

Melvin says he now knows what true freedom is.

Walking free

BY EMILY ANDREWS

In 1983, Melvin approached the doors of a Christian church meeting, looking to ask the “church people” for money. A large church service at a Tulsa, Oklahoma, campground was not the young man’s usual scene. When he wasn’t working odd jobs in welding and construction, he often spent his afternoons at a local bar, swapping stories with a friend over drinks.

“I remember going into the big arena, and I felt this electricity in the air, and it just hit me,” Melvin remembers. “I was just like, ‘Wow.’ I didn’t understand what this was, and I wanted to get away, but I couldn’t get away.”

He lingered to hear the preacher’s message. When the service ended, a friendly couple took him to dinner. They prayed with Melvin and gave him some Gospel tracts and a Bible. As Melvin began to leave, the husband shook his hand and slipped him a \$10 bill.

From there, Melvin headed to the bar. He tossed the Bible and tracts in some bushes along the way. He made it another block and then felt drawn to look back.

He says that staring at the bushes, he heard a voice repeating, “Don’t leave me here.”

Melvin ignored the plea and continued down his original path – both to the bar, and further into his addiction.

Eight months later, he sat in a jail cell facing a felony murder charge.

Filling the void

Before moving to Oklahoma with his family, Melvin grew up in a predominantly Hispanic community near Los Angeles.

As a child, he figured he was Hispanic like most of his friends, only to find out later that his family were members of the Muskogee people.

Melvin associated Native Americans with losing wars in the movies. And back then, he wanted nothing more than to win – to secure a sense of identity, to excel in sports, to earn his parents’ affection.

His family met his practical needs, a roof over their heads and food on the table. But showing emotion wasn’t commonplace at home.

Melvin doesn’t remember receiving hugs or hearing “I love you.”

He sniffed glue for the first time after seeing his older brother try it.

He began smoking cigarettes with his dad and sneaking beers from the fridge, undeterred by the knowledge of his dad’s alcoholism. Later, he tried marijuana.

“I was looking to fill a hole in my life,” he says. “Something was missing not only because of God, but because of the lack of emotional expression in my family. I thought I needed something to fill what they weren’t filling.”

A broken spirit

By his early 20s, Melvin had a son and a daughter by two different women. But he showed no signs of settling down. At age 23, while drunk and high at a party, he was arrested for his part in a murder. While he didn’t commit the act that night, he didn’t try to stop the incident and was implicated.

When Melvin arrived at county jail, his mother gave him a small Bible.

At first, he set it aside, but he tried crying out for Jesus to save him from his crisis.

He was convicted and received a life sentence, and he went to prison convinced Jesus had nothing to offer him.

When volunteers and fellow prisoners tried to tell Melvin the Gospel (the good news that Jesus had died for his sins), he wanted no part of it.

Sometimes, he physically assaulted the prisoners who tried to share their faith.

He spent many years making himself a leader of the native population in his prison and crusading against the Christian faith.

He told his Muskogee brothers, “You can’t become a Christian. You can’t live with Jesus. Why? Because he’s not for us. He’s from other people. He’s not for us.”

Later, Melvin was transferred to Oklahoma State Penitentiary. He dreaded sitting alone in a cell for 23 hours a day.

One night, he called on his grandfather in prayer, as was customary in his Native religion. Weary and broken, he pleaded for a new way to live.

Then, he received a clear response from a voice he now believes to be Jesus: “If you really believed in me, you’d believe in Jesus, because I am Jesus.”

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Murderer finds mercy

Tumelo Bapela admits the offences he committed that sent him to jail for the rest of his life, were terrible. He shot and killed security guards, intending to steal their firearms and then attempt a cash-in-transit heist.

He was caught and sentenced to life in prison plus 68 years. Now aged 46, he tells Challenge News that he was born and raised in a very poor family in Germiston by a single mother. He says it was almost like his father had died, as he did nothing to care for Tumelo and his siblings.

“I was always in trouble because of anger and unforgiveness,” he recalls. “It

was difficult for me to forgive a person who had wronged me.”

In 2015, while he was imprisoned at Leeuwkop Maximum Correctional Centre, Tumelo heard about Jesus Christ and the good news that He died for his sins.

“I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and gave my life to God,” the convict explains.

In the eight years since becoming a Christian, Tumelo has seen big changes in his life. He now loves and respects other people and no longer thinks about fighting all the time.

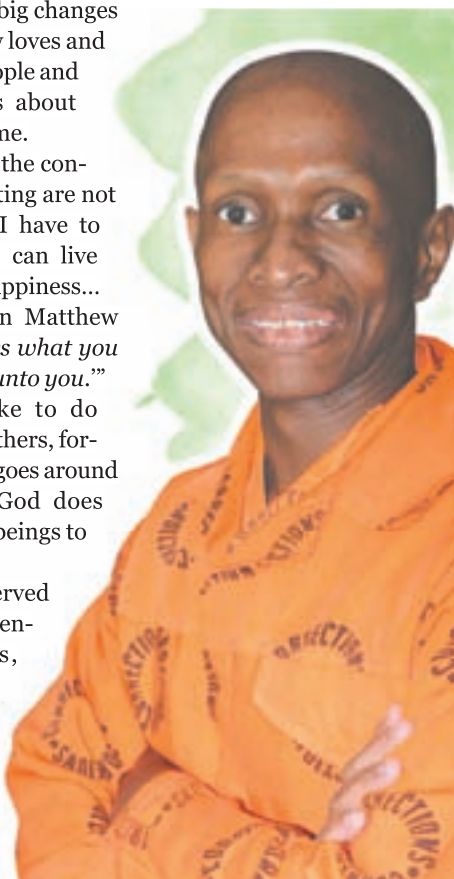
“I realized that the consequences of fighting are not good at all and I have to change so that I can live with peace and happiness... The Bible says in Matthew 7:12, ‘Do to others what you want them to do unto you.’”

Many people like to do wrong things to others, forgetting that what goes around comes around. God does not want human beings to hurt each other.”

Tumelo has served 20 years of his sentence. He says, “If you are a Christian you will always encounter the temptations but the best part of being

a Christian is that you will always be blessed with everything that you need... Jesus is the power that rules everything on earth.”

Tumelo’s favourite Bible verse is Matthew 9:12-13: “Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’”●



BACK PAGE

PARALYMPICS
FANIE VD MERWE

On a wing and a prayer

BY MICHAEL ASHCRAFT

David White was a brainiac in school and dreamed of becoming another Thurgood Marshall, however when his mother was murdered when he was 14, he lost all ambition and belief in goodness.

