

From fatherless to found

BY LEXI AGGEN

Torrance Wilson considered himself a normal kid. His life seemed great from the outside. He was born to a middle-class family in Houston, Texas, and spent his time attending summer camp, gaming, and making the honor roll at school.

One day, while searching for coins in his mother's purse to use at the arcade, his world flipped. Stashed inside was a crack pipe. He confronted his mother about the paraphernalia. She gently wiped a tear from his eye and told him not to worry – she was just holding it for a friend. Even at the age of 9, he knew it was a lie.

Four years later, Torrance's father left because of his mother's addiction. But he didn't just leave his mother; he left Torrance, too. Torrance never forgot the day he overheard his father disown him in order to avoid paying child support. His heart broke.

Torrance and his mother moved to an impoverished neighborhood. His mother continued to abuse cocaine, and Torrance began skipping school. In his new neighborhood, he was surrounded by drug users and drug dealers.

He watched as the users on his street fell further into poverty and the drug dealers made thousands of dollars a day. He knew which side of the equation he wanted to be on. A man offered him \$20 to deliver a rock of cocaine, and from that day on, he was one of the dealers.

He was eventually caught selling

drugs and sent to an incarcerated youth boot camp. While there, Torrance evaluated his life: His mother was addicted to cocaine, and his father, an alcoholic, didn't want him. On top of that, he now had a young daughter to care for. He felt hardened by life.

Torrance left the boot camp with a heart unchanged.

However, he came out in his best physical condition yet. Torrance felt he had been training to go back into his life of crime: Now he could outrun the police.

He continued to deal drugs and evaded serious convictions – until he assaulted a Houston Police Department officer.

The judge sentenced him to four years behind bars. Torrance wanted to get his life back on track upon release. He longed to be there for his daughter in ways his own father never was for him.

He married his daughter's mother and the couple had a son together. Torrance tried his best to be a good father, but things didn't go according to plan. Soon he turned back to drug dealing, and his marriage fell apart.

Torrance got a call one day that there was a detective waiting for him at home. His now ex-wife had accused Torrance of a robbery. He

went on the run but was soon arrested. No one believed he was innocent, and he was sentenced to two years for robbery by threat.

Torrance recalls that this was his most difficult experience behind bars. Every day, he woke up knowing he wasn't guilty of this crime.

But over time, his heart softened. He realized that while he was innocent of the robbery, he was not innocent. He was a career criminal. Torrance served his full two years and came out with the determination to do things differently. He joined a church, lived life with his kids, and avoided encounters with law enforcement until he was caught with a gun in his car. He was arrested for a third time and was now considered a habitual criminal.

While awaiting trial, he was shocked to find out that his grandmother had lung cancer.

She was the only person in Torrance's life who lived out her faith.



Torrance Wilson.

INSET: Torrance with his wife, Alisha.

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Unforgiveness destroys your heart

BY BILL ADAMS OF THE CHRISTIAN POST

MANY have heard of "The Nazi Hunter," Simon Wiesenthal. He's famous for tracking down Nazi perpetrators of the Holocaust and bringing them to justice. Fewer know of Wiesenthal's wrestling with the conundrum of justice versus... Forgiveness.

The beginnings of his inner struggle are documented in his 1969 book *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. The author tells of when he was a Polish-Jewish concentration camp prisoner, assigned as an orderly, disposing of medical and human waste at a German field hospital.

Unexpectedly, a young SS soldier, near death from his wounds, summons Wiesenthal to his bedside. He proceeds to confess all his trespasses, including aiding in the murder of 300 Jewish women and children who had been herded into a house, set ablaze, and gunned down when they tried to escape the hellish flames.

This German soldier seeks forgiveness from a Jew. His final words to the prisoner are, "I know



The entrance gate to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland

that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace."

Mentally dazed from malnutrition, cruel treatment, and the surreal nature of this confession, Wiesenthal is dumbfounded as to what to say or do. In the end, he says nothing, leaves the room, and spends the rest of his life wondering what he should have done.

Should he have forgiven the dying soldier? What could he have even said that would absolve the man's guilt? Does a Nazi murderer, though sorrowful, even deserve forgiveness? Can you forgive a crime that was not against yourself, but against others? What about justice – wouldn't forgiveness undermine justice? But couldn't he at least have tried to help a desperate man die in peace?

Contemplating Wiesenthal's moral dilemma, I was struck that the matter of forgiveness is either very simple or it quickly becomes highly complex. The simple side of forgiveness comes from the root meaning of the word...

Forgive: to cancel a debt.

At its root, forgiveness really is that simple. When I release another from their debt to me, whether material or emotional, I walk free and full of life — every time. But, if I pause to consider the injustice of the matter, I grow troubled and unsure if forgiveness is the way to go.

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STRONG WEAKNESS

PHIL ROBERTS

Fatherless to found

• From page 1

Unable any longer to speak, Torrance's grandmother had written on a piece of paper that she loved him. He came back to his cell and cried. He began to pray.

It started as an angry prayer but he realized that he could also thank God that he had 33 years with his grandmother. Soon that gratitude turned to surrender.

He prayed, "Lord, I'm facing 25 years to life in prison. I don't care what happens with that. I just want to trust You with the rest of my life."

Torrance was sentenced to five years behind bars. He walked in determined to be a model prisoner. Every Sunday, Torrance was in church. On the chaplain's recommendation, Torrance attended the Prison Fellowship Academy, a program that seeks to instill values and build community among participants in order to break the cycle of

criminal thinking and create leaders within prison walls. He took courses on criminal addictive behavior and embracing the heavenly Father.

He remembers the day he read Psalm 27:10: "Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me." Unlike his earthly father, God had not abandoned Torrance.

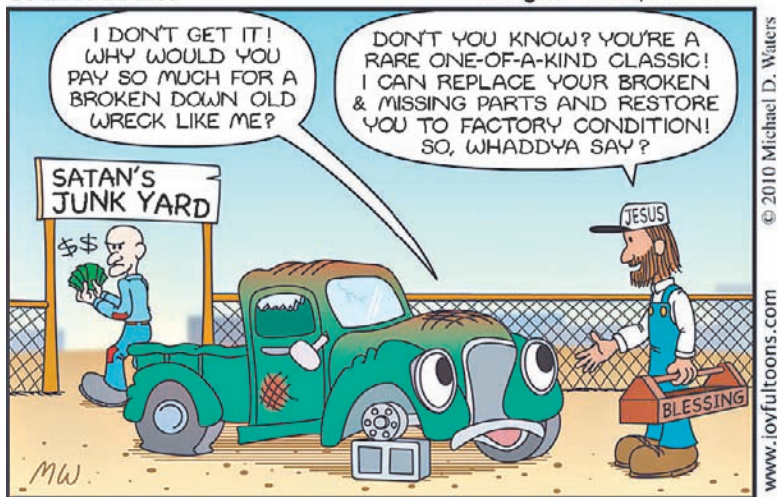
Torrance continued to grow in his faith upon release. He stayed connected with participants in the Academy program, which helped keep him accountable. He also joined a church and eventually became ordained as the pastor. Torrance married a woman named Alisha, and together they have a blended family with six children. In 2020, they started a construction company and Torrance also began working towards a political science degree. •

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

“I just want to trust You with the rest of my life.”

