

Dragged down by addiction

Isaiah Ramos was only three years old when his father was sent to prison for 15 years, forcing his mother to raise four children on her own in the Bronx, New York.

“We went from shelter to shelter,” Isaiah recalls in a Delafé Testimonies video. “There was no stability.”

At a young age Isaiah was exposed to masturbation and pornography. He remembers going to church with his mother but at the same time “messing around with the young girls in the church and just living a life of lust and secret sin”.

“Once I hit an age where I could tell my mom, ‘I don’t want to go to church this Sunday’, she let me stay home ... I began looking up to all the wrong men because my dad wasn’t in my life.

“I started just chasing money and fame, caring about my clothes, idolising what I put on my body, trying to seek purpose in different sports, living a life of fornication, sleeping around with different women.”

After graduating high school, Isaiah started pursuing a boxing career, which led him to a new obsession: gambling. “When I got involved with gambling, it affected me so much. It just made me depressed. It made me angry.”

Isaiah also started smoking weed and before long, it became a daily habit – as did the gambling. When his gambling began affecting his career, Isaiah knew he had to stop.

He resolved to quit gambling as his New Year’s resolution.

He managed to kick the habit – but found he replaced it with smok-

ing weed more and sleeping around. One night Isaiah was driving with a friend and they were popping pills to get high.

“I got into an accident and the car was totaled,” Isaiah recalls. “I remember I got out of the car and just fell on the highway. I woke up in the hospital with IVs in my arm.”

After that, Isaiah’s lifestyle didn’t change – he went right back to selling drugs, smoking weed, drinking and partying.

“But I started thinking differently. I started having thoughts like, ‘Is God real?’ ‘If God is real [and I died], would I be in hell right now?’”

After a discussion with his grandmother about these thoughts, three words stood out to him: Relationship with God.

“I knew that I needed a relationship with God, I just didn’t know how to do it.”

One day Isaiah’s aunt invited him to stay with her in North Carolina so he could get away. He agreed, but before he left, he popped pills and smoked weed continuously.

“When I got there I was so anxious,” Isaiah remembers. “This was my first time in two or three years that I was about to go to sleep without smoking [weed]... that night I prayed.

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ARE YOU READY FOR THE AFTERLIFE?

BY GREG LAURIE

FULL House actor Bob Saget, 65, was found dead in his hotel room in Florida following a show on his comedy tour. This tragic event happened right on the heels of the death of beloved comedic actress Betty White, who died at 99.

Bob made this statement on Instagram after Betty passed: “I don’t know what happens when we die, but if Betty says you get to be with the love of your life, then I happily defer to Betty on this.”

He honestly added, “I don’t know what happens when we die.”

Death is something we all think about almost every day — some more than others. We should think deeply about death, but more importantly, the afterlife.

In older times, people commonly wrote a Latin phrase on the top of documents: “Memento Mori.” It means “Think of death.”

The phrase sounds morbid on the surface, but it’s not. It served as a reminder to be aware that life ends, eternity is close and there is an afterlife.

I am not an expert on the afterlife, but I am a student, not only because I am a Christian and

a pastor, but also because my son, Christopher, died in 2008. I have thought deeply about what happens when we leave this life and enter the next one. Here is what has brought endless comfort to me: There is a Heaven, and Jesus has made a way for us all to go there.

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.

Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying” (John 11:25).

My son believed in Jesus as I do. He is now in Heaven.

For the Christian, the moment we take our last breath on earth, we take our next breath in Heaven.

Because Jesus died on the cross for my sins and rose again, I have hope for the afterlife. And I know that I will see my son again.

King David, who also lost a son too soon, wrote, “I will go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Samuel 12:23).

My son is not just a part of my past; he is also a

part of my future. Jesus promised me that.

It is not a bad thing to think about these things deeply. Renowned author and theologian C.S. Lewis said, “A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not ... a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do.”

Think about death, eternity, and the afterlife. But think on it with the knowledge that death is not the end. There is an afterlife, but you need to be ready for it. Heaven is a prepared place for prepared people.

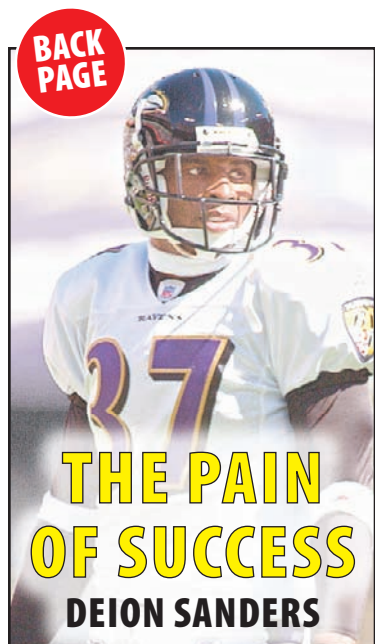
Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am, you may be also” (John 14:2).

Only those who are prepared to die are genuinely ready to live.

Now Betty, and Bob are in the afterlife. And one day, you will be

too. You decide in this life where you will spend the afterlife. Choose well.

● Greg Laurie is the pastor and founder of the Harvest churches in California and Hawaii and of Harvest Crusades. He is an evangelist, best-selling author and movie producer.



I COULDN'T LIVE WITH MY SECRET

BY BILLY HALLOWELL

A Mississippi man shocked authorities when he walked into a police station on a Tuesday and admitted, of his own volition, to killing a person three years prior.

Monroe County Sheriff Kevin Crook, a more than 20-year police veteran, told WCBI-TV he hasn't seen anything like 37-year-old James Eric Crisp's confession.

"James Eric Crisp walked into my office, of his own free will, and confessed to having killed [Roger Loyd] Taylor," Crook told the outlet. Taylor, 48, was reportedly killed March 10, 2019, and Crisp's purported admission could help finally close the longstanding cold case.

One of the most notable and difficult facts in the case is that Crisp, who once struggled with drugs and past legal issues, reportedly became a Christian after his life of crime.

He now teaches and preaches at a recovery program called God's House of Hope to help others facing similar struggles.

Crisp was an addict at the time of the killing, according to The Christian Post.

"By his own testimony, he got saved three years ago. He was in a recovery center - we sent him there," Crook said. "He is now a teacher and preacher in that program."

Despite his life change, Crisp reportedly couldn't live with his secret. According to the sheriff's office, he sought to regain "spiritual freedom" by telling the truth he had long concealed.

