

I WAS A HOMELESS DRUG ADDICT

Sheaveal

BY CHERISE BOPAPE

In Sheaveal's childhood home, the refrigerator often stood empty, and the pantry shelves sat bare. Her mom and dad struggled with personal challenges that kept them from meeting some of their family's basic needs. By the time Sheaveal was 11, she discovered what those challenges were.

"My parents were doing drugs," she says. "I didn't really know what it looked like, but I knew they were doing something different."

Stealing to eat

Sheaveal grew tired of waiting on her parents to provide food for her and her four younger siblings. At 16 years old, Sheaveal decided to fix this situation.

"I started shoplifting, going into the grocery store stealing food, even going to my grandmother's house stealing food," she says.

The situation was so bad that

when Sheaveal earned an athletic scholarship and went off to college, she constantly thought about her siblings' well-being.

"That was a real big worry for me while I was away from them," Sheaveal says. "I knew that if I was there, that they were going to eat."

Spiraling downward

Four months into her college education, Sheaveal's worries multiplied after she met her first boyfriend. She was smitten. Though she had lived with parents who were under the influence of cocaine, she didn't know her new boyfriend was using it too.

When she found out, she didn't leave him. Sheaveal thought that if the young man she loved could do drugs, then it was okay for her to use them, too. But she would later consider that decision her biggest mistake.

"I tried crack cocaine for the first time in my life," she says, "and my

life just spiraled down from there."

Her childhood dream of being in law enforcement faded. She started skipping classes, and then her grades fell. Soon, she even lost her athletic scholarship. Like her mom and dad, she was addicted to cocaine.

After receiving a tip from a family member about their daughter's irregular school attendance, Sheaveal's parents paid her a surprise visit. Initially, she lied about losing her scholarship just two weeks prior to their arrival. And when she did tell the truth about her scholarship, they packed up her belongings and drove her back home.

While at home, Sheaveal continued to steal. She was arrested 10 times on shoplifting charges, but the judge was always lenient.

However, when Sheaveal began committing drug-related crimes, which were felonies, she served time in prison on four separate occasions.



A Christmas to remember

On Christmas Eve 1996 American Elliott Oswitt was given perhaps the greatest gift of his life – he was kicked out of home by his cancer-riddled wife.

"She came to the door crying, hairless and sick-looking from the chemotherapy treatment, and told me, 'I know where you've been, who you've been with and what you've been doing. I can't take it anymore. You're no good for this family. Go away. We're better off without you,'" Elliott remembers sadly.

Elliott and Polly were married when he was 19 and had two daughters together. He was not a good husband or father. He was a heavy drug user and, although he was never physically abusive, was a very angry man.

"I was always yelling and swearing and ranting and raving. Putting down my wife and putting down my children," he admits.

Then Polly developed breast cancer and had to undergo radical surgery and chemotherapy. At the same time their daughter, who had already been in trouble with the law on more than a dozen occasions, got arrested again for fraud and jailed for three years, leaving Elliott and his wife to raise her two children.

To get away from these overwhelming problems, Elliott quit his job as a medical assistant and became a tour director for a British company.

He travelled a great deal of the time with a company



Elliott Oswitt spent many years as an angry, alcoholic drug addict before finding a Gideon's Bible in his hotel room.

that he called "Heathen Tours." The purpose of these tours was to provide any and every sort of "pleasure" the clientele could afford. He, too, participated in the immoral acts he offered to his clients.

"I got paid to take drugs and drink with people all over the world," Elliott says. "What a great job for an addict! But it got crazy and out of hand."

He barreled along this path until he found himself homeless that fateful day in the middle of what should have been the most wonderful time of the year.

Elliott booked into a motel intending to shoot and kill himself. While in the room, he noticed an open Gideon Bible on top of the

television. It made him so angry he cursed God and knocked the Bible off the television.

He tried to kick it under the bed, but the bedframe was solid and the Bible could not go under.

It fell open to John 14:27, which says: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you: not as the world gives it I give it unto you. Let not your heart be troubled neither let it be afraid."

"I was 47 years old and I wept for the first time in my adult life," Elliott shares.

His father had beaten it into him that "men don't cry" but he knows now that men who do not cry explode.

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Each time she was released, she returned to the same challenging, temptation-filled environment.

"I would actually stay out of prison... no more than six months," Sheaveal says. "Then I would start back using drugs because I went back to the same neighborhood."

Broken promises

Between her jail and prison stints, Sheaveal had six children. But she never had the chance to raise any of them. The children were all born addicted to cocaine, so she lost custody of them.

"It was a rough road not having them [in my life], and [I promised] them that I was going to get them every time I got out of prison," Sheaveal says.

But she broke her promises and knew her behavior didn't honor God. She grew up learning about Christ in church. Her parents—and especially her grandparents—were religious people. Even when her parents didn't attend church, they sent Sheaveal and her siblings to services.

"There was always a pull in my life to want to serve [God], but I was just addicted," she says.

Rock bottom

Every time Sheaveal was released from prison, she connected with a local church. However, her attendance would always dwindle until she stopped going altogether.

Then in December 2011, she hit rock bottom. She started doing things she had told herself she'd never do. Sheaveal was sleeping in a roach-infested van and became homeless.

One night, she knelt in a hotel room and begged the Lord to deliver her from drugs. She promised to serve Him for the rest of her life if He did.

She felt as empty as the refrigerator in her childhood home. At the time, she had been smoking cocaine for three days straight and hadn't been taking her prescription medications. Sheaveal struggled to breathe. When she looked down at her body, she noticed it was swollen – an effect of her drug abuse. Although her kids weren't there to hear her, she muttered apologies to each of them. Climbing into bed, she thought her life was over.

"I just knew I was going to die, and I saw my kids' faces flash in front of my eyes," she says. "When I lay down, I tell you, I lay down to die."

But when God woke her up the next morning, she knew it was only because of His grace and mercy that she had survived a drug overdose. God had kept her safe.

"God saved me"

Grateful to be alive, Sheaveal honored her promise to the Lord.

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OLYMPIC
FAITH

Ask Y: Peter Meadows answers your questions about God

QUESTION: ISN'T IT JUST DAFT TO SPEAK OF JESUS AS 'GOD'?