SALVAGER

A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.—LUKE 19:10 NIV

Coffee Break

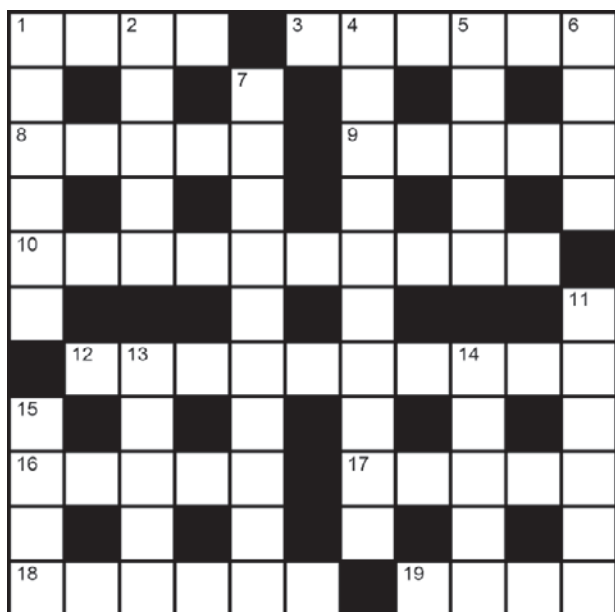
CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

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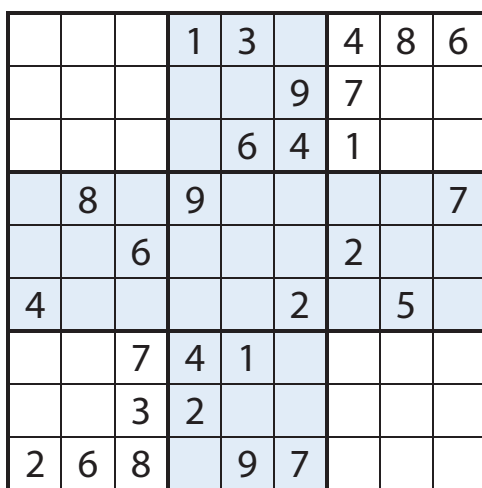
- 1 Proper _____
- 3 US stock market index
- 8 Worry, distress
- 9 Colon cleanser
- 10 The B in NBA
- 12 Poison for weeds (4,6)
- 16 Workers' collective
- 17 Inundated
- 18 Bear witness
- 19 Joint in metal

DOWN

- 1 Close at hand
- 2 Powerful impulses
- 4 Baku's country
- 5 Abide as a resident
- 6 Four-channel sound
- 7 Personal maids etc.
- 11 Corsage flower perhaps
- 13 Put out
- 14 Renter's paper
- 15 Mountain lion



SOLUTIONS PAGE 7



FROM NEAR DEATH TO LIVING HOPE

BY WM THOMPSON

Hector Fernandez Avila was 14 years old when he decided to run away from his home in Michoacan, Mexico, to live in the United States.

But before he had the chance to cross the border, he received a phone call that stopped him in his tracks. His father had killed himself. Hector immediately returned home.

"It was the worst day of my life," Hector recalls.

At the time, his hometown was a hub for drug trafficking. Influenced by the drug culture, young Hector admired the worldly trappings of the trade.

"Drug traffickers looked powerful, and I wanted to defend myself," he says. Because he was small for his age, other kids had bullied Hector frequently. His home had offered little refuge; his parents had fought constantly and disciplined Hector harshly.

The day his father died pushed Hector over the edge. Fuelled by rage and grief, he began living a volatile lifestyle. Relatives arranged for Hector to move to California, hoping a change of scenery would help.

It didn't. In California, his uncle taught him how to sell drugs. Hector joined a gang and quickly earned veteran status. However, his success in the streets came with a painful price.

"Many people were murdered, including my best friends," Hector recalls.

At age 17, he feared he would be the next to die. He decided to start fresh by getting married and leaving the state.

"I thought having a family would fix everything," he says.

And it did — for a few years. Hector stopped selling drugs and worked at

a factory in Minnesota. He and his wife welcomed a new baby.

"It was my dream come true; I had the perfect American life," Hector says.

But as the responsibilities of married life started sinking in, Hector began to second guess his decisions.

The lure of easy money enticed Hector back into drug trafficking. In Minnesota he could sell an ounce of cocaine for \$1,200 — double what it sold for back in California.

Although Hector never used drugs himself, he began abusing alcohol.

On the night of September 6, 2000, Hector celebrated his 23rd birthday by partying with his friends. He drunkenly made a deal to sell a kilogram of cocaine to a man in the next town over. As he drove to the man's house, Hector noticed several state patrol cars trailing him. He started to speed, attempting to flee arrest, but it didn't work.

Hector's incarceration began with a year in Douglas County Jail in Minnesota. He was facing a sentence of up to 40 years in prison.

Hector's wife visited with their children and told him she was leaving him. It was the last time he would ever see them. Hector had lost everything.

One day Hector grew so depressed that he planned to end his own life. But before he could complete the deed in his cell, he changed his mind.

"I was afraid that I would get into more trouble if somebody found me alive, so I got down," Hector recalls.

The next day, a pastor in Douglas County named Dave happened to visit Hector. Grabbing a book, Dave held Hector's hand and said in Spanish, "Hector, I am here to tell you that Jesus loves you."

Immediately Hector began to

weep. "I didn't even know what was happening," Hector says. "All I know is I felt a release of something."

Hector started reading the book — a Bible — as soon as he got back into his cell. He loved reading God's Word, but nightmares of his troubled past disrupted his sleep. Frightening images drove Hector to kneel by his bed and pray.

"I made a deal with God. If He made me a new man, then I would serve Him for the rest of my life," Hector recalls.

Hector was sentenced to 96 months in Minnesota Correctional Facility — St Cloud. There he heard about the Prison Fellowship Academy, which uses targeted curriculum, compassionate coaches, and restorative community to replace participants' criminal thinking and behaviours with renewed purpose and biblically-based life principles.

Hector saw the Academy as a way to prepare to do the right thing once he left prison. He applied and was accepted into the program, which required a transfer to a different facility in Lino Lakes, Minnesota.

"It was hard being the only Hispanic [in the program], and I struggled with my English. But the love of Jesus came upon all of us and changed us," Hector says.

A fellow Hispanic prisoner named Ryan later joined the program. Together, the men formed the first Spanish-speaking Bible study at Lino Lakes.

In 2005 Hector was released from prison and deported to Mexico. With the help of a re-entry program, Hector enrolled in a seminary in Puebla, Mexico. After Hector graduated, he worked at an orphanage, where he met and married Esther, a young woman who grew up there.