"He made the decision to risk his physical freedom in order to regain his spiritual freedom and hopefully help bring closure to this case for the sake of himself and the Taylor family," Crook's office said in a statement, according to The Daily Beast. "We are glad for Mr. Crisp to get this off his chest so that he might be able to continue to do ministry wherever the Lord has planned for him, but this does not close the case for us."

Authorities plan to look at the evidence to determine if there should be other charges or any other suspects.

Amy Coyle of God's House of Hope and others appeared at a bond hearing to speak about Crisp and his dramatic life change while also addressing the importance of him taking responsibility.

"We know that God is a just God. He forgives," she told WCBI-TV. "But we also have to take action for our responsibilities."

Crisp has been charged with manslaughter and is being held on \$150,000 bond.



James Eric Crisp

Dragged down by addiction

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"It was my first time in a long time that I prayed. I cried out to God, 'Lord let me sleep. Let me fall asleep without having to smoke, without having to have sex, without having to pop pills.' And He answered my prayer. I didn't just fall asleep, slept like a baby."

In North Carolina, Isaiah attended church with his aunt. He recalls tears streaming from his face as he watched people worshipping God.

The pastor preached about all the questions Isaiah had about God and to have a relationship with Him.

"There was a man there that was sharing his testimony about how the Lord delivered him from his life of sin and that was a message of hope for me. It brought me peace. It was the truth, the good news that God was offering me a relationship with Him - a new life ... that day I made the decision, I said, 'God, I'm gonna give You my life.'"

When the pastor invited anyone who wanted to get baptized (submerged in water as an outward display of dedication to God) to come forward, Isaiah walked to the front of the church.

"I laid my life down and I knew it was a very major decision. I was ready. I wanted a new life. I wanted to change ... in that moment I knew there was hope. I knew that God was gonna set me free."

After that Isaiah began praying and reading the Bible every day. "God began cleaning out my heart little by little, stripping away sins. He set me free from my pornography addiction ... He just began working in my heart; like I had no desire for it. I remember the same thing [happened] with weed. I wouldn't smoke because God was that peace that I needed."

Isaiah admits it wasn't a perfect journey and some sins were easier to give up than others.

"I said, 'God I am gonna stop doing everything else but I'm not gonna stop having sex.'"

But he became so convicted that sex outside of marriage was wrong, he prayed to God to help him to change.

"I didn't know how to do it, but I told God I was willing. God began working in my life and I began walking in purity."

Isaiah now shares his story in the hope it will help other people who are struggling.

"Jesus is the only way," he attests. "He's the only way to true peace. He's the only way to true love. He's the only way to find your purpose. He is the only way to heaven."



Isaiah Ramos

Wise words on suffering

YUVAL Noah Harari in his bestseller, *Sapiens*. "Happiness is not the surplus of pleasant over unpleasant moments. Rather, happiness consists in seeing one's life in its entirety as meaningful and worthwhile. . . A meaningful life can be extremely satisfying even in the midst of hardship, whereas a meaningless life is a terrible ordeal no matter how comfortable it is."

TRAILS and subsequent suffering in life are inevitable, unpredictable and variable. And while never pleasant, they become purposeful and profitable when responded to correctly [by using them as an opportunity to draw closer to God].

- David E. Stevens

IT has never been quite enough to say that God is in His heaven and all is right with the world; since the rumor is that God had left His heavens to set it right.

- G. K. Chesterton

GOD specialises in hard situations. He is most at work, most active, most powerful, most strategic when the odds are stacked against people; whether that's lifting people out of pits, storms, dry valleys, deep waters, shipwreck, islands, deserts, wilderness, even graves. God showed up and redeemed. Hope is not God's side hustle. God is there for you, and the harder the fight of life gets, the harder He is fighting for us.

- Benjamin Windle

WARREN Wiersbe states: "Our faith is not really tested until God asks us to bear what seems unbearable, do what seems unreasonable, and expect what seems impossible."

I'VE lately been reminded that when it's cloudy and you can't see the sun, we still trust that the sun is there. It's the same with God. He's still there, even when it feels brutal.

- Megan

"LIFE with God is not immunity from difficulties, but peace in difficulties."

- C.S. Lewis

"GOD allows us to experience the low points of life in order to teach us lessons that we could learn in no other way."

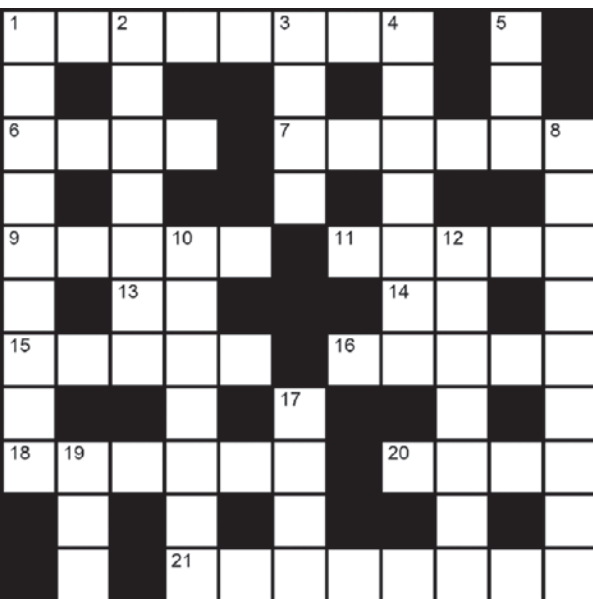
- C.S. Lewis

"LIFE is hard. Life is going to be hard if it's not already really, really hard. But I believe we can live so well in the hard. . . You have a stunning capacity to endure incredibly hard because of Jesus in your story. You are actually anti-fragile. "With Jesus in your corner, you are so much stronger than you think; you can endure very, very hard things. You can stay in the hard, you don't have to leave. You can do it. You can do this, because of Jesus."