IT DOES SOUND far-fetched to claim the God who created everything came as Jesus to live among us in human form. And that Jesus was far more than a supercharged version of Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Bono and David Blaine rolled into one. Some say the idea that Jesus was God was invented by the Church because it matched what they wanted to be true. Others say the followers of Jesus so wanted Him to be God that they made it up. So what can a sane and reasonable person – you! – believe? Let me give you a few thoughts for starters. What could possibly point us to believing such a mind-shattering claim could be fact? Let's start with the impact Jesus made. It is not the final word but it does speak volume. And Jesus impacted history more than any other person to have breathed air on planet Earth. Two thousand years after his birth, Google the name "Jesus" and you'll find well over eight hundred million pages referring to him at the present count. And no one else comes close. In other words, when it comes to impact on history and interest in the history maker, there's Jesus and there's the rest. This proves nothing conclusive but is enough to suggest we should keep looking. So what about the things Jesus did as recorded by those who watched Him do them?

For me they are exactly what I'd expect someone to do if they were God. I'm thinking of simple "God things" like miracles. I know we have seen magicians do spectacular stuff. But we know it's a trick. Somewhere there's a trap door, a mirror or an accomplice. But the only-God-can-do-them things Jesus did were altogether different. Up which sleeve did Jesus keep 120 gallons of wine that mysteriously appeared at a wedding? Or, if He just used sleight of hand and a little coloring agent, how come the guests gave it five stars? Where did Jesus hide enough bread and fish to feed more than 5,000 people in one sitting? How did He heal the crippling conditions of multitudes? How did He bring back to life someone who'd been dead so long his grave clothes stank with decay? And how did He... The list is endless. How? If Jesus was no more than flesh and blood the answer has to be "no way." But if He was God come in human form would be a piece of cake – and quite a lot of loaves and fish. And that's only a fraction of the answer as to why we should take the claim that Jesus was God seriously. • Peter Meadows is the co-author with Joseph Steinberg of *The Book of Y* the basis for the eight week Y Course that explores life's biggest questions.

I WAS A HOMELESS ADDICT

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Wanting to make amends, she called a woman whom she had stolen from a couple of months prior. After offering the woman her apologies, Sheaveal went to church. But before she could leave the service, a police officer arrested her. The woman she'd talked with earlier had alerted law enforcement officials. A judge sentenced Sheaveal to five-and-a-half years in prison. Sheaveal grieved because she knew she would be breaking her promise to her children once again. She wouldn't be coming to get them anytime soon. Yet she knew this prison sentence gave her exactly what she needed – time to work on herself and grow closer to God. "It was a peace that was just over me because [my struggle] was over," Sheaveal says. "God had saved me!" **Restored relationships** During one of Sheaveal's stints behind bars, she saw a flyer about Prison Fellowship Angel Tree.



Sheaveal is now the Angel Tree coordinator for her church and helps lead community service efforts.

She was happy to learn that if she signed up her children, a local church would provide them with the Gospel and a gift on her behalf. Sheaveal signed the kids up every year she was in prison.

Angel Tree helped her feel connected to her children. When Sheaveal was released in February 2017, her kids' ages ranged from 13 to 21. She continued working diligently to gain their trust. She called, visited, and helped them as much as she could, admitting that their new situation was strange at first. She knew they were wondering whether she would go back to prison this time. "The longer that I stayed out, they trusted me. They call me Mom," she says. "They call me now just to see how I'm doing, just to say that 'I love you.'" Now Sheaveal is the Angel Tree coordinator for her church and helps lead various community service efforts. Sheaveal may have committed crimes, broken promises, and lain down to die, but when she got up, she bounced back, got busy, and started building up others. • The original of this story can be found at www.prisonfellowship.org and it is used with kind permission.

Never the same again

BY FAY FOSTER

IT STARTED AS just another ho-hum night at work for the shepherds around Bethlehem. Taking care of sheep was a 24-hours-a-day job, so the shepherds lived out in the open with their sheep. They made, or found, 'folds' in which to keep the sheep at night. A fold could be a cave, a circle of stones with some branches or thorns for a roof, or a basic shed. Each day, the shepherds led their flocks out of the fold to find pasture, then at night, once all the sheep were counted back into the fold, they would lie across the door of the fold to protect their flock. Thieves, wolves, lions and bears were constant dangers. It is very likely that the shepherds took turns to sleep. Shepherding was considered an unskilled job, and shepherds were on the lowest levels of society. How amazing then is this account from Luke chapter 2, verses 8-14, of the night when Jesus was born: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'" "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on Earth peace to those on whom His favour rests.'" Sometimes God does things quietly. But on this occasion, this holy night, He announced the birth of His Son Jesus with a sky full of angels, with singing and light and prophecies. The second chapter of Luke's gospel, verse 15, tells us that after the angels had made their stunning announcement, they returned to heaven, leaving the shepherds in

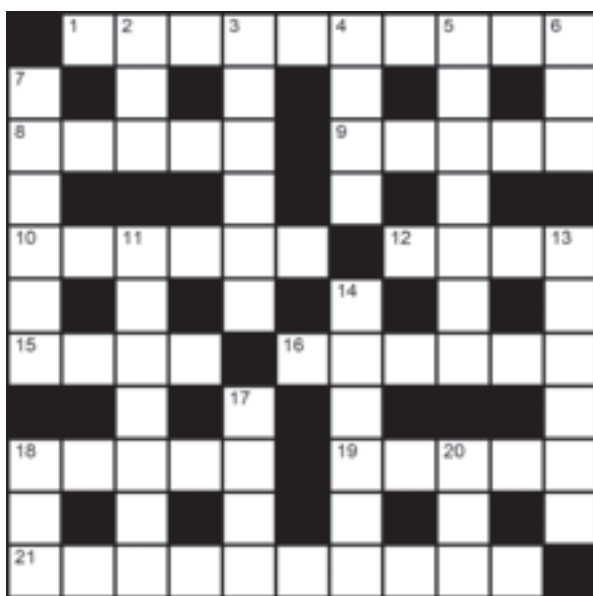


STOCK PHOTO

the shepherds to walk to Bethlehem, or how they managed to find the right building. Luke just tells us that they "found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger". And once they had seen the baby for themselves, they couldn't stop talking about what had happened. Everyone who heard them was amazed at what the shepherds said to them (verses 17-18). The shepherds returned to their flocks, but they would never be the same again. They had seen and heard things that filled them with a new kind of faith. As they walked back to the fields, they glorified and praised God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. When we decide to act of the good news we have heard, God provides such great evidence of His truth that we are overwhelmed with the reality and the goodness of it all. And we will never be the same again. • This article was first published in *Salvos Magazine* and is used with kind permission.

Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

- ACROSS**
- 1 Changed business from public to private ownership
 - 8 Athletics venue
 - 9 French city
 - 10 Course component
 - 12 Freckle's place
 - 15 Harp ancestor
 - 16 In short supply
 - 18 Fossil preserver, at times
 - 19 Entire quantity
 - 21 Non-deciduous trees
- DOWN**
- 2 Regret deeply
 - 3 Capable of survival
 - 4 Freeway fare
 - 5 Variety of pool
 - 6 MS ____
 - 7 Type of warm-blooded animal
 - 11 Long-lasting
 - 13 Compass pointer
 - 14 Crop cutting tool
 - 17 A steep rugged rock
 - 18 Terrific tennis serve
 - 20 Tuna fish container



SOLUTIONS PAGE 7



"I was sure I heard someone knocking on the door."

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nudge WITH KARL FAASE

The insight of the wise men

ONE OF THE most intriguing elements of the first Christmas to me is the story of the wise men. Here is a group of eastern astrologers who notice a new star and get onto their camels to travel who knows how far to worship a king they have never heard of. Stranger still is that when they get to the palace of Herod, the Jewish teachers of the day knew where Jesus was to be born but did not go. Yet these foreign intellectuals head off to meet and worship Jesus. These men are smart enough to read the signs of the day and see the evidence of God at work. What about today? With the eyes of faith, I believe you can see God at work everywhere. From the beauty of creation, to the birth of children, to the wonder of our universe, through to the acts of grace and kindness by people who could only be motivated by the Spirit of God. God is at work in our world. Can I encourage you to look more closely for the hand of God in your life? The evidence is there, you just have to be ready to see it. •

A Christmas to remember

• From page 1

Elliott shut the Bible and called Polly to say goodbye.

Polly asked him to at least call her pastor, which he did.

Though it was Christmas Eve, this pastor came and spent time with Elliott. He spent the next three days in the motel reading that Gideon Bible.

On Sunday, he attended church with his wife where he knelt and asked Jesus to forgive him, free him of his addictions and help him to live right.

“The minute I asked Him, He forgave me,” Elliott marvels.

“My sins were cast away as far as the east is from the west. They were cast into the deepest part of the ocean.”

The God Elliott surrendered his life to during Christmas 1996 was nothing like what he thought He would be.

“To me, God was a rule-making Darth Vader out there in outer space somewhere,” he revealed in a talk on Livestream in 2013.

Elliott grew up in Los Angeles California in a strict Jewish home.

He had no real knowledge of Jesus Christ and was not even permitted to speak His name.

His father was a “heavy hitter” dad, one with whom he had no relationship. At 17, Elliott escaped the violence at home for a different kind of violence in Vietnam.

Over three years, the army

turned Elliott from a non-drinking, non-smoking good boy into a drug addict, alcoholic womaniser.

Marriage – and even Polly’s illness – did nothing to change him as he careened down the path to what could have been a violent and untimely end. Had it not been for Polly’s actions that night before Christmas he may well have killed himself.

But, as he found out after he gave his life to Christ – “God is awesome to forgive – wives are another story,” he says ruefully.

After his conversion, Elliott stayed with his dying mother for a while and contacted an organisation called Jews for Jesus, which helped him to learn more about how his new faith was compatible with and had its roots in his Jewish background.

After his mother’s funeral, Elliott returned home and he and Polly worked on their marriage.

He then got a job with a Christian touring company, which put him in contact with Christians from all persuasions and allowed him to encourage others with his story. Polly fully recovered from cancer and worked two jobs so Elliott could complete Bible school.

Elliott became a pastor in 2000. Today both his daughters are happily married, raising his grandchildren.

“My family is proof that God does miracles even today!” Elliott says with a beaming smile. •

“**To me, God was a rule-making Darth Vader out there in outer space.**”

I found a place to belong

Jean-Pierre Visser is only 24 and is just months into a 10-year prison sentence for stealing copper cable and damaging infrastructure.

For Jean-Pierre, who had a good childhood in a Christian home and never got into trouble as a boy, it all began when he became addicted to crystal meth.

That addiction led to him becoming homeless and living on the street. He also had trouble with alcohol, lying and anger.

After he landed up in prison, Jean-Pierre says he remembered the things his grandmother had taught him about Jesus.

He says, “I decided to become a Christian when

my life hit rock bottom. I needed to get my life back. I started attending church. After 11 months I got baptised. This was seven years ago.”

Now, although he lives with the consequences of his poor choices, he declares: “I have more peace of mind. I have found that I have a purpose.

“The best part is knowing I belong somewhere.

“I would tell others that if they ever feel like they don’t belong they just need to open the Bible because that’s where they will find the answers.” •



Jean-Pierre Visser

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!

I now have peace within

Jinito Mdluli, 35, was a drug addict and a violent one.

He tells *Challenge News* he was quarrelsome and used to beat up people for “simple and useless things”. He also led a sexually immoral life and lived to have fun.

Five years ago, he began a 15-year sentence for assault (grievous bodily harm) at Modderbee Correctional.

In 2017, just before his prison sentence began, Jinito accepted a friend’s invitation to go to church, where he heard the Gospel (the good news that Jesus Christ came to Earth to die for our sins).

He shares that by that time he was looking for inner peace. The message that day talked about life after death.

“I wanted to understand more about this, and I wanted to become a better person.”

He says he found the service “fantastic” and that it “changed my mindset.

“My dreams about my future changed as well.”

He committed his life to Jesus Christ.

“Jesus is the Messiah, meaning that He saved us from being unholy and gives us eternal life.”

Not long after that, Jinito began his prison sentence.

He admits that the hardest part of being a Christian is resisting temptation.

However, he says he has changed. He says he is able to forgive others and that he is no longer on drugs or a gangster.

“Peace is now within me. I have dreams which are bigger than what I am today.

His favourite Bible passage is Romans 12:1-2: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

“In God’s family we are children of God. We will only find peace in Him. Jesus Christ is a good example for us. We have to endure all suffering as He did.” •



Jinito Mdluli

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

BY JOHN HUTCHINSON

DURING A CHRISTMAS concert, Australian singer Delta Goodrem called to a crowd of cheering fans, “Do you believe in Christmas?”

The response was rapturous, but I struggled with her question. What is Christmas? It seems to be anything thing people want to make of it.

The question should’ve been, “Do you believe in Christ?” It’s the all-important question.

To believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He came into the world to save us from our sins and give us eternal life is a life and death issue.

The correct answer can be life-changing and impact us for eternity.

The Bible says in John 3:16-19: “For 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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world,

but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because He has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

Jesus said to his friends in grief, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.” (John 11:25-26)

It’s vital to believe in Jesus for He said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (John 14:6)

He also said, “I came that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

As a young person I believed in Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. It was the best thing I ever did.

The Bible says: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9) The right question is, do you believe in Jesus? •

“Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. God’s saving love in Christ, however, is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us.” – Timothy Keller

Name: _____
First Last

ID #: _____

Date of Birth: _____ | _____ | _____
MM DD YYYY Earliest Release Date: _____ | _____ | _____
MM DD YYYY

Gender: _____ Complete Mailing Address: _____

Referred by: **CHAL** Institution: _____ Housing: _____

Street or PO Box: _____

City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____

Prefiero el curso en español.

STUDENT COMMITMENT

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

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

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

I HAVE A NEW IDENTITY

BY JOSIAH HEMP (ABRIDGED)

“I wanted to fight them every time,” Rusty says, describing his arrests. “I wanted someone to shoot me.”

Rusty wanted the arresting officers to think that he was going to hurt them, but they never took the bait.

Rusty wandered far away from home on a long, violent, and chaotic road. It wasn't where he and his family thought he would go in life.

Rusty's childhood

“I didn't know there was such thing as a dysfunctional family,” Rusty says. “That's how good my childhood was.”

Rusty's dad was a county sheriff, and his mom was a third-grade schoolteacher. In southeast Oklahoma, they lived a middle-class lifestyle. “I had a great family,” Rusty says. His childhood presented him with many opportunities for success, “so the choices I made were devastating,” Rusty says. “To come from that environment and to make those choices, it's kind of like I cheated the world.”

The prodigal son leaves home

Between his junior and senior years of high school, Rusty went to basic training for the National Guard. When he came back, he thought of himself as a grown man who didn't need to listen to his parent's advice.

“I didn't even need no one to tell me what to do anymore,” Rusty says.

He started drinking and partying, and he led his new friends down that path as well. “We thought we were the Mafia,” Rusty says. He walked away from his family, leav-

ing a strong community behind for a different sort of life. He refused to go home and seek forgiveness, continuing down a path of drugs, violence, and crime.

His decisions also led to instability in his home life. Rusty married a woman, having two children with her, but he left her. He met another woman, Brandy, and had two children with her. “There was not a thought in my mind that had life in it,” Rusty says. “There was no future in my life that I could see. There was no hope. There was nothing.

“I was so evil... there was nothing left in my life that was life. It was all dead... Every situation I put myself in was chaos and violence.”

He didn't try to kill himself, but he wanted to die.

Encountering the law

Rusty lived this way for seven years. He thought he could get away with anything. But in 1997, he received his first drug charge. Then came a felony assault on a police officer and a first-degree burglary charge. With two back-to-back violent crimes and other drug related convictions, he went to prison repeatedly. “I could never figure out how to get out of prison and live the right life,” Rusty says. “I went from prison back to the life that I'd chosen. But I couldn't forgive myself for the things I'd done.”

Resisting grace

When Rusty arrived in prison for the fourth time, Trevor, his best

friend from high school, was serving a life sentence in the same prison. Rusty discovered that Trevor had become a Christian.

Seeing Trevor's new behavior shocked Rusty. He knew how violent and dangerous he had been, but something was different, and Rusty did not like his friend's new faith.

Trevor kept sharing about Jesus through a crack in the cell door, but Rusty did not want to believe it.

“When I came in, I was doing the worst I'd ever done in my life,” Rusty says. “I didn't care; chaos ruled my life.”

In prison, he continued doing drugs and participating in any wrongdoing he could find.

Someone invited him to a weekend ministry event in the prison's gym. Rusty still didn't want Christianity, but the prison

had been locked down for so long that he decided to attend the event, just to get time out of his cell.

Rusty mentally kept his distance.

One night during the event, he prayed from his bed, “God, You're going to need to show me You're real.” On the third day, Rusty felt like he was having a heart attack. He felt an intense pressure in the room and a weight on himself.

He opened his eyes, looking for a correctional officer to get him medical help. In front of Rusty, a volunteer was staring at him and crying. Rusty says he saw the love of Christ in the volunteer's eyes.

“I was so evil... there was nothing left in my life that was life.”

”



Rusty and his wife, Brandy

“I gave Jesus everything that day,” Rusty says. “God put his kingdom around me after I gave my life to him. He just restored everything, everything that had been taken by the devil.”

Lasting freedom

In 2012, Rusty was released from prison. This time, he wasn't going back. He went to a ministry home for his first few months on the outside. There, he learned how to find a job, pay his bills, and live wisely. He paid off around \$30,000 in fines – taking responsibility for the first time.

At first, because his relationships with his family had been broken, his church, his re-entry program, and Celebrate Recovery provided him with his main source of community.

One day, the mother of two of his kids arrived at the ministry home. She was on drugs, and Rusty gave her a phone number for a women's ministry home. Six months later, Rusty saw her again and realized that she had become a Christian too.

“Give me someone to serve with,” Rusty remembers praying when he first became a Christian. He never dreamed it would be the mother of two of his kids. He married Brandy, and they continue to serve God together today. “God restored everything,” Rusty says. “My kids, my mom and dad, my grandma, all of them, everybody that I've burnt

the bridges with.” Rusty served in response to hurricanes and tornados with the Southern Baptist Disaster Relief Team, served as Celebrate Recovery Ministry Leader at First Baptist Church-Claremore for eight years, and earned a bachelor's degree in community counseling. Years of ministry prepared him to serve men in prison.

Returning to prison – to serve

In April of 2023, Rusty once again walked through the halls of a prison – but this time as a free man and as a Prison Fellowship Academy manager at a correctional center in Oklahoma. He was shocked when, on his first day, an officer handed him a set of keys.

Rusty teaches classes, leads service projects and community-building events, and meets one on one with prisoners. Reflecting on his story, Rusty often describes the change in his life to others like this: “Before I surrendered, I was inmate 261023, a liar, a thief, an adulterer, a drug addict, a deadbeat dad, a mean and violent person. After Jesus took over, I'm Rusty, a friend, a brother, a son, a father, a ministry leader, a good employee, a homeowner, and as far as I know, the best papa in the world.”