Today Hector and Esther have two children and live in Oaxaca, Mexico. Partnering with a local pastor, the couple is teaching job skills and sharing the hope of Christ with the people of Oaxaca. •

Story from Prison Fellowship

Unforgiveness destroys your heart

• From page 1

Thanks to God and His great grace (undeserved love), the answer to my conflict is settled in Christ...

Justice is His to execute. Forgiveness is mine to extend. A friend used to put it this way: "I take them off my hook and put them on God's."

If forgiveness is not that simple, then it quickly becomes astoundingly complex. The complex side of forgiveness comes from trying to figure out the how, the why, the when, the where, the how far, the how much, the how often... Meanwhile, there is no question as to how important the act of forgiveness is to Jesus of Nazareth. Central to his simple, yet profound, teaching on how to pray, he declares...

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. (Matthew 6:12 NKJV) And Jesus then adds: For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15)

Did that last part grab your attention? It should. Seriously. First comes the fortifying promise of God's forgiveness for us when we forgive others. That's God's exercising of justice based on the shed blood of Christ. But then comes the sobering warning of God's necessary judgment on us when we do not forgive others, even as the atoning work of Christ's sacrifice stands. If this is

how seriously Jesus deals with forgiveness, how dare we presume to claim the "justice" of what we think is owed to us? LORD, please forgive my trespasses...sure, but against who exactly...?

Psalm 51 gives us the answer: Have mercy on me O God...against you, you only, have I sinned, and done this evil in your sight that you may be found just when you speak, and blameless when you judge. (Psalm 51:1, 4)

The potential complexities of forgiveness are settled when we understand that we are in continual debt to God for His goodness and our inherent rebelliousness against Him. It's called sin, and for it His justice demands His judgment upon us. Yet in Christ, by His blood sacrifice and resurrection life working on our behalf, we can ask the Father, over and over again, to...

Forgive us our trespasses (against you, LORD), as we forgive those who trespass against us. It's really that simple: Know the freedom of release from your debt to God as you release the debt others have to you. All this is accomplished in Christ, and it is ours for the repenting.

As you might pray this today, embrace the core value, according to Jesus... Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. •



STOCKPHOTO

CHASED BY GRACE

BY MICHAEL ASHCRAFT

Right there in the back of the patrol car, Robert Michiels, 20, slipped out of the handcuffs and attempted to hang himself.

“I felt my life slip away,” he says on a podcast. “I watched my life flash before me rapid fire in little clips. Everything, from the time I went fishing with my dad and my brother, opening presents on Christmas, climbing up on the roof, riding our bikes, skating in the neighborhood.”

Then a loud voice from Heaven pronounced an imperious command. “Stop.” So he did.

The North Phoenix native was the kid your parents warned you to stay away from. He liked to get into trouble and fell into drugs by age 15.

After drugs reduced him to petty theft and homelessness, and not even his mother would help him anymore, he formed the plan to commit suicide. But first he would get high one last time. To scrape money together, he stole a pickup truck so he could resell the tires. But when he was stealing the first tire, people shouted and he had to drive off, cursing his luck that he’d only gotten one. As he roared off, a trucker pursued him, talking to the cops as he followed.

Eventually, Robert got cornered. He crashed straight into the pursuing trailer cab and drove off.

Then the first police car showed up and a wild chase ensued through an industrial area and muddy fields.

For the whole 22-minute pursuit, Robert continued smoking his crack pipe. Eventually he slammed into a pole. He woke up smelling of radiator fluid with the engine pushed into him. Robert credits his limp, drugged up body for his survival. He pulled himself out of the truck and ran down an embankment, into a muddy gully where the police eventually found him.

“The cops had no idea that I almost committed suicide in the back of their car,” Robert says. “They were just glad to have their guy.”

The supervisor read Robert his



Robert Michiels with his wife, Erin.

Miranda rights and he was taken to county jail. He figured he could still commit suicide in jail if things were too rough.

“I went to sleep for a month, literally,” Robert remembers. “I would just wake up to eat, go to the bathroom, take a shower and then literally just go back to bed. I was coming off drugs.”

Robert began reading the Bible. “I had nothing else to do,” he says. “I did pray.”

He lost every fight he got in, except one. He got early release because he submitted to seven years of probation.

Robert stayed with his mother, found a job at Pizza Hut, and struggled to establish himself and comply with probation. He miraculously got an apartment and his neighbor turned out to be a pastor, who explained the good news of Jesus to Robert and led him in the sinner’s prayer (like the one on page 7).

“If you acknowledge and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord [recognizing His power, authority, and majesty as God], and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9 AMP)

“God bowed the Heavens for me,” Robert says. “I went to church and heard some preaching. I literally thought my wife, Erin, had told my life to the pastor.”

Robert again responded to an altar call on September 26, 2001, and he began telling everyone what God had done for him. “Everybody I knew I would tell, God is real,” he says.

Today, Robert pastors at a church in Santee (San Diego), California. ●

PART OF A BIGGER PLAN

BY GREG LAURIE

THE worst travesty of justice in human history was the trial, execution, and murder of Jesus Christ. The very Son of God had come to this planet to walk among us, heal us, and deliver the greatest teachings ever given to humanity.

And what did they do? They beat Him, nailed Him to a cross, and left Him to die. But this was all part of a bigger plan. Jesus did not have His life taken from Him; He came to lay down His life for our sins.

Jesus said, *“For this is how God loved the world: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16 NLT). From the greatest tragedy came the greatest good: salvation for everyone and the forgiveness of sin. You see, Jesus didn’t stay on that cross. He rose again from the dead three days later, and He is alive. Is Jesus Christ living inside of you?

He is standing at the door of your life and knocking. He is saying that if you will hear His voice and open the door, He will come in. You can pray and ask God to forgive you of your sins, and Christ will hear your prayer.

Are you down and depressed and hurting? Jesus is saying, “Let me come in. Let me refresh you and give you rest. Let me give you the meaning and purpose of life that you been searching for.”

Jesus gives us the hope that when our lives on this Earth come to an end, we will go to Heaven. Not everyone has that hope. Heaven is not the default destination of every human being. It is only the future destination of those who will put their faith in Jesus Christ.

“He Himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins – and not only our sins but the sins of all the world” (1 John 2:2 NLT). ●

IF Christianity is true — and we have good reasons to believe it is — then we face judgement after death. There would be eternal consequences for those who have rejected God’s offer of forgiveness for their sins. We don’t face the nothingness of nonexistence; instead, we either face an eternity with God or separated from Him. That’s the real truth about immortality.

— theologian Clay Butler Jones

Protected for a purpose

Christina (Christy) Steele was in her forties, in prison doing 16-21 years for habitual drug felonies and sick of the life she was living, the abuse and the person she had become.

“I was tired of the lies. When you live a certain type of life, you deal with a certain type of people. I was tired of the way I was living my life. I knew there was a better way,” she told *Challenge News* from Anson Correctional Institute, where she has served five years so far.