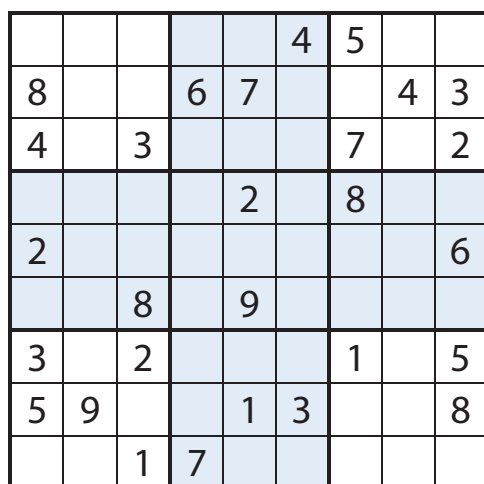
- paraplegic Katherine Wolf

Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

- ACROSS**
- 1 Subordinate set
 - 6 Shaved part of the neck, perhaps
 - 7 Albania's capital
 - 9 Open-mouthed
 - 11 Type in data
 - 13 Mexico's continent: abbr.
 - 14 "Catch Me ___ You Can"
 - 15 Follows an order
 - 16 Asparagus stalk
 - 18 Inter, as a pharaoh
 - 20 Plank imperfection
 - 21 US casino capital (3,5)
- DOWN**
- 1 Island nation in SE Asia
 - 2 Double-winged aircraft
 - 3 Horse feed
 - 4 Vegetable that looks like a white carrot
 - 5 Money in Japan
 - 8 Joint inflammation
 - 10 Employees' due
 - 12 Old German monetary unit
 - 17 Bird seen in hieroglyphics
 - 19 Granny, to a Brit.



SOLUTIONS PAGE 7



nudge WITH KARL FAASE

Being good enough

THE great English preacher, Dr Martin Lloyd Jones, would regularly ask people if they were ready to call themselves Christians.

If they responded with the words "I do not feel I am good enough" he knew there was an issue.

Here is how he responded to those words - "At once I know that...they are still thinking in terms of themselves; their idea is still that they have to make themselves good enough to be a Christian...It sounds very modest but...it is a denial of the faith...you will never be good enough; nobody has ever been good enough. The essence of Christian salvation is to say that He is good enough and that I am in Him."

So do you feel you are ready to call yourself a Christian? Remember, not feeling like you are good enough is to miss the point.

STAR ATHLETE COMES HOME

BY JOANNA BREAUULT

Some might say sports are in Stephen Barbee's blood. His father was recruited by several professional baseball teams. He refused to play games on Sundays and became a preacher instead. But for Stephen, growing up in Kansas in the 1970s, football, track, and baseball were everything.

Athletic achievement gave Stephen – a pastor's kid who was more often associated with his dad's name than his own – a chance to establish an identity of his choosing. It felt good to be admired, but this world also brought new temptations such as alcohol, marijuana, and then harder drugs.

"It was kind of like a split personality: the athlete, the drunk, the student," Stephen recalls. "I had all of these different masks I was living out."

Stephen attended Highland Community College on a full scholarship for baseball and was an All-American football player. Then one day, after transferring to Peru State College in Nebraska, it all came crashing down. Stephen got blackout drunk, and his behaviour was so bad that he was expelled. In that moment, his athletic career was over.

The roller coaster of addiction

In the spring of 1986, Stephen came home depressed and discouraged. Sometimes he prayed, but his childhood faith didn't hold much meaning for him. Stephen jumped at the opportunity to coach college football nearby – but when he was caught partying with the players, he was fired.

"My addiction always overshadowed my dreams," he says.

This truth continued to play out in his life. In pursuit of a woman, Stephen moved to Chicago. The relationship fizzled and Stephen started using crack.

"I lost everything. I was walking the streets, literally eating dry cereal for two days straight," he remembers.

During that time, he would pray, "God, deliver me ... don't let me die in my addiction." He eventually ended up at a homeless shelter where he found safe housing, got sober, and rededicated his life to Christ.

In August of 1991, Stephen gave a Gospel tract to a young woman – and she eventually became his wife. The couple had two children and bought a four-bedroom house in the suburbs. Stephen earned his bachelor's degree in communication and got a job as a chaplain at a health clinic. He went on to become the men's division director at the homeless shelter he once lived at.

Though Stephen was busy with ministry, not everything was right at home. The marriage was suffering – and one day, Stephen's wife told him she was leaving.

Alone in his house, Stephen decided – after 10 years of sobriety – to have a beer. And then two. The voice of temptation was loud and clear.

"The voice says, 'You haven't had a hit of crack in over 10 years. You deserve one,'" Stephen recalls. "And so that night, I went out and smoked about \$700 worth of crack cocaine."

Hard consequences

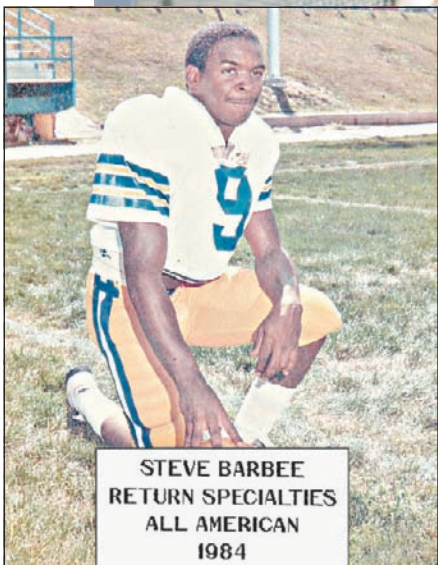
Immediately, Stephen was back in the grip of addiction. He lost his job and his house; he returned to Kansas in 2001 with only the clothes he was wearing.

For the next six years, Stephen cycled through addiction – going to



Stephen Barbee.

INSET: Stephen in his playing days.



actual sentence, Stephen spent 44 months behind bars.

Unmasking the lies

Almost immediately, Stephen realized he needed to get right with God. He also needed to be rid of drugs and alcohol for good.

"I asked myself one simple question," he said. "How many times were you arrested sober?" It was never. And so that day, I just told myself, 'If I just stay off the drugs and alcohol – if that's all I did for the rest of my life – I would never have to wear the silver handcuffs.'"

But Stephen's life change did not stop there. His in-prison work assignment was to help with religious services. He learned about many different faiths and was strengthened in his own. He prayed with prisoners and guards alike.

But the most powerful display of God's power came in the form of inner transformation. Stephen realized he had compartmentalized his life since his youth, taking on different masks based on his behavior and surroundings.

"I came face to face with my mask," he explains. "The enemy would trick

treatment, getting back into church, and then relapsing. At one point, Stephen's father – who was firm on his boundary that Stephen could not live under his roof while using – drove him to a homeless shelter.

"He opened the car door and he said, 'Son, I love you, but you have to go,'" Stephen says.

Stephen could live at home if he gave up his drug use – but instead he "chose to live a life of homelessness." He shoplifted, wrote bad checks, and sold drugs to fund his addiction.

Without realizing it, Stephen was getting high with a confidential informant. Before long, he was arrested and facing federal prison time for the sale of a controlled substance. Between his time in federal detention and his

“My addiction always overshadowed my dreams.”

his life since his youth, taking on different masks based on his behavior and surroundings.