The original of this story can be found at www.prisonfellowship.org and it is used with kind permission.

I stopped running

BY AMY CAIN

Derron was tired.

“Not just physically but mentally and spiritually tired as well,” he remembers. “I was tired of trying it my way, living how I pleased.”

After violating his parole and getting into a gunfight with a neighbor, Derron was back in jail, taking stock of his life.

He had considered running from the police, but his mother, a devout Christian, convinced him to turn himself in. He finally conceded, realizing he wasn't just tired of running from the law – he was tired of running from God.

“So, in the county jail, knowing I was headed back to prison, I confessed and repented,” Derron says. “I totally surrendered to God that day, and I found the rest I was looking for!”

He also decided to be honest with the judge about what he had done. Although she could have sentenced him to 40 years, she sentenced him to 15, for which Derron was very grateful.

“I've been in here going on eight years, and the Lord is showing me so much favor,” he says. “I'm growing in Christ Jesus. I have a better relationship with my mom, kids, and family. I got my joy, peace, and love back. Thank you, Lord! I give Him all the praise and glory!”

After committing his life to Christ, Derron began studying God's Word and learning as much as he could about living for Jesus. He soon became a leader in his facility, finding purpose in serving others.

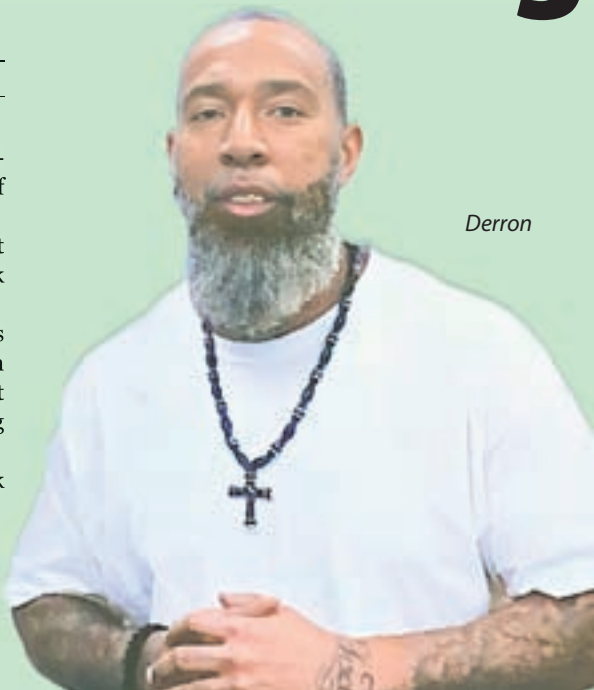
“I'm a tutor in our Real-Life Discipleship class and a spiritual leader in this new program we've started here, Spiritual Leadership,” he says.

“I also witness to guys in my zone. I share with them how, in the world, one would say I had everything out there.

But in all reality, I found everything and got everything in prison. It's in prison where I recommitted my life to God. With God, I have everything!”

In 2018, Derron discovered Crossroads Prison Ministries and signed up as a student.

After completing Tier 1, he began Tier 2, studying



Derron

alongside a personal mentor. The last completed lesson Crossroads received from him was in 2022. His facility adopted mail restrictions that help prevent contraband from entering the facility but also, unfortunately, prohibit Crossroads lessons.

Over the last several years, Crossroads has experienced challenges like this with dozens of correctional facilities, and are actively working with facility leaders to develop solutions so they can continue providing all their students with Bible studies and encouragement from their mentors.

Some years into his sentence, Derron received joyful news about the other man involved in the gunfight that brought him back to prison.

“Oh yeah, the guy that I had the fight with and shot – he also gave his life to Christ. So now we're brothers in Christ Jesus, praise the Lord,” he says. “What the devil meant for bad, God used for good.”

Used with kind permission of Crossroad Prison Ministries (CPM). CPM instructors from churches across the world guide students in their walks with Christ through correspondence Bible studies and letters of encouragement. For more information, visit cpministries.org.

Strength to never lose hope

“I had a great childhood. I heard about God at church when I was a child. My parents were Christians who brought me to church. My life before Jesus was full of anger and unforgiveness. I prayed day and night and gave my heart and soul to God. Now I have hope that my life will change from bad to good. I thought my family would help me pay the fine to get me out of jail but none of them are willing. But by God's grace I know I will find help somehow because God is looking over me. He is giving me strength never to lose hope.”

”

– Blessed Ramatsepe, 28, a prisoner at Nigel Correctional.



SWEET TOOTH LEADS TO A SAVORY TRUTH



Matt

BY CHERISE BOPAPE (ABRIDGED)

In the rural town where Matt grew up in central Minnesota, the social scene was quiet. For inspiration and fellowship, some families went to church. Matt's family only attended services occasionally.

"Faith was not really a big part of our lives," he says. "I went to youth group and stuff as a kid, but more as a hangout."

As a result, Matt preferred throwing a football to studying the Bible. Sports weren't just a pastime for him. They were part of his identity.

A life upended

Since middle school, Matt had been building a network of friends who felt as comfortable on a football field as he did. In high school, the hours of drills and practices he and his teammates experienced helped them form strong

bonds. Sports and healthy friendships inspired Matt and provided the entertainment he wanted.

But during his freshman year, Matt sustained a debilitating knee injury while playing ball. His recovery dragged on for months and distanced him from his teammates. It upended his life.

During football games, spectators still roared with excitement, and cheerleaders kept chanting motivation from the sidelines, but Matt wasn't on the receiving end of the approval and praise.

He longed for a change.

Desperate for friends

Desperate to form new friendships, Matt made poor, hasty decisions throughout his high school years – accepting invitations to parties where he and other minors would drink alcohol.

These new, unhealthy relationships couldn't compare to the wholesome community he had built while playing football.

His life spiraled downward each time he used reckless tactics to get people to befriend him.

At his lowest moment, Matt made a devastating decision he regretted.

When one of his new friends asked him for help getting a gun, Matt didn't want to disappoint him. This resulted in a series of events eventually leading to Matt's arrest and conviction of second-degree murder. A judge sentenced Matt to 20 years in prison. He was 17 years old.

Led by his sweet tooth

Matt thought his life was over. He had never had a run-in with the law before, and dealing with this new experience behind bars was hard.

On his first night in jail, Matt rejected an offer to attend church. But when he found out volunteers would be serving free doughnuts, he quickly changed his mind.

Doughnuts may have lured Matt to church, but a volunteer's relatable message of love and forgiveness is what grabbed his attention and kept him there.

