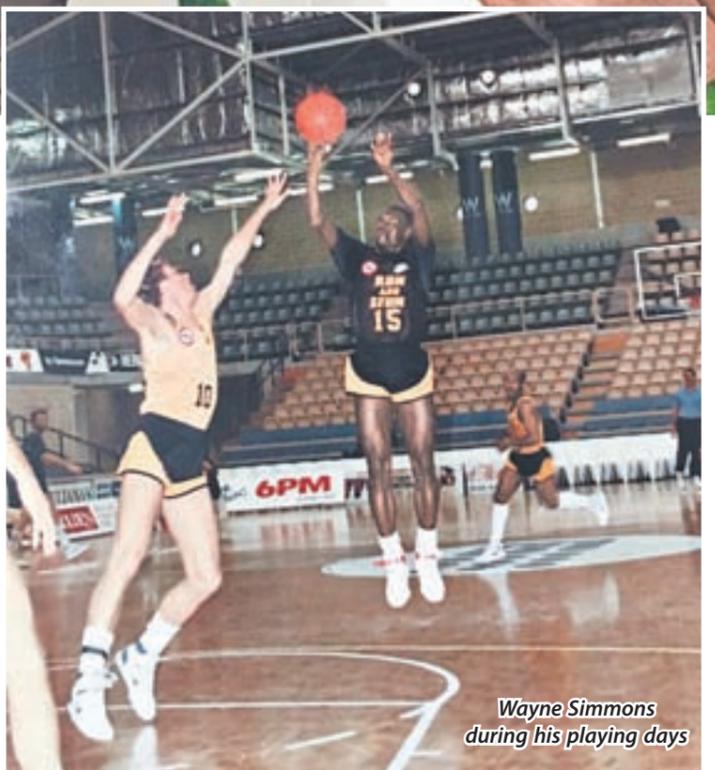
"I can't describe what happened when I got there," Wayne says.

"All I know is that God met me there and all the stuff the pastor said made sense and really touched me on the inside."

"I started to question how I was living and my attitude on certain things. The messages made me see the flip side of how I should have reacted to those situations."

"I saw that over the years I was wallowing in self-pity. I knew I had to clean up my life and get back to God. I had to be all in, not just ask God to put out one fire here and one fire there, so I re-committed my life to Him."

I STARTED TO QUESTION HOW I WAS LIVING



Wayne Simmons during his playing days

"Now on Sundays I reserve time for church whereas in the past I'd be at basketball training."

Wayne says he has found it such a relief to be able to hand over his challenges and pressures to God.

"Being able to pray and give everything to God takes the pressure off myself. It's a great release to realize I don't have to do it everything myself and that I have His divine help to get through life."

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