"I came face to face with my mask," he explains. "The enemy would trick

The love of a father

ANOTHER great blessing in Stephen's life is his relationship with his father. Stephen's dad worked as a chaplain for the championship-winning University of Kansas basketball team, and now he pastors a church. Sometimes he invites Stephen to come preach there.

Stephen will never forget the day he was a guest speaker at a missions conference in Kansas City. That morning, he read the story of the prodigal son in his devotions and was moved by the love of the father in the parable, by his forgiveness and lavish expressions of love.

The story of the prodigal son is found in Luke 15:11–32 and is about a father with two sons. The younger impatient and greedy son asks his father for his inheritance. The father agrees, but the son wastes his money, eventually becoming homeless. He decides to return to his father as a servant but when his father sees him, he runs towards him and puts a robe around him and gives him his ring – welcoming him back into the family.

"That father was looking out

daily for his son to come home. We don't know how long, but it could have been 44 months," Stephen says. He thought of his own story of coming home.

Right before Stephen went on stage to speak, his dad pulled him to one side. He had a gift for him: a huge 2006 Big 12 Basketball Championship ring.

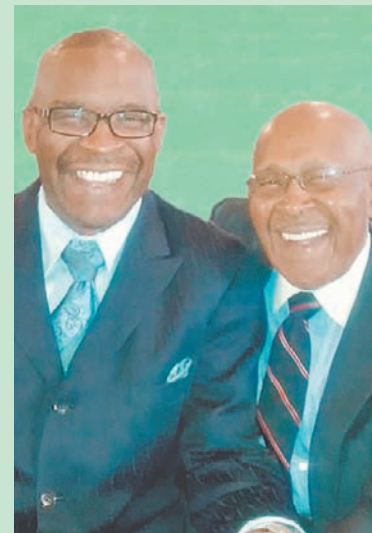
He placed it on Stephen's finger and said, "Son, this ring is yours and I'm proud that you're my son."

Immediately Stephen remembered the parable with the way-

ward son who was given a ring and a robe. His eyes filled with tears as he stared at the diamond-studded ring on his finger.

He was the recipient of great grace (undeserved love of God) – from both his Father in heaven and his earthly family.

"My family don't talk about my incarceration," Stephen says. "They don't talk about my drug addiction. They don't talk about my homelessness – but they do thank God that the son, the brother, the father is home." ●



Stephen with his father.

me to say, 'When you're in church, He loves you, but when you are in the crack house, He doesn't.'"

Stephen realized that God's love doesn't work that way.

He says, "The Holy Spirit dealt with me, and He told me, 'I'm still the God that loves you when you're in your family. I'm still the God that loves you when you're in church. I'm still the God that loves you when you have a career. And I still love you when you're out there in the drug world. You built those walls. You have to tear them down, because I'm the God that loves all of you.'"

Second chances

In January 2012, Stephen left

prison as a free man. Today, Stephen works as a field director for Prison Fellowship.

His favorite part of his job is getting to interact with men in the yard, giving them hope and a word of encouragement.

"I get to live out my passion and purpose every day," Stephen says. "It's just a joy."

Stephen has close relationships with his grown children.

He says they have forgiven him for his mistakes, and they love spending time together. ●

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

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!



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 _____

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 was a workman for the devil

BY MARK ELLIS

Shane “Little Mike” Reese grew up in Orange County, California, with mixed messages from two sides of his family. His mother’s side of the family were “solid”, but his father’s side had a felonious past.

“My dad’s side was pretty much all crime, biker lifestyle, drug deals, and questionable women,” he told God Reports.

Shane’s early life seemed promising, as he excelled in high school athletics. “I was a super jock and I ended up with a full-ride scholarship for shot-put, discus, and powerlifting. I was going to the Nationals in Arizona and I was a shoo-in to win.”

However, a school official made a serious error with respect to Shane. “My athletic director gave me the wrong time to show up for the meet. I was unable to throw or compete or do anything,” he recounts.

When he returned home from Arizona, there were numerous messages

on his answering machine, apologizing for the terrible mistake, but the damage was done. “My scholarships were athletic, and I failed to place in a national meet, so I got dropped from all my scholarships.”

He went to the last party of his senior year in high school feeling dejected. “I was in give-up mode, and there was some cocaine at the party. I thought, what the heck, I have nothing else to lose. So that’s where it started. That kicked off my career as a habitual drug user.”

He found an escape from the painful emotions connected with the sudden loss of a promising athletic future, and a downward spiral ensued. At 19, he was arrested in a Tower Records store for shoplifting and during the arrest, officers found drugs in his possession.

“I went to jail for the first time at age 19, which was a major shock to my family because I’d always been the jock, the athletic guy. They had really no idea what was going on behind the scenes after high school.”

From the age of 19 to 36 Shane was addicted and locked up, either in a penitentiary or county jail, for sales, multiple possessions, parole violations, weapons charges, and even an explosives charge.

“I was a workman for the devil, doing things that go along with the drug life and the people related to it: robbing, stealing, and hurting people. I was definitely working, and it wasn’t for God.”

Shane stayed high whether he was in jail



Shane “Little Mike” Reese’s life has completely transformed.

or out of jail. He says drugs were readily available when he was incarcerated. “I was an IV drug user. So when you get to that level, there’s nothing off limits as far as what your conscience will let you do. I destroyed families, not only my own, but other people’s,” he admits.

One of his greatest regrets is that he injected a pregnant girl with drugs. “She was just like me, an IV drug user. Everything came second to the drug and getting high.

“The devil is strong,” he adds. “He lives in the lives of people that are out there on the streets and doing drugs, because it’s an easy place for him to land.”

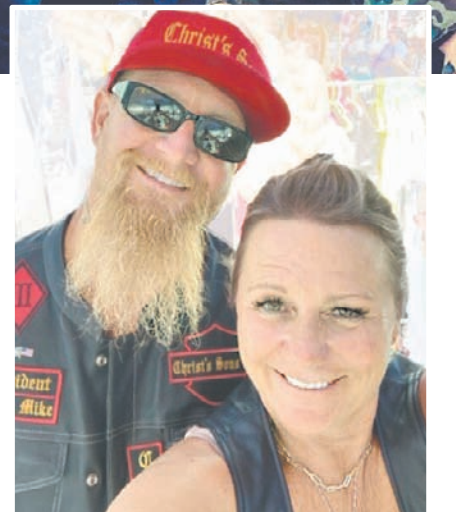
At 36, Shane appeared before a judge who offered him the choice of another nine years in prison, or a 90-day rehab program. “That was an easy choice, so I went to the 90-day program, just to get parole and my family off my back and appease them for a little while. I had no real goal in mind of getting sober or getting clean or anything like that. It was just to get everybody off my back.”