This better way was one Christy’s maternal grandmother and paternal grandparents had known.

“My Pawpaw, a Christian, was the happiest man on earth. So I knew by the joy he had that there was something special in God’s Words in the Bible.”

Christy also knew there was a God because of the number of times her life had been spared.

“If your life has been anything like mine, you would have to ask, how did I make it through that ... and that ... and that?”

Christy had survived a neglectful mother, abusive relationships, and terrible beatings over many years, as well as her life of drug, alcohol and sex addiction.

She came to the conclusion: “You have to realize that someone is protecting you. Why are they protecting you? Because you have a purpose in life! You don’t have to change to be saved. You don’t have to be cleaned up. God does all that

for us so He gets the glory.”

Wanting happiness like her Pawpaw and knowing that God’s way was better than the way of the world, Christy prayed: “Lord Jesus, please forgive me for my sins. I believe that your Son died for me and was raised from the dead and I know that I am saved because your Word tells me that I am and You can’t lie.”

The Bible says, *“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.”* Romans 10:9

The difference becoming a Christian has made for Christy is profound. From being someone who was addicted, jealous, had a bad attitude, was often angry and lied a lot, she now has deep happiness, true friends, love and compassion for others.

“My heart is so big. God has showed me the bigger picture. Also, He has shown me what true love is – to be loved as His child. We don’t change overnight, it takes time and we will fall short, but we keep trying to make a difference in ourselves and others. We can start fresh every day and live in the present, so do what you can with this moment.”

“Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.” Ephesians 5:15-17 ●

“You don’t have to change to be saved.”

Wise words

WHEN people encounter the true God, they experience a selfquake. That’s one way you can tell if you’ve met Israel’s God or simply a figment of your imagination. A made-up God will leave your world undisturbed, conveniently aligning with your priorities without displacing anything, because ultimately you are more glorious than it is. The real God, however, will land in the middle of your life like an elephant crashing through the ceiling, displacing your sin, changing all your priorities, and forcing you to reorient yourself around the weight of glory.

— Andrew Wilson, from *The God of All Things*

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

Prefiero el curso en español. Street or PO Box

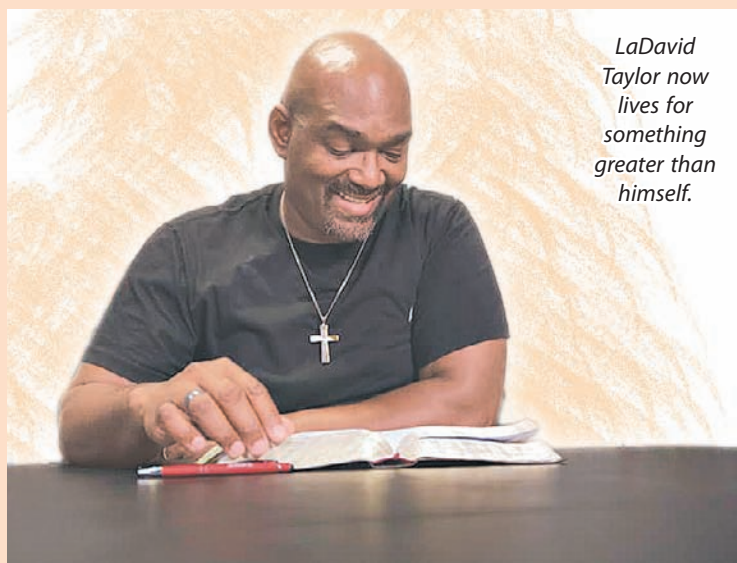
City State ZIP

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 5037 | Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8



LaDavid Taylor now lives for something greater than himself.

Marine finds his freedom in prison

BY GRAYSON POPE

When LaDavid Taylor was young, he never felt at home. He was brought up in Dallas by his mother and his stepfather, who was his only father figure from the time he was a toddler.

“The way that he showed love – he always provided, but he didn’t talk much... He was a wise man, but we didn’t talk much,” recalls LaDavid. His mother was young, and she and LaDavid had their issues, too. LaDavid struggled with feeling abandoned and misunderstood, so he tried figuring out life on his own.

That didn’t go so well.

Getting back on track

“I needed molding; I needed mentoring,” he says. As an adolescent, things spiraled downward. “I got into the streets and a lot of foolishness.” LaDavid believed in God, but he would often get upset with Him and turn away from Him.

LaDavid knew he needed to get his life together, so he joined the US Marines. He really enjoyed life in the corps – until he hurt his knee, essentially ending his military career.

That sent him into a depression, which he numbed with alcohol. One day he woke up in a Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital. A friend had brought him there after finding him unconscious at home. The doctor

told him his liver was damaged. “[He said], ‘All it’s going to take is for you to drink you a couple more beers, and you’ll die,’” LaDavid remembers. “That was it for me.”

Determined to get healthy, LaDavid stopped drinking. Unfortunately, the friend who had brought him to the VA was on a different path.

The friend started drinking and became aggressive, even taking the keys to LaDavid’s car. The two men fought over the keys. The friend had a gun.

After a struggle, LaDavid shot him twice, which led to a sentence of 25 years in prison. He was 24 years old.

Surrendering his will

LaDavid felt the full weight of what he had done. At the end of his own resources, he told God he didn’t want to turn away from Him anymore.

“[Then God] told me to prove to Him that I love Him,” says LaDavid. “And that meant just basically, ‘Seek My face in the middle of your darkness.’ And I grew from that.”

Prison might be a dark place, but LaDavid stayed focused on trying to seek God and to grow in his faith during his sentence.

Hoping to improve himself and prepare for life after his eventual release, LaDavid applied to join the Prison Fellowship Academy.

The Academy uses targeted curriculum, compassionate coaches, and restorative community to replace participants’ criminal thinking and behaviors with renewed purpose and biblically-based life principles.

The program helped him to ask the deeper questions and get to the underlying issues that lead to unhealthy behaviors.

Living for something greater

One of LaDavid’s favorite Academy classes was Alpha, a course facilitated by Prison Fellowship that creates a space where people have conversations about faith, life, and God.

“Alpha took me from head knowledge of my faith with Christ to an intimate knowledge, just through asking questions and being able to evaluate my personal views about my own faith,” he says.

While LaDavid was growing as a person, he was also growing as a dad. He signed his children up for Prison Fellowship Angel Tree, a program that serves incarcerated parents by giving them a pathway to restore and strengthen relationships with their children and families.

The year before his release, LaDavid asked his girlfriend – who stuck with him the entire time he was incarcerated – to marry him. She said yes.

LaDavid was released in 2018 at 44 years old. He and his family are doing well. LaDavid has since started a janitorial business, and it’s prospering.

He also has a role with Alpha’s Inner City Initiative in Houston, which allows him to continue with his favorite part of the Academy program.

He says his favorite part is building relationships with groups, local non-profits and churches so that together they can support their community.

The greatest lesson LaDavid learned from his time in the Academy is one he is still practicing today: “Live life for something greater than yourself.”

