

## Prisoner to princess

False ideas have held Tina Cook captive to her feelings for most of her life. She was trapped in deception but eventually found a way out to the truth. This is her story in her own words.

Looking back, I was saturated with the belief that there was something wrong or 'lacking' in me, that I was unworthy, unlovable, didn't measure up and never did anything right. This mindset chartered a path of destruction that took me very far from the truth of my real identity.

I began people-pleasing, performing, and approval seeking as a pre-teen. I later became an easy target for drugs, sex, and rebellion in any form. Unsurprisingly, by age 15 I was pregnant and before I turned 16 had undergone an abortion that left me unable to ever have children. Right after my 16th birthday, I tried to commit suicide and was committed to a psych ward.

Promiscuity, abortion, and my attempted suicide propelled me into a world of shame, regret, and guilt. Even worse, I developed a detrimental belief that God was punishing me for what I had done, by taking away my hope of ever becoming a mother.

All of these emotions further validated my belief that I was worthless. I was caught in a trap that I simply could not find my way out of. The more I tried to make the feelings of inadequacy go away...the further down the rabbit hole I seemed to travel.

I used anything and anyone: alcohol, drugs, material things, and sex with lots of men to try to escape from my reality.

Eventually, my life was unrecognizable to me in those cold moments of clarity that hit me like a ton of

bricks! But, one more drink, one more line, one more hit, one more man...and I could make it go away again for a while.

I was estranged from my family, homeless, owned nothing, sold my body for money, then spent it all on drugs, as soon as I got it.

I had been voted 'Best Dressed' by classmates in High School; now,

I was swapping dirty clothes with people so I would have something different on.

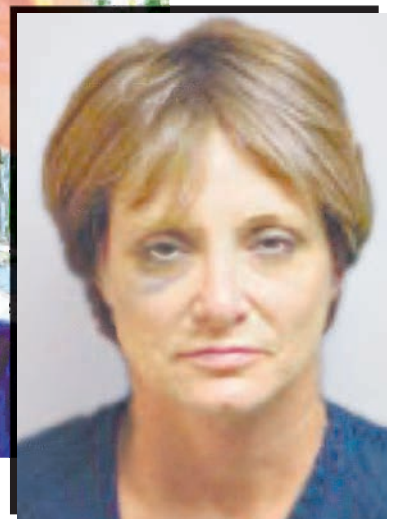
I had been in and out of jail since 1989 and it was now October of 2011. In fact, in the previous nine months I'd been to jail three times already, was currently bonded out by a man

who I don't even remember meeting, and had just missed my court appearance, when I got arrested again smoking a hit of rock-cocaine. But, this time a series of events took place that sparked a change in me.

First of all, I was convinced that I was going to die in the sorry state I was in, as my recent prison sentence wasn't the 'party' I had had



Tina Cook's mug shot from her past life (below) and Tina with an instagram filter reflecting her royal status now.



during my other incarcerations. I kept to myself and was in deep thought about my life...how I was raised by a good Christian woman and where I had come from, how I was living now and where I had ended up. The realization of it all was heart-breaking!

It was at this point that I came to the end of myself and fell not only into the arms of Jesus but began

to fall head-over-heels in love with Him as well! This life-altering event freed me to take action by joining the jail's working pod so I could be productive and have a semblance of normalcy with a schedule to follow.

I started attending the Bible studies that were offered.

I began asking for help, applying the steps from 12-Step programs that I had learned during my many

recovery attempts, and reading things that edified me.

One of the first books I read was Joyce Meyer's *Battlefield of the Mind*.

In it, she explains the importance of thinking about what you are thinking about. So, as I sat at the industrial sewing machine making inmate uniforms, I began to consider, "What are you thinking about right now, Tina?"

• Turn to page 2

## The pressure that comes from within

BY DAN DELZELL, CHRISTIAN POST CONTRIBUTOR (ABRIDGED)

**HEALTH** issues, relationship tensions, and financial struggles place tremendous pressure upon people. But one particular source of pressure is rooted even deeper within us. I am referring to the ever-present problem of sin.