In the rehab program in Santa Ana, California, Shane began a 12-step program, albeit half-heartedly. One day he attended a meeting with 200 people, and he felt the guest speaker skewer him with these words:

“Hey, stupid, you want to be happy? Go do what the happy people do.”



Shane Reese (second from right) with some other members of Christ’s Sons Motorcycle Club. INSET: Shane with his wife, Tina.



I don’t know any happy people, Shane thought, and he began to ponder the man’s words in his heart. “On Sundays, we were able to leave for a couple of hours to go see family or go to church. And I ran into a girlfriend of mine who said that this guy had beat her up and broke her finger and he goes to this church.”

“So I went to this church, not necessarily to find God, but to find this guy and give him what for. I wasn’t thinking that God is present at this place and there’s Christian people at this place. I was going there to hurt this guy.”

As Shane sat back in his seat and began to listen, Pastor “Freeway Pete” Cropsey, a former leader of the Vagos Motorcycle Club, delivered a message that penetrated Shane’s calloused heart.

When Freeway Pete gave the invitation to follow Jesus, Shane came forward and surrendered his life to Jesus as his Lord and Savior and was born again.

“My dad was a biker and I wanted to be like my dad my whole life. And I got my wish. But one of the guys that he hung out with was this guy named Freeway Pete, who was the national Sergeant at Arms, for the Vagos 1% Outlaw Motorcycle Club. That means he was a real heavy hitter. If there’s any issues within the club, he’s the one that goes and handles it, however he needs to handle it, nationally, which is a very big deal.

“So lo and behold I go to this

church, and there’s Freeway Pete — 30 years later — as a pastor of this church. His message landed home because he looked like me, he talked like me, was covered in tattoos, a biker, and he got his life right.

“From that day, in 2013, I have been saved and serving the Lord, living this amazing Christian life.”

Shane met his wife, Tina, in rehab. She got saved at the same church, and they were baptized together, “We’re still happily married today, seven years later.”

He marvels at the way his life has been transformed. “The most measurable change for me is the peace, the serenity, the true joy of this new life in Christ.”

Shane is currently the president of Christ’s Sons Motorcycle Club. “Ninety-eight percent of us have walked the prison yards in Southern California, have been addicted, homeless, violent — we even have a former bomb maker.

“But we all did one thing different in our lives that changed our lives, and that was submit to God. That’s the only thing different we did that changed our entire lives.”

“I destroyed families, not only my own, but other people’s.”

OVERWHELMED BY TRUTH

BY HAROLD

Before October 19, 2005, I was an atheist, believing that when you died, it was over. In September 2005, I was convicted and placed in the Allegan County Jail until sentencing in October.

I was in a cell with four others for 30 days, listening to them say that the Lord would get them out of their mess. My opinion was, if they had the Lord in their life, they wouldn’t be in here in the first place.

On October 18, 2005, I arrived at Jackson Prison and was placed in a one-man cell. The only contact I had with anyone else came at a one-hour yard time and 20-minute chow time three times a day.

My second day at Jackson, I went out to the yard not knowing anyone and sat with two guys my age at a picnic table. We introduced ourselves and made small talk. They were talking religion and tried getting me in on the conversation.

I explained that I didn’t believe, and they accepted that and continued talking with each other.

The announcement came over the loud speaker that it was time to return to our cells. At that time, I realised one of the guys I was with at the picnic table was in the cell right next to mine.

About 7pm that night I was terribly bored. I knocked on the wall and asked Tim, my neighbour, if he had anything I could read. Around the corner came a Bible. He said that was all he had. I thought, what the heck, I need something to read. I spent three hours that night reading.

I woke up the next morning praying and in tears.

The Holy Spirit consumed me like I can’t explain. I



Stock photo

was extremely overwhelmed by His presence.

By November, I had read the Bible from beginning to end.

I’ve read it four plus times since then. I’m a devout Christian today thanks to the Lord putting me next to Tim when I got to Jackson.

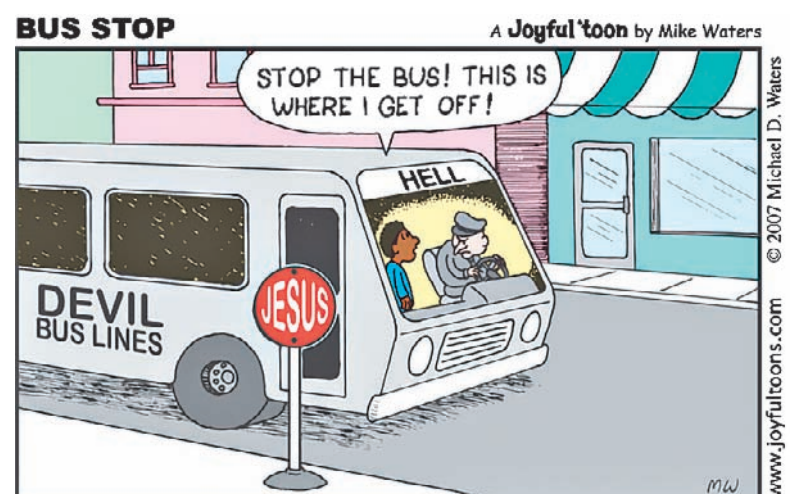
The Lord has totally changed my life.

I look at life and people differently. I love everybody, regardless of how bad their attitude is or the way they choose to walk in life.

I have stopped swearing, I pray multiple times a day, and talk to the Lord continuously.

My prayers are being answered and my life is blessed.

Used with permission from Alpha Prison Ministries. Originally published in November 2006



For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. — COLOSSIANS 1:13 NIV

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A MAFIA MADMAN

BY NAZARII BAYTLER

Despite being involved with the Brooklyn mafia, drug dealing, and losing his connection with his daughter, Robert Borelli made a 180 degree turn that changed the future course of his life.

“As a young kid growing up in Brooklyn, New York, being a small guy, I had to be a little rough kid. You had to learn how to fight,” Robert told DadTalk.

Robert’s neighborhood was tough and, unbeknownst to him initially, it was run by the Gambino crime family.

“They protected the neighborhood and got all the respect from just about everybody in it, including police officers,” Robert continues. “There was mutual respect between the officers and the mafia guys.”

Robert was well-liked by the mafia affiliates, and he often attended their social clubs to run errands.