"That's when I changed my concept of life and became a totally different person," David says on a Manifestations Worldwide video. "My dreams and aspirations were totally killed. The idea that there was a God in Heaven was over for me. I declared that night that if there is a God in Heaven, then He'd better stop me because I'm going to hurt all these people."

David went from a gifted program at school to fending for himself on the streets. Filled with rage, he "pimped" himself out to older women to have a place to sleep and food to eat. To get a little extra money for himself, he became a trigger man robbing people at gunpoint.

"I was a little stick-up kid," he says. "I was a wicked young kid. I was known to be a shooter."

A local drug dealer took him under his wing. Knowing that brandishing a gun would get the young man killed, the drug dealer taught David that dealing was a safer way to make a buck.

Because he was so dangerous, the cops wanted David off the streets, so they planted drugs on him, accused him falsely and locked him up, David says. He was labeled "a threat to society."

"I was innocent of the charges I was in prison for, but I wasn't innocent," David acknowledges. "I had done a lot of worse things. They did what they had to do get me off the streets."

A God-hater, David despised "jailhouse religion." While Christianity turned him off, he like the white-hating religions of the Black Panther Party, the Nation of Islam, or the Hebrew Israelites.

"I was trying to prove that the Bible was full of falsehoods and contradictions and that Christianity was the white man's religion," David says. "But then I found that the things I was taught to battle Christianity with was actually a lie. I found that Christianity was established in Ethiopia since the year 84.

"As I was reading the Bible, I was changing," he adds. "The Book changed me."

Then he stumbled on the story of Gideon, who tested God to find out His will and purpose.

It occurred to David to likewise test God – in a "weird way like a child would."

"If God is real, send a bird to touch this window pane," he recalls. "It was raining out. When I called on God

to touch a window pane, amazingly a bird touched that square. I was an intellectual and it didn't make sense. I thought it was coincidental. So I chose numerous other squares for the next hour and a half, and every square I chose telling God to prove Himself to me, (the bird touched.)

"I realized the God I had been hating was a God who is real. He played tic-tac-toe with me to prove He was real to me and that He had a purpose for my life."

In tears, David pledged to never kill anyone again, but he didn't fully turn his back on his old life. When he was released, he fell back into hustling to survive. He was in a time of transition in which God was calling him out of the world, he says.

Eventually, he turned away from his old lifestyle. A convict introduced David to a pastor who was a good example of a man who had overcome a terrible past and became a man of integrity and a good husband. It showed David that he could and should live for God.

Since starting church, David has become a beacon of light and voice of wisdom for a myriad of young people. He has rediscovered his purpose of doing good and helping people. He's not Thurgood Marshall, but he's making an impact.

"The greatest influence I can have over people I relate to is the power of a changed life," he says. "It's the sustainability that God

and the Holy Spirit

bring. People ask me

questions: How do

I remain steadfast?

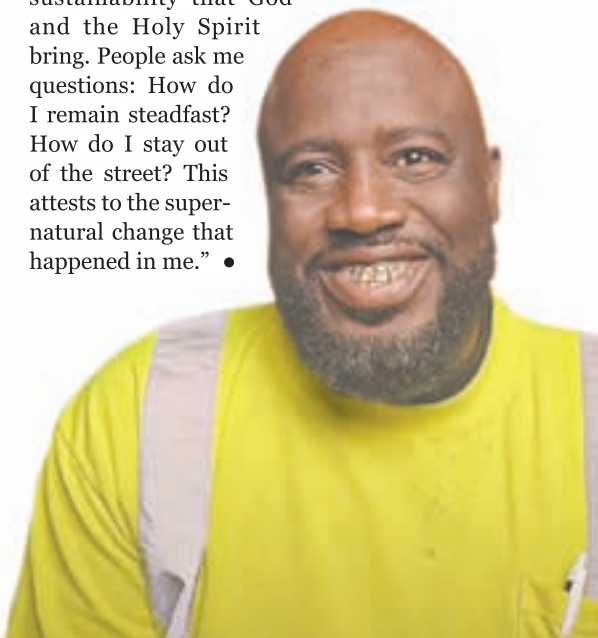
How do I stay out

of the street? This

attests to the super-

natural change that

happened in me." •



David White. Photo: YouTube/Manifestations Worldwide



WALKING FREE

• From page 1

Awakened to hope

When the sun rose in the morning, Melvin thought about the night before.

He leaned over and reached for the small Bible that was collecting dust under his bunk.

He opened the book and peered out his cell window, making sure no one could see him.

Then he began to read John 1: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

"I started realizing right then that God was the one that they called Jesus, that walked this Earth," says Melvin.

"Right then I made the decision, 'OK, I asked you to put me on a path you want me on. If it's Jesus, then I'm going with it.' And I surrendered right then."

New life begins

Melvin spent the next 27 years preaching the Good News to anyone who would listen. He received death

threats from opponents of his new faith, but he persevered.

Due to changes in the legal circumstances surrounding his case, Melvin walked free in November 2021, after nearly 40 years in prison.

He found a church community and began to preach on occasion.

In July 2022, Melvin married his high school sweetheart Tammy, with whom he had had reconnected just before his release.

He also re-established relationships with his grown children and enjoys getting to know his grandchildren.

Melvin continues to minister to others, especially his fellow Muskogee tribe members, however he can. He and Tammy founded Native Wings Like an Eagle, a non-profit ministry serving the Oklahoma City area.

"Sometimes, I just get in the car, fill up the tank, and just drive," he says. "I'm thinking, 'This is freedom.' But really, it's not freedom – I already had freedom. Freedom is in Christ." •