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

SUCCESS CAME AT A COST

First-generation Puerto Rican American growing up in Milwaukee, Héctor Colón was the target of racism and bullying from a young age. One particular neighbor took an immediate dislike to Héctor and taunted him with a barrage of racial slurs.

When Héctor recounted what happened to his family, his father told him he needed to learn to defend himself and took him to a boxing gym. He was shown some basic combinations by his future coach, who turned to his father and said, “Héctor’s a natural. He will become a champion.”

Despite having natural talent, Héctor began to train hard. He got up before school to work out, trained during his lunch break and worked even more after school.

Sadly his father never saw him complete as he left their family when Héctor was 12. Héctor continued to endure bullying and racism but, “boxing provided the structure and support I needed. It taught me dedication, determination, and discipline,” he writes in an article for *Christianity Today*.

Héctor began representing the United States in boxing around the world. As a teenager, he was a seven-time US national champion. As a senior in high school, he was chosen as a candidate for the 1992 USA Olympic Boxing Team. He also won the F Don Miller Award at the 1992 national championships for skill, respect and determination.

But as his success grew, Héctor noticed other areas of his life were falling away.

“[Boxing] entangled me in some unhealthy relationships,” he admits. “Once, at a restaurant, a group of friends and I decided to sprint from the table without paying. The police rounded a few of us up and took us to jail.”

When Héctor’s coach picked him up, he was furious and reminded him that he “needed to be a champion both in and out of the ring”.

Héctor had been baptized and confirmed in the Catholic Church as a child and continued to attend

Héctor Colón is now the vice president of the USA Boxing board of directors. INSET: Héctor in his boxing days.

church even when the rest of his family stopped going, but boxing and travelling led him away.

Héctor dreamed of completing in the Olympics and began preparing for the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. In the trials, he lost to Jesse Briseno and was devastated.

“My dreams of Olympic glory had vanished... I felt lost and rudderless, wondering what to do with my life. That’s when I started attending church and Bible studies again, and on December 27, 1992, I purchased my very first Bible. That same day, I gave my life to Jesus Christ.”

In 1993, Héctor once again fought Jesse Briseno for the 147-pound US National Championship.

“This time I knocked him out in fewer than two minutes. That victory breathed new life into my career prospects.”

The fight was televised, and the resulting publicity saw Héctor on the cover of USA Boxing’s magazine, as well as the inside cover of *Sports Illustrated*.

Héctor considered going professional but found himself feeling conflicted when he read in the Bible: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who

is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

“I pictured myself in the ring hurting someone who was a temple of the Holy Spirit. I pictured my own temple getting hit and endangering my body and my brain in a way that God had not intended.”

Héctor prayed about whether he should continue boxing for about a year. Finally he decided to leave the

sport he loved, which he describes as “the hardest decision I had ever made”. He knew he was letting many people down, especially his coach.

“When I first gave it up, it was really difficult,” Héctor says in an interview with Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. “I would see individuals that I competed with: Oscar De La Hoya, Vernon

Forrest. All the greats that ended up becoming world champions, I competed with them on the United States national boxing team. Vernon Forrest – I beat him twice. He became a four-time world champion. Jose Antonio Rivera – I knocked him out; he became a three-time world champion. So giving that up in the very beginning, was really hard. Really hard.”

But at the same time, Héctor felt an overwhelming sense of joy and peace and knew he had made the right decision.

Héctor says leaving the ring enabled him to start a family, pursue God and explore career opportunities that aligned with his faith. Today he is the president of a Lutheran social service organization and the author of *My Journey from Boxing Ring to Boardroom: 5 Essential Virtues for Life and Leadership*.

He remains involved in boxing in his role as the vice president of the USA Boxing board of directors – which may be surprising for some. But Héctor wants to make the sport as safe as possible with rules, training guides and medical advancements.

“I’ll always be thankful to boxing for providing character-shaping structure and discipline when I needed it most. But only by giving myself to Christ did I discover a calling worthy of my utmost devotion.”



Congratulations graduates!



Friends and family, correctional officials, and government representatives gathered to honor the graduates of the Prison Fellowship Academy. In select prisons across the country, the Academy offers incarcerated men and women a pathway to holistic life transformation. Guided by Prison Fellowship staff and volunteers, participants learn to lead lives of purpose and productivity inside and outside of prison.



Frank Mesa and his wife Jennifer.

Frank sees the light

BY MICHAEL ASHCRAFT

Frank Mesa put the gun in his mouth many times. Sometimes, he pointed it to his temple. But he could never pull the trigger.

"I hated life. I hated people. I was just bitter," Frank says. "I used to argue a lot with my parents. I told my mom, 'I hope you die.' Two weeks later she became real ill and went to the hospital and within a week, she passed away."

Frank, then 23, blamed himself. He had been taking care of both his parents, who were ill. He grew up in Apple Valley, California.

The family moved away from the gang violence in L.A. in 1978 at the time his dad retired. An only child, Frank was mischievous.

"As a kid, I remember being bullied a lot, getting picked on," he recalls. "I was jumped by a number of older kids. They stole my brand new bike. This is where I started hating people."

As he grew up, he fell in with the heavy metal crowd during middle school, groups like Ozzy Osbourne and Def Leppard.

"One of my favorite songs was from Pat Benatar. It was *Hell is for Children*," Frank says. "It was an addiction. It helped me to forget about issues, stress, and peer pressure. I just wanted to be accepted."

The first time he inhaled second-hand marijuana smoke, it gave him hallucinations for three days, so he stuck with alcohol.

"Almost every weekend, I would look for parties that I wasn't invited to," he says. "We would just get blasted. I would show up to work intoxicated."

Naturally, his parents scolded him for this behavior. He argued over this. "This is my own life," he responded. After his mother's death, Frank felt bad for wishing her dead. He could never apologize. He wondered what would become of himself. "Is this life? Is that all there is?" he asked.

Frank had never been a church person. A few months later, somebody knocked on his door and explained the gospel to him.

"I had all kinds of questions about God at the time," he says.

The church was full, and Frank picked a spot in the back row. When lively praise songs started, he freaked out.

"I'm in the wrong place. I have to leave," Frank remembers.

"But I was trapped," he says, because the door was behind the pulpit. "I would have to pass the pastor, and I knew he would want to stop me. So I just stayed in my seat and waited it out." He listened to the whole message. At the end, the pastor asked if anyone wanted to receive Jesus.

"My heart was pounding. It wouldn't stop," Frank remembers. "So I raised my hand."

The pastor then asked him to go up to the front and pray.

"I didn't want to. My heart started pounding again," he says. "Finally I got out of my seat and my heart started going back to normal. A man led me in a prayer to (receive) Jesus."

Then something remarkable happened. Frank saw a bright flash. He thought it was a camera, but when he opened his eyes, there was no one with a camera.

"I felt a heaviness come off. The flash was God touching my life," he says.

At home, Frank tried to explain what had happened to his father, who was still in mourning and didn't want to hear.