“At the age of 17 years old, I started hanging out with one of the mob guys’ sons,” Robert says. “His dad often had a big spread every Friday night where all the wise guys from the neighborhood would come meet him and give him respect.”

Robert was impressed by the influence of the men there and was drawn towards the criminal lifestyle.

“My family had a hard time making ends meet. There were financial arguments in the house over rent, and at that age, that was not something I was looking forward to having for the rest of my life.”

Robert’s gravitated towards the mafia life, drawn by the respect, money, and nice clothes offered by it.

“See the people?” a mafia man told him one day as they observed some people at a bus stop. “They are the suckers; they have to go to work, and they give half their money to the government. We’re gonna keep that money for ourselves.”

But by age 20, Robert was deep into trouble with the law. He had a murder case and possession of a weapon case. Prison offered the proof that he was good for the mafia because he didn’t “rat anybody out.”

So when he was released, he was ready to operate and scale up in the lifestyle portrayed fairly accurately, he says, by the movie *Goodfellas*.

“I was getting recognition,” Robert says. “I got involved in selling drugs.”

Robert was living a fast-paced life of partying, drugs, recognition and excitement. Robert demanded respect, and he would even resort to violence to get it. He wasn’t only running drugs; drugs were running him. He became a “crackhead.”

But then something happened that would change everything.

“In 1993, a little girl was born, my daughter, Brianna, and seven weeks into having her home, I walked out of her life to get high just for that night,” Robert states. “It ended up not being just for that night, and I ended up staying out getting high.”

Patricia, his wife, didn’t like his newly adopted lifestyle and forced him to stay away from their daughter

so she wouldn’t get corrupted.

Finally the law caught up with Robert and he was incarcerated for a long stint. He missed his daughter, but his wife wouldn’t let him talk to her on the prison phone.

“No matter if you’re a mobster or a crackhead, to walk out of your daughter’s life when she’s just a baby is devastating,” Robert affirms. Nothing he could do in prison lessened the pain. “I couldn’t get high, I couldn’t get a drink, I couldn’t medicate myself; I had to deal with that pain.”

Robert was afraid to be seen crying, so he took refuge in his cell, where he cried out to God.

“I was raised around Catholics, so I knew about God, but didn’t know how to have a relationship with Him,” Robert says. “I cried out, ‘God, if you’re real, have somebody kill me or change me, because I can’t live with this pain anymore.’”



Robert Borelli with his wife.
INSET: Robert’s mug shot.

God honored his prayer, and Robert became a new creature in Christ after he surrendered his life to Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Since then, he hasn’t touched drugs or alcohol.

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

In addition, Robert has begun to build a relationship with his daughter.

“I ended up meeting her again when she was 16 years old,” Robert reminisces. “She had an abandonment kind of thing, so things are still a little rocky, but we’re working on it. I’m praying for her, and trying to make a relationship with her.”

Reformed by God, Robert quit the mafia. He collaborated with federal investigators and entered the witness protection program. His name was changed along with his social security number.

“Reading the Word of God transformed my mind and made me see that that lifestyle was not the life God planned for me,” Robert says.

“So that transition wasn’t very hard for me. I was in a different state, nobody knew me.”

Robert’s mother passed away while he was in the witness protection program, and because of his changed identity and unknown address, nobody could tell him until three days after her death. He wasn’t allowed to go to the funeral.

But the sacrifices have been worth it to be with Jesus. “I wouldn’t trade places for anything in the world from where I am today,” Robert says.

He warns young men to beware of Hollywood’s glamorization of crime life in the movie “Goodfellas” and other films.

“It’s not what it appears to be, a big illusion, so to speak,” Robert states. “The lifestyle is not the same thing as when I was involved in it 40 years ago. It’s definitely a lot worse today.”

Robert admires the young men who attempt to build a future for themselves with proper aspiration.

“Make the sacrifices you have to make now, so you can have a better life later on,” Robert advises. “Don’t fall into the [get rich quick] trap that they portray for you.”

Since then, Robert co-wrote his biography titled, *The Witness*.

“I was a witness for the government,” Robert says. “Now I’m a witness for Christ.”

This article first appeared on godreports.com and is used with kind permission.



Raúl Escariz

A second chance for a new life

BY JOANNA BREAUULT

Raúl Escariz says he wasn’t brave for fleeing Cuba – he was simply unaware of the risks.

“We had no idea what we were getting into, what we were going to face,” he admits.

In 1992, Raúl and three friends launched a raft, propelled by a 25-horsepower motor, into the ocean. They were determined to build a new life in America. What they didn’t know was that to their east, a terrible storm was gaining momentum.

After three days at sea, the men were picked up by a ship that delivered them to safety in Florida. Seven hours later, Hurricane Andrew hit southern Miami.

Looking back, Raúl now realizes, “It was the hand of God that picked us out of the ocean.” The son of an atheistic Communist father and a closeted Catholic mother, Raúl had the sense that something “greater and higher” was out there – but he had no idea what.

Eager to bring his wife and five-year-old son to Florida, Raúl found a job as a bodyguard for a business owner. He made enough money to secure their passage and provide a comfortable life. But soon, he felt like what he had was never enough.

“It happened that the love of money – avarice – the need to possess things, darkened my eyes,” Raúl says.

Raúl committed health insurance fraud, stealing tens of thousands of dollars. Then he became a bodyguard for a famous Mexican pop singer. Raúl traveled the world providing security for his new boss.

But Raúl’s crimes eventually caught up with him.

In 1998, he was indicted on 33 counts of insurance fraud and 33 counts of grand theft. Raúl panicked and fled to Costa Rica with his family, which now included a second son.

Raúl tried to start a new life. He avoided being photographed and cut off contact with friends and family. The family’s living conditions were poor, and Raúl was constantly on edge. He struggled to sleep.

“I was feeling really depressed, just really destroyed, and I said to myself, ‘How can I start again, really?’” Raúl recalls.

One day, a family friend named Conchita invited him to church. The words of the pastor pierced his heart so precisely that Raúl assumed his friend had relayed his life story in advance. Raúl says he was “captivated.” A week later, he attended church again and gave his life to Christ.

Several months later, Raúl was asleep when he heard what he believes was the voice of God telling him to return to the US.

“[God said] that He had plans for me that I could not fulfill while I was running from the American authorities,” Raúl says.

Despite his wife’s nervousness, Raúl obeyed, returning to the US with his family. Soon after his arrival, he was arrested and sentenced to eight years at Okeechobee Correctional Institution in Okeechobee, Florida.