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

Coffee Break

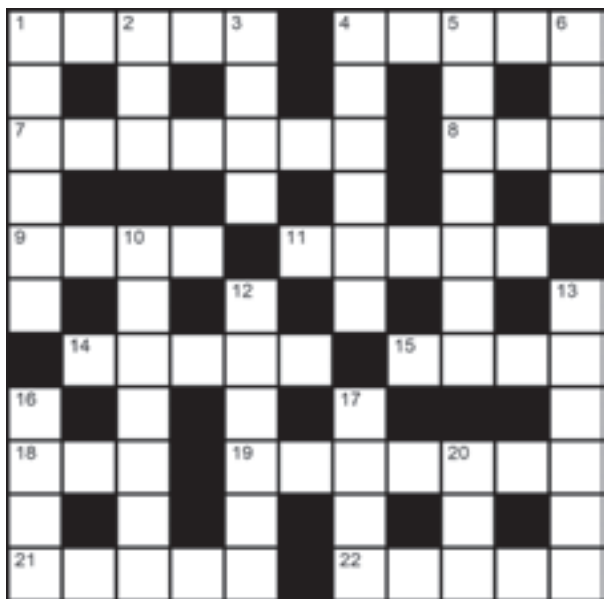
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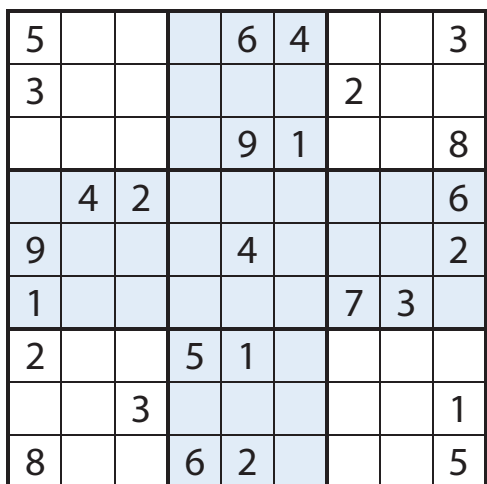
- Shoe size factor
- Maintain a subscription
- Sickly pale
- Pole for an angler
- Sax relative
- Tendon
- Sarcastic sort, scoffer
- Keyboarder's goof
- Once around the track
- What's left
- Large fire
- Hostile force

DOWN

- Implement of combat
- Paternity identifier
- Cannabis fibre
- Shrink, as from a snake?
- Infant's room
- The whole ___ world
- Original Olympics site
- Ferocious, savage
- Tragedy's opposite
- Spill the beans
- Land at sea
- Food colouring



SOLUTIONS PAGE 7



HEALING THE FATHER WOUND

BY ELIOT KERN

"MY father's father," Wayne Alcorn, author of *My Father's Son*, tells Eternity magazine, "was a World War I returned vet. The things men and women see on the battlefield scar them for life. Add to that the fact that my father's natural mother died soon after he was born. So my grandfather was dealing with that. He went through three marriages, divorce, pain, all the disappointments – layers upon layers – and I don't even have a clue what his father was like."

The result was a man who worked hard to put food on the table, but showed no affection to his son. As Alex Alcorn later told Wayne, he felt like an unwanted inconvenience.

Alex's father died young, leaving behind a 19-year-old son – a chronic alcoholic who regularly spent time in jail, desperate to numb the pain of a deep father wound.

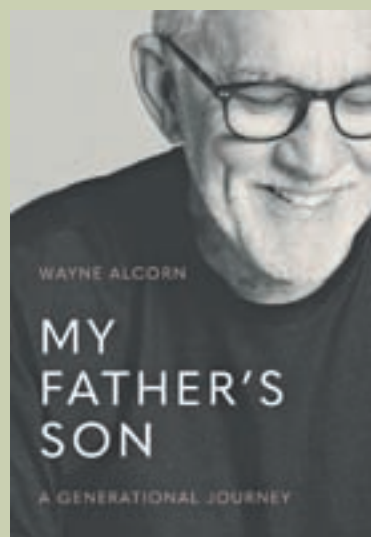
When people long for the love of a father, says Wayne, they'll try almost anything to fill the gap.

"The number of people I know with addictions of all kinds, simply as an attempt to numb the pain, it's off the charts." For some, the father wound becomes a longing for attention, often resulting in juvenile crime. In decades of work with youth discipleship organisation Youth Alive, Alcorn says, "I never went to court with a young man or woman who was in trouble with the law that had a good relationship with their father."

Others pursue affirmation by climbing the ladder or achieving notoriety.

But all these efforts to numb the pain are bandaids. In fact, far from healing the father wound, they often perpetuate a generational cycle.

"The simple adage is, 'hurt people hurt people,'" Wayne



says, before quoting a line from the book: "We learn to be a father through being a son." He continues, "Schools have kids 30-something hours a week; the rest of the week – the 130-something hours – is in the home. Where are most things learned in life? In the family home. Things we see; things that were never said to us, but we caught it. More is caught than taught."

What Alex Alcorn caught hadn't set him up well. Chronic alcoholic: tick. Juvenile crime: tick. He seemed destined to repeat what he'd experienced as a child.

"But one day in a little country town," Wayne marvels, "he heard a preacher preach a simple text: 'Whom the Son sets free is free indeed' (John 8:36), and a choir began to sing a simple old song:

'Come home, all who are weary.'

Barefoot, shirtless and drunk, Alex had been released from jail earlier that day. As he walked forward, the crowd thought he was going to cause trouble, says Wayne, "but they didn't know what was happening in his heart."

"He knelt down, literally in the gutter, in a little street up on the Darling Downs, in a town called Dalby. That's now 72 or more years ago; he made a decision to become a follower of Jesus. And because his life was changed, the generations that followed have been changed.

"I tell people all the time, if you're not happy with your family tree, plant a new one in the most fertile soil of all: the love of God. In one decision, our whole family line was changed forever," Wayne says.

What can break the cycle? What can fill the void? What can heal the father wound?

"I say over and over," Wayne insists, "nothing and no one can fill that, until you discover the love of a God who says, 'Call me Dad.'" •

This is an extract from a longer article in Eternity magazine.



Abram Kutoane says he now has a different perspective on life.

Injustice turns to joy

Abram Kutoane was sentenced to 35 years in a maximum security prison for burglary even though the complainants themselves told the court he did not commit the crime.

However, it was in prison that Abram's life actually changed for the better, he says, because it was there, in 2008, that a fellow inmate brought him to a prison service.

At the service he heard the gospel (the good news that Jesus Christ came to Earth to die for mankind's sins) and committed his life to God.

"God changed my life when I was in prison," Abram says. "I saw that without God I am nothing; I am a living testimony that He is Lord of my life."

Abram says Jesus rescued him from his lengthy sentence, which was reduced from the original 35 years to nine.

"My life was not good at all but after I met Jesus my life changed. I became a new person who did things in a different way.

"I started to change my old ways and serve the Lord. I stood in front of many inmates and told them about how Jesus can save them from their sins. It is good to know our Creator because without Him we are nothing

in this world."

He says becoming a Christian has given him a different perspective on life and that he wants to share the message that there is abundant life through Jesus Christ.

"Jesus Christ came to save the lost and bring them into His kingdom. When God is on our side all things are possible and through Him we have life in the fullest."

However, Christians are not perfect and still make mistakes. Abram recently had another brush with the law.

He was convicted of common assault for getting into a fight and sentenced to three years.

Yet he sees this outcome as evidence of God's mercy. The man he fought with was later found dead and the authorities originally wanted to charge Abram with his murder.

"I fought with him but I did not kill him."

He says that it was "by God's grace" that he won his case and was instead convicted of the lesser charge of common assault.