When they asked, "Who wants to give their heart to the Lord?" Matt raised his hand and prayed.

"I didn't know what that really meant," Matt says, but looking back, he recognizes that's where the Holy Spirit started stirring in him.

Sparking a fire

Church volunteers continued discipling Matt during his stint in jail. He was eventually moved to Minnesota Correctional Facility-Stillwater.

But in 2011, after serving eight years of his sentence, Matt was still wrestling with the guilt and shame associated with his crime. Then he began noticing men who had found a sense of peace.

"[Some men were] locked up longer than me and getting out after me," Matt says. "They were happy, joyful people, and I was not... I started to learn from them and just realized that it was a relationship with Christ in their life that was different for them."

When he transferred to MCF-Lino Lakes, he had nine years left to serve on his sentence and began living out his faith in earnest.

There, he participated in what is now known as the Prison Fellowship Academy.

When he graduated from the year-long Academy, he stayed another year to mentor men in the next cohort. He led them in small groups, too.

He told other residents that participating in the Academy is the best decision they'll ever make because with the Academy, a person does their time with purpose.

A church on the inside

After completing the Academy, Matt transferred to MCF-Moose Lake. While there, he put into action the values he learned from the Academy. A pastor from a local church asked Matt to start a microsite at the prison using the church's DVD recordings.

As well as running the church, Matt also led a Prison Fellowship Academy, even though he was still incarcerated. The COVID-

19 pandemic blocked volunteers from coming into prisons, but thankfully, the Church on the inside continued to meet and have Bible studies.

Matt says, "Volunteers aren't always going to be there. Stuff like COVID or whatever could happen. But the Church still exists

and thrives inside."

The multiplier

In the last two years of his incarceration, Matt started a work release program. He began working at the church as a janitor. Then, when another position with greater responsibilities became available, Matt was promoted.

"Within six months of being on work release," Matt said, "I was the facility manager leading a crew of 10 people and managing two facilities."

Today, Matt serves as the director of multiplication at the church. He's responsible for training and equipping people, especially incarcerated men and women, to be faith leaders and share the Gospel in their communities.

Matt says he also oversees the planting of microsites much like he did when he was incarcerated.

Second chances and answered prayers

Matt's second chances didn't stop with his church family. His parents have always been supportive, and other close relatives have shown him grace. He was also able to reconnect with his younger brother after they had completely lost contact.

Matt even found the love of his life, Alissa.

The two married last year and welcomed their first baby in May.

Matt is grateful for his growing family. He's also thankful for his career, church, and restored relationships. He knows God has been gracious to Him, giving him second chances.

Now when he's lured toward dark places, he's better equipped to stand firm. No longer is he desperately seeking approval from friends. He realizes he has all the approval he needs in Christ.

The original of this story can be found at www.prisonfellowship.org and it is used with kind permission.

From student to mentor

BY PAIGE DEUR

At nine years old, Jim was asked not to return to the Sunday school program offered by his church because he asked too many theological questions. Rather than giving up, he was motivated to explore his faith even more.

"I went home and talked to my mom and then asked Jesus into my life," he recalls. A few weeks later, he began attending a different church, trying to follow Jesus and live like Him.

He continued walking with the Lord into adulthood, even amid challenges, including a marriage to someone who didn't share his faith. However, after three years, he led his wife and mother-in-law to Christ.

Jim's life seemed to be on the right track.

He says, "My wife and I raised our two boys in the Church and studied the Word with them, trying to live by the example Jesus gave us."

Nevertheless, at 38, Jim made regrettable choices that culminated in a prison sentence. Within those prison walls, a suicide attempt brought him back to Christ.

Recalling that transformative day, he says, "I found myself on my knees, asking for forgiveness, turning my life back to Jesus, and thanking Him for saving my life." Prison became a turning point for Jim.

He pursued higher education, led Bible studies, and witnessed the transformative power of God's Word in breaking down barriers between people from diverse backgrounds.

He was encouraged by letters from former members of his facility's Bible study who had found comfort in their faith after release, reconnecting with their families and finding church homes on the outside.

"This was another of God's tremendous blessings, as you are not allowed to receive letters from those who are on parole or probation while you are incarcerated, but the officers continued to pass them on to me," he says.

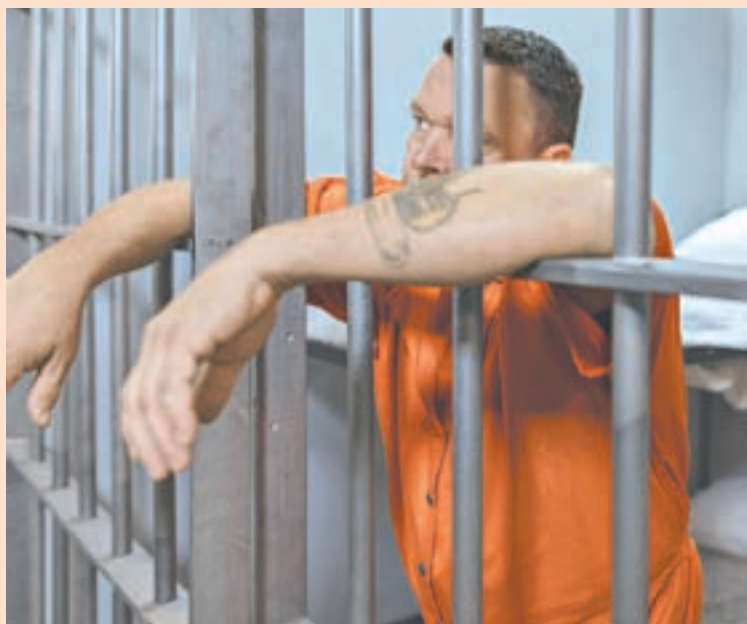
In 2016, Jim was paired with a one-on-one mentor through Crossroads' Tier 2 program.

His mentor, Lou, walked alongside him and encouraged him during his re-entry journey later that year.

After his release, Jim sought reconciliation with his family, embracing forgiveness and a renewed sense of purpose.

"While he has experiences I don't have," his mentor Lou says, "both of us have shared sorrows and joys."

Over the past eight years, they have both comforted each other through losses, including Jim's mother and



STOCK PHOTO

Lou's wife, and encouraged each other to share the hope they have in Christ.

"I was impressed by how he was able to talk to one of his son's girlfriends about Jesus," Lou shares. "He encourages me to witness to one of my sons-in-law."