Frank felt an urgency to bring him to church. "I didn't know what to do except to force him to go," he says. His dad had emphysema, from having smoked most of his life. He only had 20% lung capacity.

Frank bullied his dad into accompanying him to church the following week. Dad didn't want to surrender to Jesus, so Frank raised his hand for him! The whole church circled them to pray for his dad to turn to Jesus.

Nonetheless, Frank's father found an inexplicable peace.

The next day he passed away.

Frank sold his guns because of his constant temptation to suicide, and began to serve God. A divorced man, he asked God if He had a wife for him: "Yes," was the reply.

"Who is the person you have for me?" he asked God.

A woman called Jennifer was in the worship team on stage as Frank stood at the back as an usher.

She's the one, God impressed on his heart. At a dessert night, Jennifer brought a banana cream pie.

"I was speechless," Frank says. "That was confirmation because that was my favorite pie." Six months later, they were married.

In 2015, Frank began pastoring a church in nearby Adelanto, California, where he is still today.

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

The biggest change is the peace I now feel

Australian Samuel Narrowway did not know how to deal with stress well, and from a very young age he had a lot of it. He and his younger brother were neglected by their alcoholic mother, and beaten, locked out and abused for many years by her various boyfriends.

At 15 Samuel left home and couch surfed and a few years later discovered the oblivion of methamphetamines.

"My trigger was trauma and emotion," he elaborates. "I couldn't handle it. Whenever it arose, I would get on drugs and hang around the wrong crowd and get into criminal activity. I would be full of deceit and lies and would rip off businesses through fraud. I would hang around motorcycle gangs and organised crime figures.

"Eventually I developed a severe anger problem and would fly off the handle at the most trivial problems. I would black out and become extremely violent and aggressive."

For a year Samuel did manage to stay clean from meth and things were looking up when he got married and moved in with a woman who had teenage kids.

"I thought I was on top of the world! I was wrong! My wife had serious mental issues and turned out to be using me in a bad way. She eventually went to prison and I looked after her kids. The Child Protection removed them saying I had a bad criminal history revolving around drugs and therefore was an unfit parent."

When his local church wouldn't help him out, Samuel relapsed into drugs to drown his painful emotions.

Then he impersonated a police officer to rip people off for money for more drugs, and got caught and ended up in jail.

With hindsight, though, he is glad. "God stopped me by putting me in jail to get clean and be trained in His ways and be prepared for service. God saved me from a drug-induced premature death!"



Samuel Narrowway

Samuel had heard of God in Christian primary schools he attended briefly but he really found God in a Kairos Course he did in prison in 2017. A man called Ben helped Samuel to understand the story of the Bible and how Jesus could change a person's life and desires.

"I felt God ask me to start a new life, get rid of all my past evil desires and use those evil experiences to help people in need and spread the salvation message. I became a Christian because I believed the truth about Jesus and that God could change me!"

How did he become a Christian? "I had a time of intensive prayer with others and with extensive repentance (asking for forgiveness and renouncing wrong). A lot of emotions and memories exploded through me! I received the Holy Spirit (of God) by freely repenting (turning from my sin), believing

and committing my life to Christ," Samuel explains.

Since that time, Samuel says the biggest change has been the peace he has felt. "My life is not free from tests and difficult times but I have wisdom and knowledge how to deal with them. I have been calm. God is healing my severe anger problem and violent tendencies.

"Life is clearer with God! You see things better and more colorful.

"I love communicating with God through the Holy Spirit and getting an insight into what my life will look like if I continue on with His will. His love is abundantly amazing!"

Now 30 and three years into his five-year sentence, he tells others: "If you are lonely, sad, mad, or anxious, God is there for you. Jesus is the way. Trust in Him and He will show you His existence in weird and wonderful ways."

Samuel's favourite Bible verse is Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future."

FROM STUDENT TO TEACHER

Eight years ago, I was trapped in the town of Me-ville; that is, I was living for my own selfish pleasures – whatever I wanted in the moment. These pleasures caused me to commit a crime which tore apart my family and sent me to prison.

My marriage had ended two years before this when my wife and children walked out of my everyday life and became merely weekend acquaintances. At the point of no return, the rest of my life began to fall apart in that jail cell. With no job, no home, no family, no friends, I had lost everything in my world. There, broken, I finally gave my life to Christ and was born again. It has been a long, pain-filled process of learning about this new life in Christ.

In Jesus' mercy, I became accepted, and this would not have happened if the Lord had not sent a pastor to visit the jail, and to bring Bibles and studies to give out. This was the first time in my life that I had taken the Word of God seriously. It took me six years of studying God's Word to get to the point where I could hear his voice.

In Central Michigan Facility, I came to the Alpha Ministries group and have now been a discipler with Alpha for at least a year. I've had the pleasure of watching three students also become disciples, with a current student still working on the materials. God has grown our group



STOCKPHOTO

from 11 to over 35 in that time. My two favourite books in the Bible are Psalms, because they really lay out the human experience, and Matthew, for his no-nonsense approach to who Christ is and the essential teaching for how we are to conduct ourselves in Christ Jesus. My favourite authors are Matthew, Luke, and John, who have much to say about the all-important ministry of Christ. A favourite verse would be: "So have no fear of them (persecutors), for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matt 10:26-28, ESV)

If you can live your life under such security that nothing in your life is hidden, but all is exposed, then you don't have to fear what someone will think of you. Either that your life is full of darkness or full of light will be self-evident. I have made my life open to all.

- Doug

Used with permission from Alpha Prison Ministries

Trusting God... even in the dark!

"When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer." - Corrie ten Boom'



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 19:12-34

INTRODUCTION

WE are here at the point where the trial of Jesus ends with great injustice being done. Pilate knows He has done nothing to deserve death but hopes to avoid a backlash from the crowd. We can only imagine what this did to Pilate's conscience. He must have felt deep regret. But his troops did whatever they wished to do to Jesus. They were cruel and heartless, despite the fact that they knew nothing first-hand about the prisoner. Read on.

Verse 12 "From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, 'If you let this man go you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.'"

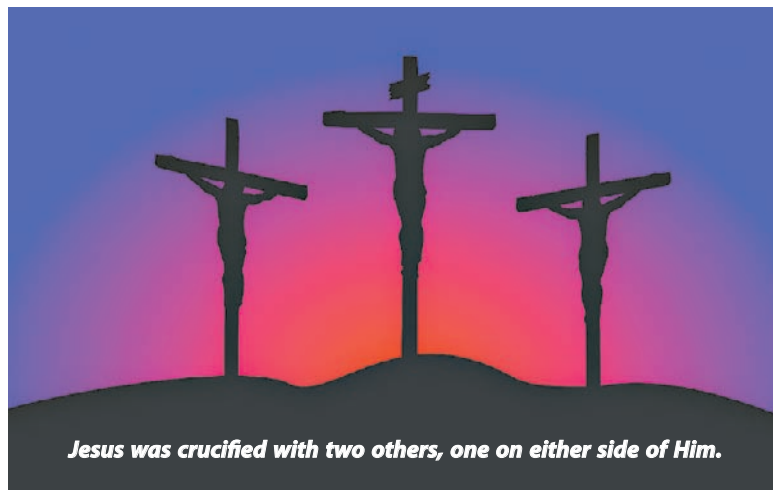
Pilate was troubled about what to do with Jesus but he was also troubled about what he should do with the crowd and its leaders. He faced a dilemma. Now the Jews brought up loyalty to Caesar to sway Pilate.