"When God is on our side all things are possible. Without God on our side we won't make it in this world."

His favourite verse is John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life."

"I became a new person who did things in a different way."

"The Christian Gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. It undermines both swaggering and snivelling. I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less." – Timothy Keller

The power of a second chance

BY EMILY ANDREWS

Michael Vander Horst still recalls the sound of rain on the roof of his Chevy Cavalier, the night of his crime years ago. The night of the burglary that changed everything.

The car was stuck in the mud, and the passenger's seat was empty. Will, his partner in crime, stood across the driveway, pointing a pistol at the young couple who had just returned home. No one was physically hurt that night, but life as Michael knew it was over.

After a brief time on the run, Michael spent months in county jail. In a plea deal, he finally told the truth about what he and Will had done, despite the pressure normally felt by those behind bars not to inform on their accomplices.

"I was not prepared for maximum security prison," Michael recalls. "When the metal cell door clanged behind me, I was locked in with a complete stranger, in a room the size of a broom closet, for 21 hours a day. There was no TV or radio to distract me. ... For long hours of the day, I lay stretched out on my bunk, thinking about my life and how I got here."

Lost and alone, Michael hated watching his parents pass through metal detectors on visits, their shoes being searched for contraband. Tearfully they told their son, "We love you," in a room full of watchful eyes, and his pain only grew. Soon he couldn't stand his own reflection in the mirror.

And every day for a decade, he lived looking over his shoulder for Will, knowing one day they might meet again.

An unexpected meeting

It was a snowy night on the Muskegon prison yard, when, under halogen floodlights, Michael saw Will approaching and braced himself. Because Michael had agreed to the plea deal 10 years before, Will was serving even more prison time.

"I knew that one of us would be leaving in an ambulance that night," Michael shares. "There was no other way out... But something happened. Will asked me to forgive him. To forgive him? He told me that he had wanted to kill me for years. But now, he had accepted Jesus in his heart and wanted to ask forgiveness for ruining my life. Ruining my life? Nearly speechless, I nodded my head and left the yard, not knowing what to believe. I chose to believe Will, to believe forgiveness was real, and to believe I could forgive myself, believe I could love myself and others. These choices became the vehicle of my own transformation."

While at Muskegon, Michael enrolled in the Prison Fellowship Academy to continue his transformation journey.

"I found a new identity in Christ, and my faith was real for the first time," Michael attests. "This was not about sacraments or legalistically checking off boxes."

"This faith was a simple call... to love because all people are created in the image of God. This was not just



Michael Vander Horst

theology—it was real."

Michael left prison with a new set of values and God-given purpose.

Having learned the importance of Christ-centered community from the Academy, he got involved in a church on the outside and took a job in full-time ministry.

At church, he met Alisha and married her about a year later.

Reentry had brought many blessings.

It also brought challenging roadblocks.

Taking steps to serve

Not long after their honeymoon, Michael and Alisha stopped by a café in Owosso, Michigan. They sat and talked about next steps for Michael's career and God's will for their family. Michael felt prompted to ask the barista, who was steaming milk for drinks, if the café was hiring. Before long, Michael stood behind the counter wearing an apron and taking orders.

Michael excelled as a barista, not only serving coffee, but also serving customers with the love and joy of Christ. He worked up to becoming a general manager before taking a role at the café's corporate headquarters. That role led to job in the sales department.

Last year, at a franchise meeting, Michael shared his story for an audience of hundreds—a full room of franchise owners, managers, baristas. He imagined the questions that arose in their minds as they listened. What does a second chance mean? Do "convicted criminals" deserve a second chance?

But they didn't just see Michael as a "convicted criminal". They embraced the man who stood before them, proof of the power of second chances.

Living by grace

To Michael, a second chance is freedom. It's hope. He admits that it hasn't been a smooth ride. He struggled with things many people don't think twice about, from big cultural shifts to using an iPhone. But he takes it all in stride. He still remembers that snowy night on a prison yard, the moment he was surprised by grace (undeserved love of God) from someone who had every reason to hate him. But that's how he tries to live today: by grace, one step at a time.

The dream materialized

During the COVID-19 pandemic Michael was laid off. While he found a job managing a gym, his dream job was to work with Prison Fellowship.

"[I had] been stalking the Prison Fellowship employment tab for a good five years. ... I always thought, 'There's a few organizations I would love to work with. Prison Fellowship is one of them.' But it was always the dream."

When an Academy graduate program manager position came up, Michael went for it – and got it.

"That's not just a dream fulfilled. It's a dream expanded."

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

"I knew that one of us would be leaving in an ambulance."

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.

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Gender: _____ Complete Mailing Address: _____

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Prefiero el curso en español. Street or PO Box: _____

City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____

STUDENT COMMITMENT

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

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

When you have completed this form, please return it to:
 Crossroads Prison Ministries | PO Box 900 | Grand Rapids, MI 49509-0900
 Crossroads Prison Ministries Canada | PO Box 5837 | Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8

Out of the dungeon of addiction



Robyn has a heart to see people delivered from drug abuse just as she was.

BY JOANNA BREAUULT

“I experienced sexual abuse early in life – men were my mom’s thing,” Robyn explains.

The men in Robyn’s mom’s life were often dangerous and cruel. Robyn was raped for the first time when she was nine years old. At 13, she was impregnated by a 26-year-old man who then, with her mother’s support, forced Robyn to marry him so that he would not be prosecuted for rape. He divorced her a year later. Due to Robyn’s age, the man was granted sole custody of their daughter.

Robyn was heartbroken. She says she did not want to return to her mother’s home where she might be further abused, so she went to the street and did “whatever street people do to survive”.

One night, some acquaintances offered Robyn a place to stay and introduced her to intravenous meth. She tried it once and was hooked. She was 15.

A spending spree

For the next nine years, Robyn

bounced from place to place. Often “home” was a motel.

She had three more children with three different men, all of whom were abusive. And meth was her constant companion.

At age 24, Robyn left the violent man she was living with and took her children to the home of a friend. She noticed her friend’s credit card on a table and slipped it into her pocket. Over the next three days, she spent \$5000 with the stolen card.

Robyn was arrested, and the judge sentenced her to 27 years in prison.

A clean heart

Eight months into her sentence, Robyn attended a three-day ministry event.

She was overwhelmed by the love and power of God.

“I laid on the ground for the whole service and part of the next day, just weeping,” she says. “I spent a day and a half under a chair in the fetal position. God was just delivering me from everything in my life.”

When she finally got up off the floor, Robyn says she felt like a new person. She began working for the chaplain, setting up for services and helping with music. She got sober. And she felt shame melt away.