The Bible teaches that Adam and Eve were perfect when God created them. They made the tragic choice to sin against their Creator, and the spiritual disease of sin has been passed down from parents to children ever since. When writing to Christians in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul described their spiritual condition prior to conversion.

"You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world..." (Ephesians 2:1-2).

My wife recently underwent surgery when it became necessary to remove and replace a herniated disc in the lower part of her neck. The C5-C6 disc was putting pressure on the nerve roots next to her spinal cord. Tammy felt this painful pressure for about a year and often held her right arm in the air to relieve the numbness she was feeling. After initial remedies failed to relieve the pain, we were blessed with a terrific surgeon and a successful surgery. The neck pain and pressure are now completely gone.

Sin does something similar by placing spiritual pressure upon the "nerves" of our soul. This real pressure can make us numb to the Lord's will for

our life. You see, we were not created to live for sin, but for the glory and honour of our Creator.

Sin means to "miss the mark" of God's holy standard. We have all sinned in our thoughts, words and actions. And we have all felt the guilt and the pressure that sin produces within us.

"There is no peace," says the Lord, "for the wicked" (Isaiah 48:22).

This inner restlessness applies to believers as well whenever they choose to engage in sin. It interrupts God's peace in our souls and places considerable pressure upon our heart and mind. For example, David felt miserable after sinning against God by committing adultery and murder.

"When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer" (Psalm 32:3-4). It was only when David turned away from his sin and confessed it to the Lord that the pressure was lifted from his soul.

Edwin Louis Cole wrote: "Temptation can be tormenting, but remember: The torment of temptation to sin is nothing to compare with the torment of the consequences of sin."

The Holy Spirit [invisible person of God] convicts us of our sin. Without this much-needed conviction, we would never confess our sins to God and turn away from them.

Jesus said, "When He (the Holy Spirit) comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8).

Apart from the Holy Spirit's conviction, each one of us would remain lost in our sin. We would ultimately receive a sentence of eternal punishment for our sins. (Matthew 25:41,46; Mark 9:44-48)

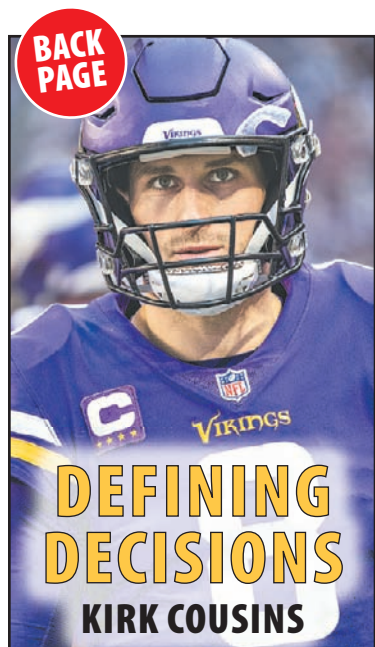
"It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Thankfully, Jesus came to pay for our sins by His death on the cross and to deliver us from the guilt, power, and eternal penalty of sin.

"Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:15).

"Jesus is the atoning sacrifice (paid the price) for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

What particular sins are placing pressure on your life today? God is willing to perform surgery on your soul and address those areas with His grace and power.

There is only one way to have your sins washed away. Turn to the Lord today in genuine sorrow and faith, as you pray: "Forgive me Lord for my sins. I turn away from them. Wash me, Jesus, with your precious blood. Empower me to live for you, and help me to stand strong and not open the door when temptation comes knocking. Amen." •





# I FOUND A NEW KIND OF FREEDOM

Rebelling from family expectations and comparisons, Jason found freedom in driving – and racing. When his dangerous driving offences began to pile up and he showed no sign of changing, he found himself in prison. Hopeless and angry, Jason had hit rock bottom. But looking back now, he describes it as his turning point and one of the best things to happen to him.



Jason found himself in prison after his dangerous driving offences began to pile up. He now describes his time in prison as one of the best things to happen to him.

ing. At the beginning I just got tickets here and there, but then I got suspended from school. Things just got worse and worse. It was kind of like an addiction.”