A year after his release, Jim signed up as a Crossroads mentor.

"As a lifelong Christian who strayed from my beliefs, ethics, and morals and ended up serving three-and-a-half-years, I can relate to the daily struggles of [people in prison]."

"I would like to help them find or renew their relationship with Jesus and give back for all my blessings," he shared in his application to become a mentor seven years ago.

Today, Jim's commitment as a Crossroads mentor has impacted more than 400 students as he shares his story of resilience, faithfulness, and the transformative power of God.

"The Lord has blessed me greatly," Jim attests.

"Throughout my life before, during, and after my incarceration, God has shown unmatched faithfulness that still amazes me. We are told by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:9 that 'God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.' I am proof of His love, blessings, and faithfulness and will continue to tell my story so others will know that God is true to His Word and that His Son is the way to eternal life."

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"I can relate to the daily struggles of [people in prison]."

"My greatest humiliation – being sent to prison – was the beginning of God's greatest use of my life; He chose the one thing in which I could not glory for His glory."
– Chuck Colson, former Special Counsel to President Richard Nixon and founder of Prison Fellowship

WORDS FOR THE HEART

STUDIES IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

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

Mark 4:1-34

INTRODUCTION

WE ARE LEARNING from the master teacher, the Lord Jesus. One way in which He taught was by parables. A parable is a story that teaches a truth.

The story is not a true happening, but it shows something important about life. Chapter four of Mark commences with the parable of the sower, a man who scatters seed. This is how it reads.

Verse 1 On another occasion Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around Him was so large that He got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables.

The Lord was being pressed by the crowd, so getting into a boat gave Him freedom to sit and speak.

Of course He was still close to the edge of the water, so He would be easily heard. This is what he said:

Verses 3-8 Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell

on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew, and produced a crop, multiplying 30, 60, or even 100 times.

Verse 9 Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

It seems that the truths in the parables should have been grasped but even His disciples didn't always understand.

So, Jesus is about to tell them plainly what is the meaning of this parable.

Verses 10-12 When He was alone, the Twelve and the others around Him asked Him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"

Jesus comments on the effect of parables on hearers.

He quotes from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. There we read of the



STOCK PHOTO

blindness and deafness of so many hearers even when truths are told to them. Something we all must take notice of.

Now He explains what the parable of the sower means. Note that the seed is the Word of God.

Verses 13-20 Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the Word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the Word that is sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear

the Word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the Word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the Word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the Word, accept it, and produce a crop – 30, 60, or even 100 times what was sown."

The seed has life in it. God's Word has the offer of life and hearers must respond to its challenges and

invitations. There are four responses in this section.

- Those who scarcely hear and quickly forget.
- Those who respond but have no depth – shallowness.

- Then others who allow the affairs of this life to crowd out the voice of God.

- The fourth is the case of the hearer who obeys the word sincerely and lives the life given by the seed.

No doubt all these cases can be seen today as the Word of God goes out.

Verses 21-23 He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

It seems that the Lord is still referring the Word, comparing it to light. As it is intended to bless people, it should be brought out into the open.

Verses 24, 25 "Consider carefully what you hear," He continued. "With the measure you use it will be measured to you – and even more. Whoever will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."

Another translation reads this way: "Pay attention to what you hear! The same rules you use to judge others will be used by God to judge you – but with even greater severity."

Verses 26-29 He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

Jesus is explaining the way God's Kingdom grows. He is still referring to the Word as seed which God uses. Just as seed germinates and grows to produce grain, so the Word of God spreads and brings new life. This is the way we come to God and live a life that is different. Indeed, it is life that never ends.

Verses 30-34 Again He said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

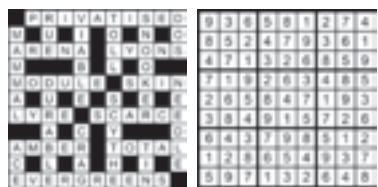
With many similar parables Jesus spoke the Word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable.

But when He was alone with His own disciples, He explained everything.

As we put together the messages of this chapter, the central thrust of them is clear. God works with the seed of truth to bring new life to needy people.

CONCLUSION

We are challenged to think about the way we regard the Word of God. Do we listen well? Do we take it seriously? Let's remember, it is God's way of working. His Spirit uses the Word to transform us.



HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

Anyone can gain the eternal life offered through Jesus Christ

We read in God's word: "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)

OUR PROBLEM: **Separation from God**
"Everyone has sinned. Nobody is good enough because God's standards are perfect" (Romans 3:23) **ADMIT**

GOD'S REMEDY / SOLUTION: **Jesus died on the cross**
"God demonstrates His own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8) **BELIEVE**

OUR RESPONSE: **Trust Jesus by receiving Him**
"To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12) **COMMIT**

Here is an example of how you can pray.

Dear Father in Heaven. I come to you now because I want to be saved. Please, forgive me of my sins. I believe that you sent your Son Jesus Christ to die for me and that you have raised him from the dead. I now ask Jesus Christ to come into my life as my Saviour and Lord. Take control of my life. Please make me the person You created me to be. In Jesus Christ's name. Amen

The Lord Jesus says: "I tell you the truth. Everyone who believes in me has eternal life." (John 6:47).
He gives life of a wonderful quality that continues forever.

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

I have prayed the prayer [ABOVE]

* Please check 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

Was the tomb really empty?

BASED on overwhelming historical evidence, Christians believe that Jesus was resurrected bodily in real time and space by the supernatural power of God. The difficulties in belief may be great, but the problems inherent in disbelief are even greater.

Many people have advanced alternate theories to explain the Resurrection:

• The wrong-tomb theory

Answer: If the wrong tomb was involved, the Jewish authorities would have lost no time in producing the body from the proper tomb and squashing any talk of a resurrection.

• The hallucination theory

Answer: It is not credible to think that 500 people could have seen the same hallucination for 40 days.

• The swoon theory (Jesus did not actually die on the cross)

Answer: Jesus was pierced in the side by a soldier to prove that He was dead before they took Him down from the cross.

Even if He somehow survived that, it is impossible that someone half-dead, weak and ill could have rolled the heavy stone away, got past the Roman guards and then given the disciples the impression that He was a Conqueror over death and the grave.

• The stolen-body theory

Answer: How did the depressed and cowardly disciples suddenly become so brave and daring as to face a detachment of select soldiers at the tomb to steal the body? And why would they do so? They didn't even understand that Jesus was going to rise from the dead.