“My heart was clean, so I was able to see the Lord,” Robyn says. “I was able to forgive and ask for forgiveness.”

A new start and a familiar trap

After serving five years, Robyn was released.

For three years, Robyn worked hard to get back on her feet. She secured a job in road construction and attended church and Bible study.

And she even regained custody of her children just one year after her release.

One day as they worked on the highway, a co-worker casually said, “This would be a lot more fun if we went and got high.”

That suggestion was all it took. “I left the job site, got a needle, and it was like I had never quit,” she says.

A weight lifted

Robyn was back in the grip of addiction. Her children, now teenagers, bore the brunt of her drug use and her return to abusive relationships.

“The kids were a mess,” she says. “They spent a lot of time with friends and living on the street.”

Seven years into her relapse, Robyn was caught driving without a license and was put on probation.

Her probation officer noticed her bruised body and could tell she was using drugs.

The officer could have easily put Robyn back behind bars. Instead, she showed Robyn compassion by helping Robyn leave her abusive partner and check into a residential treatment center.

“I used drugs all the way up there, did drugs in the parking lot,” Robyn admits. “But as soon as I walked through the door, a weight lifted off of me, and I thought, ‘I’m done.’”

The need for recovery-focused community

The relapse rate for meth users is between 40-60%. Robyn sees the roots of her relapse in her lack of a recovery-focused community.

“I had a lot of guilt that I could go back [to using drugs] that quick,” she says. “But if we don’t stay connected to a sober group of people and our mind is not transformed, that’s what can happen.”

Robyn spent three months in rehab and then went to live in a sober home, a transitional post-rehab living environment. She has now been clean for two years. She has a steady job, and her relationships with her children have been restored. Thankfully, her adult daughter is even willing to let Robyn live with her.

“I still don’t have a place of my own because of my past,” Robyn says. “I have been out 12 years, and it still haunts me. But God is so faithful, and restoration is true. It really has been amazing.”

Giving back

Robyn attests that there is one thing she absolutely loves: volunteering with the homeless. In particular, she has a heart to see people delivered from drug abuse. Just as she was given a second chance to turn her life around, Robyn is eager for others to experience the same.

“I hope to help pull people out of that dungeon of addiction,” she says.

Where is God in tragedy?

BY MARILYN ADAMSON

GOD is the Creator of the universe who yearns for us to know Him. That is why we are all here. It is His desire that we rely on and experience His strength, love, justice, holiness and compassion. So He says to all who are willing, “Come to Me.”

Unlike us, God knows what will happen tomorrow, next week, next year, the next decade. He says, “I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning.”¹ He knows what will occur in your life and can be there for you, if you’ve chosen to include Him in your life. He tells us that He can be “our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble.”² But we must make a sincere effort to seek Him. He says, “You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”³

That doesn’t mean that those who know God will escape difficult times. When wars or rampant disease cause suffering and death, those who know God will be involved in that suffering also. But there is a peace and a strength that God’s presence gives. Reality tells us that we will experience problems in life. However, if we go through them while knowing God, we can react to them with a different perspective and with a strength that is not our own. He is bigger than all the problems that can hit us, and we are not left alone to deal with them. God has created humanity with the ability to choose. This means that we are not forced into a relationship with Him. He allows us to reject Him and to commit other evil acts as well. He could force us to be loving. He could force us to be good. But then we would be robots. Instead He gave us the human dignity of free will.

We have, by our lives and actions, distanced ourselves from God. The Bible says that “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”⁴

The consequences? Our sin has separated us from God, and it affects more than this life. The penalty for our sin is death, or eternal separation from God. However, God has provided a way for us to be forgiven and know Him.

God came to earth to rescue us. “For God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”⁵

Jesus left the safety and security of His home, and entered the hard environment we live in. Jesus got tired, knew hunger and thirst, battled accusations from others and was ostracised by family and friends. But Jesus experienced far more than daily hardships. Jesus, the Son of God in human form, willingly took all of our sin on Himself and paid our penalty of death. “In this is love, that he laid down his life for us.”⁶ He went through torture, dying a slow, humiliating death of suffocation on a cross, so that we could be forgiven. Jesus told others ahead of time that He would be crucified. He said three days after being buried He would show Himself physically alive to those who saw His crucifixion. On that third day, Jesus’ tomb was found empty and many people testified to seeing Him alive.

He now offers us eternal life. We don’t earn this. It is a gift from God offered to us, which we receive by faith when we ask Him to enter our lives. If we turn away from our sin and turn back to God, we can have the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.⁷ What about heaven? God does have a better place He offers us. In this world, God will wipe every tear from people’s eyes. There will be no more mourning, crying, death or pain.⁸ Right now you can ask God to enter your life. You can do this through prayer. Prayer means talking honestly with God. At this moment you can call out to God by telling Him something like this in sincerity:

“God, I want to know You. I want to receive Jesus Christ and His forgiveness into my life. I don’t want to be separated from You anymore. Please forgive my sin. Be the God of my life from this day onward. Thank you God.”

Footnotes: (1) Isaiah 46:9 (2) Psalm 46:1 (3) Jeremiah 29:13 (4) Isaiah 53:6 (5) John 3:16-17 (6) 1 John 3:16 (7) Romans 6:23 (8) Revelation 21:4

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TRUE CHANGE

Paseka Cebisa recently landed in jail for drug possession and spoke to Challenge News, while there, about how prison has helped him to truly live out the faith he professed years ago.

“I had a tough childhood. My mother worked and I had no father. I disrespected and swore at my mother in front of people,” Paseka remembers with shame.

“My mother went to church. I remember her telling me about church.”

The boy enjoyed hearing good things about God and that him gave him hope, so he decided to follow Jesus.

“I became a Christian because I wanted to be a good person.

“But I got into drugs. When I got angry I went around hurting people,” Paseka confesses.

Then the law caught up with him.

“In prison I chose to really follow Jesus.

“I apologised to people I hurt and asked for their forgiveness. I stopped using drugs,” he testifies.

The Bible says that true faith produces good fruit, as it indeed did in Paseka’s life.



Paseka Cebisa

“The best part of being a Christian is the love of other believers,” he says. “The hardest part is [being diligent about] reading the Bible and praying.

“Jesus changes lives,” Paseka declares.

As his favourite verse says: “If we confess our sins, He [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) •

POWER OF THE CROSS

A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. – 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18 NIV

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

I FOUND THE LOVE OF A FATHER

BY KATE CAMPBELL

Hector Ginez started selling drugs because he wanted money.

"I thought it was 'cool' to be a drug dealer, to have money, to live that lifestyle," he said.

But deep down, he longed to be loved and be seen.