Verses 13-16 "When Pilate heard

this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour. 'Here is your king,' Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, 'Take Him away! Take Him away! Crucify Him!' 'Shall I crucify your king?' Pilate asked. 'We have no king but Caesar,' the chief priests answered. Finally, Pilate handed Him over to them to be crucified."

It is very clear to readers that this was really no trial at all. No weighing up of evidence, no proof of law-breaking, just loud condemnation. Notice how ironic all this is. The creature calls for the death of its creator. Guilty sinners condemn a sinless man. The perfect Son of God is to be punished like a common criminal. Pilate goes away with his inner thoughts in turmoil, wondering what he has done. The fact is, that he has participated in the most significant event ever to occur on earth. Jesus is dying for reasons those who crucify Him have no idea about. It is for mankind's redemption.

Verses 17, 18 "So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. 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."

Remember that earlier in this chapter we read how Jesus was whipped and mocked and spat upon by Pilate's soldiers. They crowned Him with thorns. Now they inflict on Him the most cruel and painful death imaginable, little knowing that ancient prophecies were being fulfilled to the letter.

Verse 19-22 "Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read, JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, 'Do not write "The King of the Jews" but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.' Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written.'"

It is plain that Pilate's bad conscience was working on him. To give just a little reputation to Jesus he made an effort to honour Him. Perhaps he wanted to convey that he did not have anything against Jesus who just might have been who He said He was. There is a tradition that tells of Pilate later on journeying as far as Switzerland where he took his own life. There is a mountain named after him to this day.

Verse 23, 24 "When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took His clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 'Let's not tear it,' they said to one another. 'Let's decide by lot who will get it.' This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled which said, 'They divided my garments among

themselves and cast lots for my clothing.' So this is what the soldiers did."

The quotation is from Psalm 22, known as the Psalm of the cross. It is a vivid picture of crucifixion though it was written around one thousand years before Christ. Here is proof of the inspiration of Scripture. Pagan Roman soldiers would have no idea they were fulfilling prophecy.

Verses 25-27 "Near the cross of Jesus stood His mother, His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. When Jesus saw His mother there, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, 'Here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home."

We see here a very human touch and observe the thoughtfulness and unselfishness of Jesus. It seems that Joseph, Mary's husband, was no longer alive and Jesus trusted John the disciple to care for her. It is notable that several women were faithful in following Jesus as disciples, even when others had fled the scene.

Verses 28-30 "Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said 'I am thirsty.' A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus lips. When He had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, He bowed His head and gave up His life."

From the other Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we learn that Jesus said seven things while on the cross. He felt abandoned, calling on His Father, He prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him, he spoke to His mother and John, He declared His work finished and He committed His spirit into the Father's hands. What was finished? The sacrifice acceptable to the Father was made. The debt of sinners was covered in full because of the shed blood of the Savior.

Verse 31 "Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down."

The significance of the broken legs is this. While crucified, the victim was able to give some support to their body by using their feet on a protrusion to take some weight and enable breathing. In this way, criminals were known to survive several days before finally dying. But with the legs broken, the body slumps and causes death.

Verses 32-34 "The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear bringing a sudden flow of blood and water."

Another forecast from the Old Testament was fulfilled. No bone was broken. Jesus had laid His life down in a deliberate act. The blood and water revealed His death.

CONCLUSION

By no means is this the end of the Gospel story. The things that happen next are all part of the vital history. But we must understand that the Bible teaches that we need to repent of our sin and trust in Jesus as our own Savior before forgiveness and eternal life are ours. What a wonderful salvation was brought about by Almighty God. Don't neglect it.

N	O	U	N	N	A	S	D	A	Q	7	2	9	1	3	5	4	8	6
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B	A	S	K	E	T	B	A	L	L	5	8	2	9	4	3	8	1	7
Y	N	A	O	3	7	6	5	8	1	2	9	4						
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P	V	A	J	E	C	9	5	7	4	1	8	3	6	2				
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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