Raúl says he was a “baby Christian” at the time. In prison, he began to mature, attending Bible studies and church services on the yard.

“I tell people that it was one of the most blessed periods of my life,” Raúl says. “It was a time I could find Jesus for myself.”

Raúl’s years of incarceration brought spiritual benefits to his family as well.

“My wife learned to stand strong on her own, and my kids started to see a reality that they had never known,” Raúl says. “Yes, [before I was incarcerated] they had a lot of money and everything was fine ... but dad was never home.”

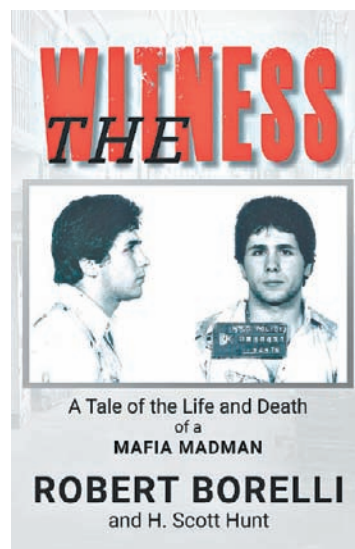
Now, when his sons came to visit him in prison, Raúl talked to them about God and “things that mattered”. Their relationships blossomed.

Today, Raúl is free, and he loves to return to prison as a volunteer. At a recent Prison Fellowship Hope Event, Raúl shared the Gospel message in Spanish.

“I want to say to everyone that there is a second chance,” Raúl says. “Trust in God and keep moving forward.”

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

Don’t fear, because I am with you;
Don’t be afraid, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you, I will surely help you;
I will hold you with my righteous strong hand...
I am the Lord your God, who grasps your strong
hand, who says to you, “Don’t fear; I will help you.”
Isaiah 41:10, 13



Robert’s book about his life.

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 20:19- 21:6

INTRODUCTION

WE now draw near to the end of the Gospel of John. It is a climax of great importance because of the resurrection triumph of the Lord Jesus. Each of the four Gospels move toward this notable event; Christ risen, victorious, and leaving this scene to be with His Father in heaven. It is most important for us to see just how all this affects us. Keep this in mind as we look at the passage for today.

Chapter 20 verses 19, 20 *On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'* After He said this, He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

The disciples thought that the authorities may arrest them as followers of Jesus, so they hid as best they could. Even though the room was locked the Lord suddenly

appeared. He had truly risen physically, but His body was now of a different nature, able to pass through a solid wall. Showing His hands and side gave proof that He was Jesus who was crucified. It is not hard for us to understand that believing in a resurrection from death was very difficult for these men. But the proof gave them reason to rejoice that He had actually defeated death.

There were many outcomes from this victory which they were yet to fully appreciate.

Verses 21-23 *Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'*

The Father had sent Jesus on a mission to mankind. His task was to reveal God and to make a way of salvation by dying as a sacrifice, and to have that salvation spoken of throughout the whole earth.

Now He is saying the those whom He had taught, that they were to go on a mission. They were given the task of taking the Good News to the world. Their authority to forgive or to withhold forgiveness was something just for them which was not passed on to future disciples.

Verses 24, 25 *Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. When the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, he declared, 'Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it.'*

People have thought that back in Bible times people were superstitious and ready to believe the incredible. Thomas shows this to be wrong by his attitude. He wanted clear proof, undeniable evidence. He has come in for much criticism over the years for his unbelief but any one of them could have said the same thing before they became eye-witnesses. And we could place ourselves in that situation and feel the same way.

Verses 26-28 *A week later His disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then He said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to Him, 'My Lord and my God!'*

Notice that Jesus does not strongly rebuke Thomas for his unbelief. Instead, He is making up to him what the other disciples had experienced. It is an act of kindness.

Verse 29 *Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'*

The record shows that there were only several hundred people who saw Jesus alive after His death, all in differing circumstances. The largest group was probably at the scene of His ascension. There was no doubt that the resurrection was and is a reality. All theories aimed at denying the fact have failed.

As Like says in Acts 1:3, Jesus left "many infallible proofs" and no-one has ever been able to give an alternative explanation. All had to agree that the tomb was empty. The disciples all went on to give their lives for the truth. They would not die for a lie.

So down through the centuries to the present day people have believed without seeing the risen Lord. It is God's way of dealing. The preaching of the cross brings faith to light and sinners put their trust in the Lord as their Savior.

Verses 30, 31 *Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you*



may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life through His name.

John is making a summary of his book and then speaks to the readers. He tells of the purpose of his writing. It is that others may hear and believe. He has been an eye-witness of the events and asks us to believe. Yet it is God Himself who calls us to faith. John is simply a servant.

Chapter 21 verses 1-3 *Afterward Jesus appeared again to His disciples by the sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. 'I'm going out to fish,' Simon Peter told them, and they said, 'We'll go with you.' So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

This chapter is something of an appendix or a postscript following what seemed to be the end at the close of chapter 20. But John has an important piece of history to record. It seems that the disciples felt at a loose end. They had been locked away in the room but now were in Galilee because the Lord had given them the message to be there. Maybe they felt there was nothing happening and going back to their old occupation of fishing was Peter's first thought. They fished with nets through the night but never caught a thing.

Verses 4-6 *Early in the morning Jesus stood on the shore, but the*

disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you caught any fish?" "No, they answered. He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

This miraculous haul of fish must have reminded the disciples of earlier days when the Lord guided them to the right place to fish. Just yet they have not recognized Jesus but we will see that they shortly did and that He had a very serious reason for meeting up with them. In our next study we will read about it and see more of the Lord's love and care for his people.

CONCLUSION

It is not possible to over-state the importance of Christ's resurrection. There are so many aspects to what it achieved. One is that the Father showed His pleasure for the life and ministry of Jesus and that He accepted the sacrifice that Jesus offered. It was the crowning achievement of our Lord to defeat death. It means that there will be those who follow Him into the Father's glorious presence. They will be all those who believe in this life. The resurrection is a decisive blow to Satan and all evil.

For us, this one who shows Himself to be the Savior of the world, is able to save us from the penalty of sin, from its power and some day from its presence.

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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

NEVER OUT OF REACH

BY GREG LAURIE

ALICE Cooper was at one time the most famous and successful rock star in the world. His given name was Vincent Furnier, but as a young man, he joined a rock band and changed his name to Alice Cooper.

At his concerts, Alice Cooper was known for spectacle and for being a dark figure. In reality, though, much of it was only an act. Over time, however, Vincent Furnier turned into the character Alice Cooper. He became an alcoholic and then a drug addict.