A materialistic relationship

Growing up in San Antonio, Texas, Hector attended the church where his dad worked as a custodian.

Though Hector knew all the Bible stories, he didn't know God personally. By age 17, he was getting in so much trouble that he no longer felt welcome at church.

"I felt like God didn't love me," he says.

Hector started drinking alcohol, experimenting with marijuana, and eventually selling the drug.

By age 25, he managed the money for a barbershop chain that was a front for selling drugs. Then, he became a father and supported several children.

And though Hector felt he had a good relationship with his kids, he admits it was a materialistic one.

"I always thought that because they had clothes, because they had food, because they had a place to stay, because they had the iPads, they had the Game Boys ... that was [being a good] dad. That's what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to provide," says Hector.

Back then, Hector wanted to give his kids the material things he never had growing up. But he overlooked what really mattered.

"They needed me to be there," he says. "They needed me to spend time with them."

Even while he was dealing drugs, Hector continued going to church. He was even tithing on the money he was making from his drug deals.

He thought, "Because I gave my 10%, because I gave God what I was supposed to, He was going to look out for me," says Hector. But God wanted more from Hector than his money.

A prisoner's bargain

In 2015, Hector was incarcerated on a federal charge for intent to distribute heroin.

He ended up facing three years behind bars in Bastrop, Texas. Hector began his prison sentence thinking he would return to his old lifestyle selling drugs after his release.

But the struggles of prison and separation from his family brought him to his knees.

He got troubling news about what was happening to his family in his absence.

Far from his children and being unable to help them in their struggles, Hector realized for the first time the true cost of his lifestyle. In anguish, he asked God to help them.

"I'll give everything up," Hector promised. "Help me get through this."

Hector was so serious, he even wrote up a contract with God, which he keeps to this day.

Growing deeper

Within days, Hector learned that his family was doing better, and he knew he needed to make good on his promise.

Hector met Christians behind bars who showed him the way to hope.

Someone gave him a Bible, and instead of leaving it on the shelf, Hector started reading it and encountered Christ like never before.

Soon, Hector started playing drums at the Christian church services, reading his Bible more, and growing deeper in his knowledge of God alongside Christian men.

Pursuing hope

Hector completed drug classes in prison that shortened his sentence, but when he was released, he struggled during his transition to a halfway house. His new freedom was a gift, but it came with the temptation to return to old habits.

For so long, he depended on the money he made selling drugs – and on whatever persona he crafted to impress others and fit in. Now Hector had to figure out who he was. Or else he risked going back inside.

He needed a mentor to help him stay focused on his commitment to God. A local pastor named Chris made it his mission to walk alongside Hector.

"He never gave up on me," says Hector. Chris introduced him to a men's small group, which gave him the accountability he needed.

Hector got a job with a roofing company and even started his own clothing company called

412 Threads.

The clothing company makes t-shirts with biblical messages and uses a portion of the proceeds to buy Bibles for people behind bars. Hector couldn't forget the impact God's Word had in his own life, in prison and out.

"I wanted to give back to a community that I was once a part of," he said.

The love of a father

"A lot of times we ask God for something, and God has something much more planned for us than we expect," says Hector.

He learned that God doesn't want his money – God wants a relationship with him. He invests serious time in his role

as a father, too, instead of trying to address every need with material things.

Hector is passionate about using his story and his new company to influence the next generation. Through his experience in prison, he

“
God has
something
much more
planned
for us that
we expect.”



Hector Ginez has started a company which is helping the community he was once a part of.

says he realized, "It doesn't matter how much money you have. It doesn't matter how much drugs you sell. It doesn't matter who you know. If your relationship with God is not there, if

you don't know what grace is, you'll never know what peace is." •

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

Gentle giant lends a helping hand

BY AMANUEL MENGISTU (ABRIDGED)

Standing 6 feet, 6 inches tall and weighing 330 pounds, the director of chaplaincy for the Philadelphia Department of Prisons has a stature that could easily be intimidating. However, Carmelo goes out of his way to make those around him feel comfortable, especially the prisoners whose spiritual welfare he is responsible for.

But two decades ago, long before he became a chaplain, Carmelo was a young father in prison facing a potential life sentence. After years of running a major drug trafficking enterprise in Philadelphia and a lengthy pursuit by federal authorities, he was finally arrested.

Growing up in a 'war zone'

Carmelo grew up in the South Bronx in New York City, which at the time resembled a war zone with rampant crime, gang violence, and widespread illegal drug use plaguing the area.

"There were a lot of veterans coming back home from Vietnam that were heroin addicts, so heroin was dominating the streets," he says.

Carmelo's father, like many residents of the Bronx, was from Puerto Rico. He sold drugs from the back of a neighborhood bodega and also struggled with addiction.

"When he would get high, [he became] a very violent person," Carmelo recalls. "Every now and then, we [kids] would get beat up, but it was mostly Mom."

The pain of poverty

This cycle of abuse continued until Carmelo's parents separated and his father left the house. Although this separation brought relief from the violence, it also resulted in Carmelo's family collapsing into extreme poverty.

Carmelo's dad showed no interest in continuing a relationship with his son, even though he still lived in the Bronx. As he entered his teenage years, Carmelo was consumed with anger at his father's abandonment and increasingly frustrated with being poor.

Crime and punishment

Carmelo soon decided that crime was the quickest way out of poverty. He began robbing local stores with a BB gun, later graduating to using real firearms and committing bigger crimes. In the mid-1980s, Carmelo started selling drugs. This was the time when crack cocaine was introduced to the area, leading to an explosion

of addiction in the Bronx, where drug use was already widespread.

Carmelo got deeper into drug trafficking after marrying a Colombian woman whose brothers imported illegal substances on a massive scale. Working with his in-laws, Carmelo became a major distributor of narcotics in Philadelphia, where he ended up relocating his operation.

Becoming a father

His wife gave birth to a daughter during this time, fulfilling a lifelong dream of Carmelo's.

"That was always my dream, to have a family and a wife and a house," he says.

Despite this desire, Carmelo didn't know how to be a faithful husband or a good father. He would visit his daughter on weekends, bringing her hundreds of dollars' worth of toys, but neglected to spend any time with her. It wasn't until he was incarcerated years later that Carmelo understood how much he had taken for granted.

Diesel therapy

Carmelo's criminal enterprise came crashing down one night when federal agents swarmed his house and arrested him. Even though he was to be detained in New York City, the police took him on an uncomfortable six-day journey, stopping at correctional

facilities across the country. This process, known as "diesel therapy," was physically exhausting but spiritually enlightening for Carmelo.