• The moved-body theory

Answer: If the authorities moved the body, when the disciples started to talk about a resurrection, why didn't they recover the corpse, display it on a cart and wheel it through the centre of Jerusalem?

• The relocated-body theory

Answer: The Jews didn't relocate the bones to an ossuary until the body had been buried for a year. Even if it were true, all it accounts for is the empty tomb, which is not what convinced the disciples Jesus had risen – it was His appearances to them.

• The copycat theory (Christianity copies ancient myths)

Answer: Unlike the historical Jesus, there is no evidence for the reliability of any of the alleged parallel stories in the mystery religions.

Jesus of Nazareth ate, slept, performed miracles, died, and returned to life. These accounts are supported by a reliable historical record.

In contrast, the dying and rising gods of the mystery religions were timeless myths repeated annually with the changing seasons.

The greatest proof of Jesus' bodily resurrection is the change that came over His followers.

They were transformed from terrified doubters, to bold, charismatic preachers who were prepared to die for what they had witnessed.

And who would die for something they knew to be a lie? If the resurrection had not happened, they would have known it.

These arguments are taken directly from *More than a Carpenter* by Josh McDowell, chapter 10.

For more in depth reasoning see, among others, *More than a Carpenter* by Josh McDowell; *Who moved the Stone?* by Frank Morrison; or *Cold-Case Christianity* by J. Warner Wallace.



Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone of Team USA celebrates her gold medal and new World Record in the Women's 400m Hurdles Final of the Olympic Games Paris 2024. (Photo by Julian Finney/Getty Images).



Tsige Duguma of Ethiopia. (Photo by Sam Mellish/Getty Images)

**Challenge
SPORT**

OLYMPIC FAITH

The limelight shone bright on the medallists of the Paris Olympics.

For one particular group of athletes though, that glory rightfully belonged to Someone else – it belonged to Jesus Christ. And that's where they directed it.

Using songs, Instagram and even sign language, they declared their thanks and faith to God.

Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone, USA – 400m hurdles gold

Four-time Olympic gold medalist, world champion, world record holder – American hurdler Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone wears many crowns.

But the one that means the most to the 25-year-old has nothing to do with her athletic accomplishments. “The title that means the most to me,” she says, “is daughter of God.”

She shares her faith story in her autobiography *Far Beyond Gold: Running from Fear to Faith*.

At the post-race press conference after winning the gold, she said: “I credit all that I do to God... I have a platform and I want to use it to glorify Him.

“Whenever I step on the track it's always the prayer of, ‘God, let me be the vessel in which You're glorified... regardless of what happens, He's going to get the praise through me. That's why I do what I do.’”

Sydney wrote in an article on the Guideposts website that she had been raised in the church, but she didn't really know God.

“I'd been avoiding Him because I had this idea of Him as a harsh taskmaster who'd demand that I give up what I enjoyed, including running, to serve Him. Even so, my soul must have been yearning for him, because I found myself thinking, ‘The only way I'm going to heal from this is with God.’ So I started

going to church again.”

Her personal life changed when she met former NFL player Andre Levrone Jr. They were married in 2022 and she credits him with helping her to fully embrace her faith.

She disclosed in her book that it was with his help that she realized “my life wasn't about me. It was about showing the world God's power, wisdom, kindness, love, and forgiveness.

“Win, lose, or draw, it's an opportunity to glorify Him, and my value is already secure in Christ.”



Australian high jumper Nicola Olyslagers reads her Bible and writes in a journal during a competition. (Photo by David Ramos/Getty Images).

Nicola Olyslagers, Australia – high jump silver

Few people understand having a higher calling than Australian Olympic high jumper Nicola Olyslagers.

At 1.86 metres, the 27-year-old not only stands tall in regular life, but also in her sport. At the Paris Olympics in June, she won the silver medal and in doing so became the first Australian field athlete ever to win a medal at consecutive Olympics, having bagged a silver at the 2020 Games in Tokyo.

She sets the bar high for the other – greater – purpose in her life: living for Jesus Christ.

Nicola became a Christian in her teens. In her last year of primary school she went to a new school and remembers being nervous about her new surroundings.

But she worried for nothing. “When I walked in I was immediately met by this overwhelming, non-judging love from the students and teachers,” she recalls.

“It was a love that left me with questions and envious of how they were able to show that sort of love. They all said they loved because Jesus loved them... it changed my entire life. It was the first time I came into full realization of the Gospel [story of Jesus saving us from our sins] and the reality of God.

“I committed my life to Jesus.”

Her Instagram profile is peppered with Bible verses and prayers.

After winning the silver, she posted: “Praise be to God my Rock! He is my strength and song!!”

Gabriel Medina, Brazil, surfer – surfing gold

Brazilian surfer Gabriel Medina was told to remove an image of Jesus from his surfboard as he was in breach of the Olympic Charter, which prohibits political and religious manifestations.

It didn't stop him from winning the gold medal with a score of 9.9 – the highest ever in Olympic surfing history.

The picture of him surfacing from the wave – with a hidden message – has gone viral. It shows him and his surfboard seemingly levitating as he points his index finger to the sky – a gesture well known to Brazilian evangelicals as praising and thanking God.

Gabriel's post-victory Instagram post bears this out: he quoted this verse from the book of Philippians – “I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4: 13)

Noah Lyles (Track and field, USA) – 100m gold, 200m bronze

As he lined up for the men's 100m final, USA's Noah Lyles could be seen mouthing the words: “Thank you, God. Thank you, God.”

After winning gold, the sprinter told Premier Christian Radio that he had to find his “own journey with God”. “I thank God every day for



Brazil's Gabriel Medina during the 5th heat of the men's surfing round 3, of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. (Photo Jerome Brouillet / AFP) via Getty Images)

getting me through each and every round. Healthy, mentally and physically”, he added.

In a victory interview with BBC Sport, the 27-year-old was asked what his final thought was before the race. He said with a grin: “Thank you, God”.

Team Fiji

Team Fiji delighted the athletes by singing worship songs in the Olympic village regularly. Australian water polo player Matilda

Kearns shared the moving scenes on Instagram. “Having the best seat in the Village being next to the Oceania building,” she wrote in a post. “Still not sick of it!”

Tsige Duguma, Ethiopia – track and field 800m silver

Ethiopian track and field athlete Tsige Duguma won silver in the 800m. The words “Jesus is Lord” were written on the back of her race bib – fitting words to end this wrap-up.

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