The amazing thing was that Alice Cooper was the son of a pastor, and

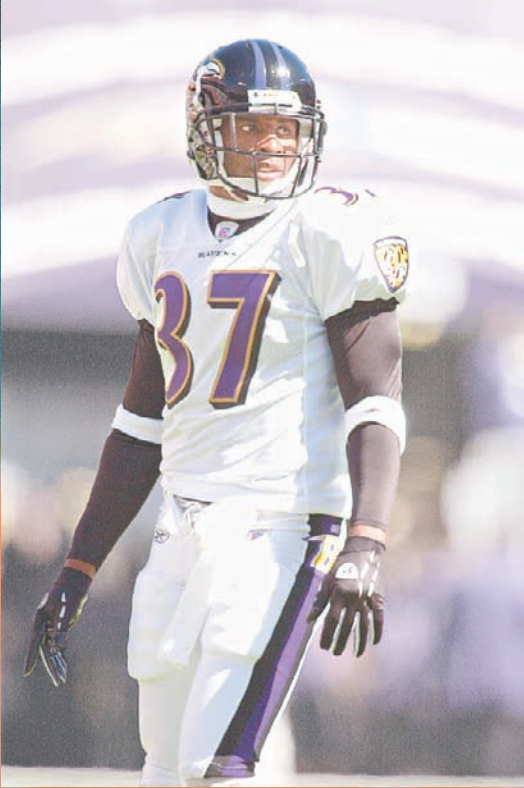
he was running away from God. He ran so far away from God that people thought he had reached the point of no return. But God wasn't done with him. One day, when he was overdosing on cocaine, he looked into a mirror and thought he saw blood coming out of his eyes. He was hallucinating.

Alice Cooper cried out to God. He then took the softball-sized rock of cocaine that he had and flushed it down the toilet. God heard his prayer and turned him around. Since then, he has been walking with the Lord. He has been clean and sober for many years. Today, he seems to be addicted

only to golf. He loves to get out on the course. But his faith in Jesus Christ reminds us that no one is beyond God's reach.

Maybe you've made some bad decisions in your life. Maybe because of some things you've done, you're thinking, "It's too late for me." But it's never too late for you. God can turn your life around, just as He turned Alice Cooper's life around. God can forgive your sin. God can refresh you, replenish you, and revive you. But you must turn to Him.

"I am the Lord, the God of all the peoples of the world. Is anything too hard for me?" (Jeremiah 32:27 NLT)



Deion Sanders of the Cincinnati Reds attempts to steal second base during a Major League Baseball game against the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1997 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Photo by George Gojkovich/Getty Images)

INSET: Deion Sanders #37 of the Baltimore Ravens during a NFL football game against the Pittsburgh Steelers on September 19, 2004 in Baltimore, Maryland. (Photo by Mitchell Layton/Getty Images)



THE PAIN OF SUCCESS

In 1997 Deion Sanders was at the top of his game in not just one but two sports. Nicknamed “Prime Time” and “Neon Deion”, he was playing in both the National Football League (NFL) and Major League Baseball (MLB) and made history by hitting an MLB home run and scoring an NFL touchdown in the same week. He had achieved success other athletes only dream of, winning two Super Bowl titles and making a World Series. Yet Deion was empty. So empty that he

attempted suicide - something he credits with actually saving his life.

Starting off his career playing baseball, Deion was drafted in 1985 by the Kansas City Royals but didn't sign with the team, waiting until 1988, when he was drafted by the New York Yankees.

He debuted the following year, the same year he was drafted by the Atlanta Falcons in the NFL draft.

He went on to spend 14 successful seasons in the football league with five different teams. He was named All-Pro nine times, a Pro Bowl player eight times as well as Defensive Player of the Year in 1994 with the San Francisco 49ers.

Deion played parts of nine baseball seasons with four different teams. He is the only player to ever take part in a football Super Bowl and a baseball World Series.

In an interview with Bear Grylls, Deion shares how he felt after winning his first Super Bowl.

Deion Sanders speaks onstage during The Big Homecoming Event at Clark Atlanta University on June 17, 2022 in Atlanta, Georgia. (Photo by Paras Griffin/Getty Images)

“I was the first one on the bus, the first one to bed. I didn't even go and party. [There] was something missing inside. It wasn't as fulfilling as I thought it was. It wasn't about the things - the outward things - because I had power, money and sex but it wasn't fulfilling ... there was an empty feeling still.”

When Deion went through a divorce and lost custody of his children, the emptiness only grew.

“It was devastating. I went through a suicidal period.”

He attempted to end his life by driving his car off a 40-foot cliff. To his surprise, he walked away with no significant injuries.

“Shortly after that I had to just come to the Lord with my hands up and say, ‘I'm done. I can't do it anymore. You've got me. I give up. God, You take me.’”

“I had to get a lot of Word in [read the Bible a lot] so that I could fight off the enemy,” Deion says in a Sports casting article. “I wouldn't be where I am today without my faith ... My faith is everything. It's the gas that propels the courage; the truth that keeps me going.”

Deion went on to win custody of his children.

“I pride myself on being the best dad in the world,” he told Bear Grylls in 2014. “I know all their shoe sizes, all their clothes sizes, the teachers. I know how to braid my daughter's hair. It has to be something bigger than you that you're working for,

that you're living for. If it's all about you, you've already lost.”

Deion spoke about Christianity in a video for Alright TV on YouTube.

“The fact that you are here is proof that God does exist,” he explains.

“Do you really think that you're the design of two random molecules

just coming together randomly? God is a God of order. And we all must go through the same process. When God created Adam and Eve it was a meticulous process.”

Since his playing days, Deion became an analyst for CBS

Sports, NFL Network, and Barstool Sports. He was an assistant coach for women's professional basketball team Dallas Fury as well as the offensive coordinator for the football team for the school his sons

attended until 2020, when he was hired by Jackson State.

Last year Deion's doctors discovered severe blood clots in his leg, which required two of his toes to be amputated from his left foot.

“We may smell like smoke because we've been through the fire,” Deion says in an interview with Chris Neely of Thee Pregame Show.

“But I wouldn't change none of it. I needed it. I love it, I'm proud of it, I'm thankful for it. I got to really see God's face.”

Deion feels fortunate that he only lost two toes and not his entire leg or even his life.

“So when I look up and say thank you, Jesus, it's because I know the quiet cries at night that were in that hospital.”

Now 55, Deion is the head football coach at Jackson State. He has written a book about his life called *Power, Money & Sex: How Success Almost Ruined My Life*. •



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