At one stop, his cellmate told him that the one thing he wanted was a Bible. Later, during a bus ride, Carmelo overheard two detainees behind him talking about Jesus. Carmelo's heart stirred as he listened to the men discuss their faith in Christ, and he struck up a conversation with one of them.

"I said, 'Man, can you pray for me? How do I go about this?'" Carmelo recalls. "And he was like, 'Look, say this prayer with me. It's a prayer of reconciliation.'"

Fellowship and freedom

Carmelo committed his life to Christ that day. By the time he arrived at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, he was eager to get involved in the facility's Christian community. He began attending church services and prayer meetings with a core group of men who were also awaiting trial and sentencing.

After nearly two years of detention, Carmelo was surprised to receive a merciful sentencing that required only four additional months of incarceration. He would soon return home as a changed man.

Fruitful ministry

After his release, Carmelo began volunteering regularly to preach to the Spanish-speaking population in a Philadelphia prison. His ability to also preach in English soon led to a diverse, growing group of prisoners attending his meetings.

This fruitful ministry soon caught the attention of the director of chaplaincy at the Philadelphia Department of Prisons, who offered Carmelo a job as a chaplain.

He eventually took over as director of chaplaincy when his boss retired. In this current role, he is focused on supporting his staff and ministering to the spiritual needs of over 7,000 prisoners.

Starting a new chapter

After his release from prison, Carmelo remarried, became a father to a stepson, and then had three more children. He is now a father of five, including his older daughter, and he greatly enjoys being involved in his children's lives. He talks to his kids about his past struggles and encourages them to make positive life choices.

As a chaplain, Carmelo uses his platform to encourage incarcerated parents to be similarly honest with their children.

"I always tell everyone to do their best and not allow their children to inherit their past," he says. "Make them aware of your mistakes, but also, make them more aware of your comeback ... You made a mistake, and you might have fallen, but you got back up." •

The original of this story can be found at www.prisonfel



“
You made a
mistake and
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but you got
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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

Highlights in John

INTRODUCTION

WE have been through John's Gospel together and have learned much. It seems to be a good idea to look back a little and see again some of the highlights of this Gospel before we leave it.

Chapter 3: Verses 1-5 "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know You are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs which You are doing if God were not with him.' In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' 'But,' said Nicodemus, 'how can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!' Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'"

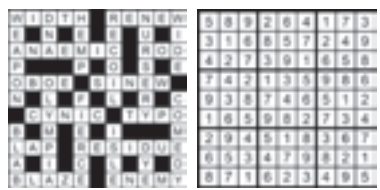
This religious man who came to Jesus by night was surprised at what

Jesus said to him. He was a devout Jew who felt he was doing all the things he needed to do to be right with God. But Jesus bluntly told him that there was something necessary which he didn't have. The new birth. Without it, there is no entry into God's kingdom. As Nicodemus couldn't understand what he meant, Jesus went on to show him that there is a spiritual birth which is brought about by the Holy Spirit. A person becomes alive as never before. Many things become new. There will be a love for God and His Word and a love for others. There will be a new sensitivity to sin and a desire to please the Lord.

We do not have the power to produce the new birth; it is a miracle from God.

Chapter 6: Verse 35 "Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me will never go hungry, and he who believes in Me will never be thirsty.'"

There are a number of claims made by Jesus in John's Gospel commencing with "I am." The first one came after the feeding of the 5,000 and some discussion about bread. Jesus told the people that He was the bread from heaven that gave life to the world. We know that bread supports life and is a daily necessity. Jesus came to give a new kind of life, a spiritual life which He implants in



us and then maintains. Christians experience the satisfaction that comes from knowing Him in this way. Our searching is over.

Chapter 8: Verse 58 "I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am!'"

In this chapter there is a debate surrounding the claims of Jesus. He is opposed by Jews who argue that they are righteous, and He is even demon-possessed. They take refuge in being children of Abraham, the great patriarch. But the Lord ends the argument by this statement. He says that He was in existence before Abraham was born. Abraham lived and died many centuries earlier. Notice, He didn't say "I was," but "I am." This is a claim to be God. It is to say, "I have no beginning and no ending." Jesus' existence did not begin with His birth as a baby. Remember, He came to earth from heaven.

Chapter 10: Verse 11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."

Much is said in chapter 10 about sheep. People in general are likened to sheep. There are good reasons for this. The people listening to Jesus were well acquainted with keeping sheep and the role of a shepherd. Jesus presents himself as the shepherd people need. He guides, feeds and protects those of His flock. More than that, He even lays down His life for them. All this points to His great love which took Him to the cross to save us.

Chapter 11: Verse 25 "Jesus said to her, '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.'"

These words were spoken at the time of the raising of Lazarus from

the dead. From this we know that there is a life to come. We will see the death of the body but there is something more. A day will come when the dead shall rise. We have the Lord's guarantee of this as He claims to be the resurrection. There is much said about this in the New Testament, carrying great importance. We can be certain that death does not end all. There is a new day coming.

Chapter 14: Verse 6 "Jesus answered, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No-one comes to the Father except through Me.'"

There is no mistaking what the Lord is saying here. Perhaps this is the most challenging claim He has made as it embraces so much. All we could search for is found in Him and in Him alone. There is no other way to the Father but through Jesus. He personifies all truth. True life, everlasting life is in Him alone.

This statement is unacceptable in the ears of modern man but it still stands. It means that all other claims to the knowledge of God are false. There are not numbers of roads that lead to heaven. Notice, that if we do not believe what He has said at this point, then we dismiss Him altogether. To believe in Him means to accept what He says.

Chapter 15: Verse 1 "I am the True Vine and my Father is the Gardener."

This is another illustration, using the natural world to teach a truth. Jesus refers to a vine as a picture of His relationship to the Father and our relationship to Him. He speaks in this passage of believers in Him being part of the vine, drawing life from it. So, there is a special union with Christ that believers enjoy, a closeness of fellowship and sharing. It is because of this that we are expected to bring

forth fruit. That fruit is such things as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and in short, godliness.

Chapter 19: Verses 17, 18 "Carrying His own cross, He went out to the Place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified Him, and with Him two others – one on either side and Jesus in the middle."

This is something of a climax in John's report of Jesus' life. So much of what is said previously is leading to this time of suffering. The description of the passion of Jesus and his death is touching, revealing His great love for us while also showing the hatred of those who crucified Him. This is the centre of His saving work – the sacrifice by which we are made right with God.

Chapter 20: Verse 31 "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name."