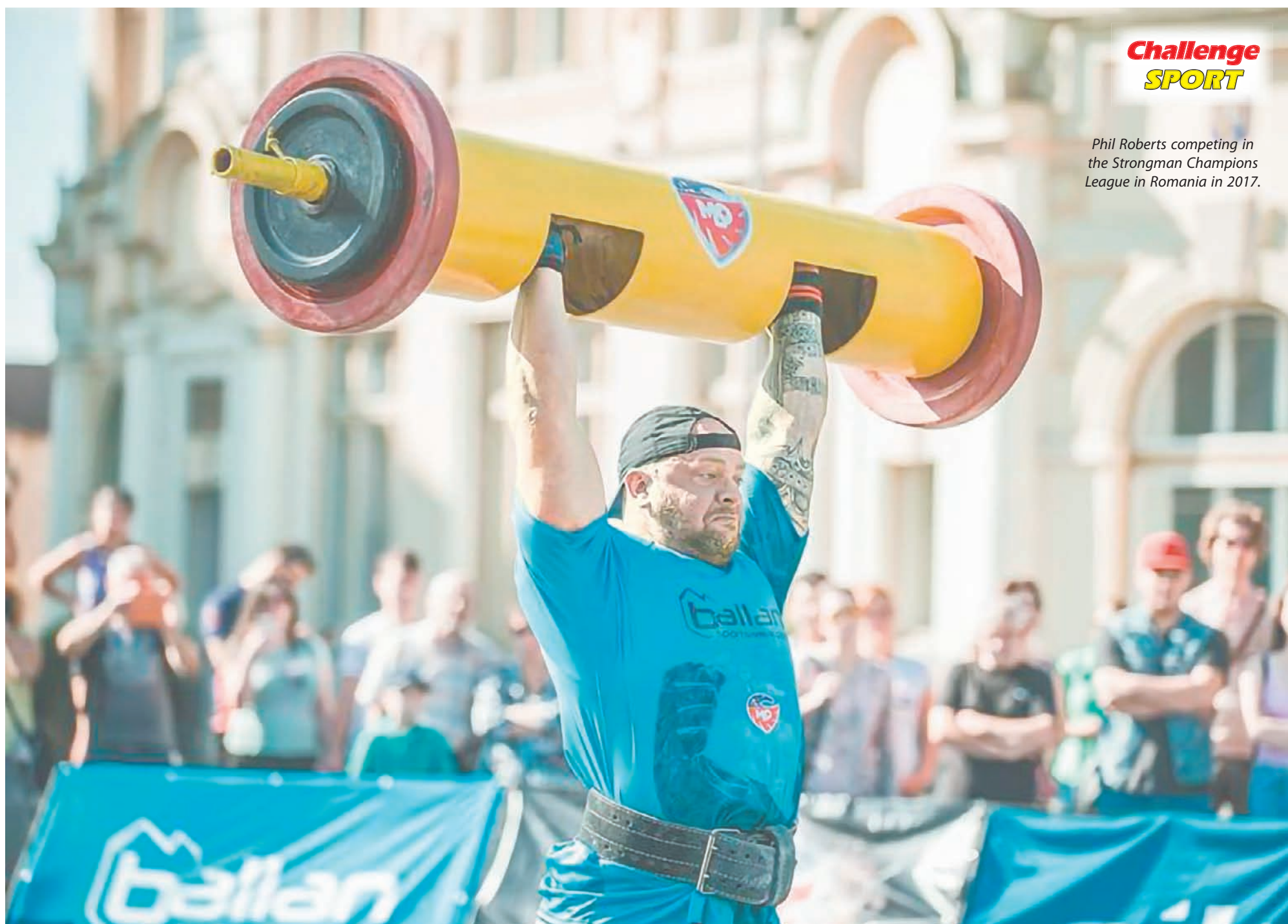
Roadblocks and opportunities

DO YOU ever run into roadblocks on your life journey? Do you ever get frustrated when things go wrong and your plans don't work out as anticipated? What seems like a detour can lead you straight to your destination.

Grace and Walter Lantz rented a rustic wooden cabin in the forest for their honeymoon. At the first dawn there, a woodpecker started its pounding on the roof. The newlyweds couldn't sleep for the noise. But by the time they returned from their honeymoon, they were inspired to create a cartoon character, "Woody Woodpecker." Walter drew the pictures. Gracie became Woody's voice. Years later, at their 50th wedding anniversary, Grace remembered the problem of the noisy woodpecker and said, "It was the best thing that ever happened to us."

In 1859, a New York chemist travelled to Pennsylvania, to watch the drilling for oil. He was Robert Chesebrough who watched as the oil drillers cursed a colorless oily residue that stuck to their drills. Though it was a problem that gummed up the works, the oil workers smeared this stuff on their cuts and burns. It helped to heal. Chesebrough took this oily residue back to New York. By 1870, he was manufacturing what he had developed from that oily problem. He called it Vaseline Petroleum Jelly. A violent storm posed a problem for the captain of a slave ship. He was John Newton, born in London on July 24, 1725. He transported slaves from Africa to America. On March 10, 1748, a storm frightened him so badly that he called out to God for mercy. The problem of the storm started a storm in his heart. He remembered his childhood faith. Finally, that inner storm gave him the opportunity to give up the slave trade. At age 39, he became a priest of the Church of England. He wrote a hymn called "Amazing Grace" to tell how God's love changed his life. 250 years later people are still singing it. That storm provided showers of blessing in his life and for many others in the years to come.

In each of these instances, a setback turned into an opportunity. Try to change your perspective on whatever difficult situation or trial you are facing at the moment; view it creatively and turn it into an opportunity to learn and grow.



STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

In 2017, Sheffield policeman Phil Roberts was crowned Britain's Strongest Man.

Winning this competition was no mean feat. The 32-year-old had to beat his opponents in events such as flipping a 880 lbs tractor tyre, lifting a car and pulling a plane. At 6'2 tall and weighing 293 lbs, he was built like a mountain.

Yet while he was as physically as strong as they came, emotionally Phil was as weak as a child.

"It looked on the outside that I had everything, but I didn't feel fulfilled," he says on the YouTube channel Life Stories. "I felt empty."

Emptiness had plagued him ever since he was 22, when his best friend hanged himself.

Until then Phil had been a casual churchgoer, but this tragedy caused him to turn his back on God.

"I couldn't understand how a good God could allow that to happen and that's when I decided I was done with God and would live my life my way to the full — or at least what I thought was to the full," he says. "I can't say I'm proud of the next 13 years."

Those were the party years, the hard drug (cocaine, heroin, lots of steroids) and hard drinking years.

He even got engaged and bought a house with his fiancée but was unfaithful to her and they broke up.

By this time Phil was a police officer, but had become disillusioned with the job and chalked up the most

complaints of anyone in the South Yorkshire Police Force.

Where did it go wrong, he asked himself?

"I went from wanting to help and protect the vulnerable to being one of the most violent men in the force. I left a trail of disaster behind me and slipped into depression."

Phil tried to pick himself up by throwing himself into weight training and competing in novice strongman competitions.

Bolstered by some early victories, he went all out to win the major titles, which resulted in his 2017 win.

This launched him into the glamorous world of women, sports cars, penthouse apartments and lucrative sponsorship deals.

But still this brought him no lasting joy — instead he describes his success as hollow.

His use of hard drugs, which included copious amounts of steroids, continued.

In 2019, Phil decided to defend his title.

By this time, he weighed 335 lbs. "I was having the worst competition I've ever had. I was so big and so uncomfortable because I put on that weight very quickly.

"The steroids and recreational drugs I was taking put my body under huge pressure — it's by the grace of God that I didn't just pop."

The last event of the competition rolled around — the Atlas stone lift, in which competitors have to lift

five huge round stones, increasing in weight from 220 to 353 lbs, and place them on five high platforms.

He got through the first four but slipped while lifting the final and heaviest stone. It dropped.

The 353 lbs rock crashed onto Phil's shin bone, which broke with a sickening crack.

"I knew instantly it was bad," he says. "It sounded like a massive branch breaking off a tree."

When surgeons told him his injuries were so severe he could lose his leg, Phil's world disintegrated.

"I went from being one of the strongest people on earth to the vulnerable little boy I was growing up. I was terrified," he shares.

"All I could think of was that I would lose my business and my livelihood.

"I realized everything I'd built my life on, things that never gave me real happiness or joy in the first place, could vanish overnight."

However, Phil had some friends who were Christians. They reached out to him during this time and invited him to a Christian men's retreat.

"At that point I was so desperate I said I'd take anything, so I went, but this time I wasn't my confident cocky self. I was in pain; my leg was being held together by this massive cage. I was miserable."

While he was there, one of the speakers approached Phil and said to him: "Why don't you give this God thing a go? Give Jesus a chance."

Willing to try anything, he said to himself: "Yeah, why not give Jesus a go?" It really was as casual as that!

He says slowly but surely things

started to change. "I didn't know much about God at all. I thought He was cruel and Jesus was just some kind of nice guy.

"I knew I had to change — I wanted to change — but I was kind of straddling the Christian life and the old life. But God was so gracious; He was so patient. He gave me grace [undeserved love]. He is a loving father, the best Father ever.

"I can genuinely say today that on reflection the day of the accident was the best day of my life, though not at the time, of course. But it was when I realized that all these things that you've spent so much time and effort on can be taken away from you in an instant.

"God has given me the purpose and meaning I've always looked for."



Right: Phil Roberts doing the Atlas stone lift.

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