John gives us the reason for his writing. All through the book he gives evidence pointing to the deity of Christ, that is, that He is indeed God. His miraculous deeds, His sinless life, His words, His resurrection from the dead. Also, John hopes that readers will find life in Him. Take note that believing is not simply admitting that what is said is true, it means fully trusting in Him to save from sin. It is a personal commitment, leaving the old life behind and stepping out in a new life with Christ. Do consider where you stand at this time.

CONCLUSION
We have explored the Gospel of John. So, we plan to change to the Gospel of Mark. Each Gospel is different to the others but at the same time speak strongly for the glory of the Lord who is at the centre.

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

The place fulfillment is found

BY GREG LAURIE

COMEDIAN Jerry Seinfeld once pointed out that "everyone's looking for good sex, good food, and a good laugh because they're little islands of relief in what's often a painful existence."

That isn't new to our day. In the Bible, King Solomon decided to seek out laughter as well. He probably brought in the finest comedians of the day. Maybe acrobats, magicians, and illusionists performed for him too. But in the end, he concluded that it all was empty.

He wrote, "Laughter is silly. What good does it do to seek pleasure?" (Ecclesiastes 2:2 NLT).

Then Solomon thought that maybe he could find the answer in alcohol. If he just started drinking, perhaps in his altered state he would be a happy person.

He said, "After much thought, I decided to cheer myself with wine. And while still seeking wisdom, I clutched at foolishness. In this way, I tried to experience the only

happiness most people find during their brief life in this world" (verse 3 NLT).

Drinking has become a very common thing now, and people, especially young people, think going out and having cocktails is a cool thing to do. But it isn't cool. In fact, the Bible warns, "Wine produces mockers; alcohol leads to brawls. Those led astray by drink cannot be wise" (Proverbs 20:1 NLT).

Solomon tried it all. He went on a building binge, constructing massive houses, mansions, and palaces. And he recognized the emptiness of life without God.

Maybe there have been times in your life when everything seemed to click. There was that beautiful star-filled night or that gorgeous sunset, and you thought, "This is it. If only life could be this way!"

But those are just glimpses; each glimpse gives you a sense that it is what life ought to be like.

However, you are never quite there, because you won't find fulfillment in this world. You will find it only in a relationship with God.

You won't find fulfillment in this world.

Fanie van der Merwe of South Africa (centre) crosses the line to win gold ahead of silver medalist Charl du Toit of South Africa (left) in the Men's T37 100 metres final at Hampden Park during day five of the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games. (Photo by Cameron Spencer/Getty Images)



Fanie with the gold medal for the 100m T37 Mens event. (Photo by Julian Finney/Getty Images)

DESPITE DISABILITY

Very few people get to compete in one Olympics but South African Fanie van der Merwe has been to three. He won double gold at his debut at the Beijing Summer Paralympics in 2008, in the 100m and 200m sprint. And went on to win gold again at London in 2012 for the 100m and bronze at the 2016 Rio Games. He also won gold at the All-Africa Games in 2011 and 2015, and at the 2014 Commonwealth Games.

Growing up, Fanie had tried all sorts of sports and had big expectations but found it difficult and disappointing with his cerebral palsy, so he realized that he probably would never excel. However, he decided he would compete because he loved it and not care too much if he didn't get anywhere.

"That was so crazy for me. When I had that attitude, God came and He turned what I thought of as my disability and something that is holding me back, God turned it around into a blessing," Fanie told Christians in Sport.

Of his cerebral palsy, Fanie says "I knew as a child that there was something wrong with me but I never saw it as a disability." He had always competed with able-bodied children up until grade 11 (aged 17), when he finally made the school's abled-bodied athletic team. Then his coach suggested that he compete in para athletics.

Fanie saw this new opportunity as a beautiful gift from God and from there a lot of doors opened

for him. He began competing in disabled sports in 2003, in 2004 he competed in his first national championships. Being considered for the 2004 Athens games inspired him to try harder. In 2006, he began studying at Stellenbosch University, where he began training in earnest to compete in Beijing in 2008.

There he won his first two gold medals. "I almost got anxiety just thinking about the race and then when I went out onto the track I had peace. God pushed the anxiety away and I could really relax," he says.

As a young boy, Fanie wanted to be a child of God but didn't know how to do that. He thought maybe if he could just live a good life God would accept him, but he kept failing in his own strength. He also had spiritual pride, he confesses, in that he would look at others and think "well at least I'm not that bad" or "at least I'm not doing that".

"Even when I had opportunities to give my life to the Lord, I was never sure [it had worked], until I was about 16-17, I remember, telling someone that I don't know why but I always feel like I need to commit my life to the Lord at every opportunity. He told me it is not about your works, it is about what Christ has done for you on the cross, and it is His blood that sets you free and gives you salvation. And I knew then

I don't have to ever [try to] earn my salvation again, it is what God has done for me.

"That was the first step of the salvation process but although I didn't doubt anymore, no one really showed me how to walk with Christ. Then when I went to university I got disciplined, where someone took the responsibility to mentor me and explain to me that God's love disciplines us.

"That changed a lot of my understanding about Christianity and God as a father," Fanie says. He said when people corrected him, he could not see it as loving behaviour. Now he realized that God's correcting discipline was an act of love, wanting the best for him.

From the Bible passage in Hebrews 12:6 (...the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and

He chastens everyone He accepts as His son) Fanie realized in fact that the discipline he was feeling was proof that he was in fact God's son, not evidence that he was far from God.

"After that I experienced God as very near to me. He would walk with me through the highs and the lows. He was never distancing Himself when times got tough, He was right there in the thick of it with me. I could really run to Him in those times when I felt a lot of despair," Fanie relates.

“ I experienced God as very near to me. ”

Even right from the start at the 2008 Beijing Games, he remembers God intervening for him when, during the 200m, his legs started going into spasm, and God gave him the strength to carry on and get over the line first.

At the London Games in 2012, Fanie went into the 200m race very confident with a lot of expectation resting on him as the world record holder at the time.

Up until the last 50 metres he was in front but then five people passed him before the finish line and it felt as if his whole world had imploded. "I went back to my room that night and I felt God say to me, 'Fanie, I love you because you are my son, and not because you can win medals. And I'm proud of you.' All my years I had tried to perform to get

acceptance and to be someone, and now I didn't have anything to give to give God except my worship. And I spent the next three days just worshipping Him and God really restored me through that."

On the final day, when Fanie ran the 100m, he successfully defended his title, knowing that his identity and God's love for him did not rest on the race's outcome.

"My first identity is as a son of God," he declares, "then is my identity as a sportsperson. I start everything with Jesus."

Fanie and his brother Chris now run a Christian non-profit called Inspired 2 Become, focusing on alternative action sports and athletes with disabilities, and Fanie also coaches visually and intellectually impaired children. •

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Literature Fellowship
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