This behaviour continued into Jason’s college years. Jason was continually getting arrested and charged with drunk driving and dangerous driving offences but nothing changed and he would return to the same behaviour.

“I thought I could always get away with things. I had this mentality that when I got in trouble my parents would pay the legal fees ... It didn’t matter how

much trouble I got into, my parents always found a way to get me out of it.”

Eventually a judge recognised that Jason wasn’t learning and sentenced him to six months in prison. Jason felt ashamed and mad at the world. He thought due to his prison time he would be unable to work ever again and his family would abandon him.

“I attempted to commit suicide because I felt like it was hopeless.”

Prison guards intervened and he was placed on suicide watch for two weeks.

Although Jason wasn’t raised in a hope where spiritual matters were discussed, he had heard about God and decided to pray to Him to help him get out of the situation he was in. A couple of weeks later, a pastor from a prison ministry visited Jason’s cell.

“He just wanted to pray for me and listen to me,” Jason recalls. “I would just complain about the whole world and how unfair it was that I was there with all these real criminals when I wasn’t even real criminal... He gave me

a Bible to read but I didn’t really care too much about that – it was just good to have someone to talk to.”

When some inmates approached him and forced him to fight with another new prisoner, Jason lost and he sank deeper into depression. He saw the Bible in front of him and while he didn’t want to read it, he decided to draw something he knew was in it – Jesus on the cross.

Other inmates saw the drawing and commented on his artistic talent.

“People started like coming to me with different requests,” Jason remembers.

Suddenly he had many people wanting to talk to him. Some assumed he was a Christian and invited him to a Bible study. Over time, as he learned more about Jesus and His sacrifice in dying for our sins on the cross, Jason began to believe in and trust Jesus. He completed a Bible course, and when he finished, he was presented with a Bible with his name engraved on the front.

“After I got out of prison I became a different person,” Jason explains. “My attitude changed. I became more grateful for what I had and I stopped complaining. I thought being in prison was the worst thing in my life, but God showed me otherwise.”

Jason now attributes his change and his conversion to Christianity to his time in prison. He says it was a turning point and one of the best things to have happened to him. Since his release, his relationships with his family and friends have become stronger.

“God has a purpose for everyone’s life,” he attests. “God guides my life. Whenever I have any struggles in my life, God is Who I go to. Knowing that God is always by my side, always in me and walking with me through every step of my life

– that’s where I get my security from. Because I know God is with me, it doesn’t matter what happens to me. Even if it seems like the whole world is against me, God is always with me. Everything I have right now God gave that to me. I stopped comparing what I don’t have and instead I started looking at what I had, what God gave me ... Being part of God’s kingdom is where I get my joy from.”



Tina proudly displaying her Bachelor of Science in Addiction Studies.

## Prisoner now a Princess

• From page 1

I was distressed that in spite of my sincere belief that I wanted to change... I was sitting there thinking about how to find my drug dealer and johns when I got out.

The book told me to replace this ungodly, against-my-will thinking with good thoughts. That was when I began to practice thinking about what I was thinking about and replacing it with Bible verses, with memories of my life that were worthwhile and full of promise, and with mental snapshots of my family.

Not long after that, my father died. It was that terrible - not only could I not go to his funeral, but my family did not WANT me there! I made a vow to God, “I’m going to stop missing out on the important stuff in my life!” About a month later, I found out my mama had terminal cancer.

My mother had been the constant in my life, although my behavior had finally caused her to release me to God to protect herself from the pain my lifestyle caused her. So, I made another vow to God, “My mama may never talk to me again, but I’m going to live everyday so I’ll be available just in case she wants to!” A year later, I was holding her hand when Jesus led her into eternity.

I celebrated eight years of sobriety on October 28, 2019. Emotional freedom has come at a great cost to me but the rewards of attaining it are priceless!

I made a lot more vows to God (and kept them!) that I believe have been critical in my ability to remain on the path of recovery. The first one was that I would stop looking for a man and start living for THE Man (Jesus)!

The next vow was to leave behind those regrets...all that shame and guilt that held me in bondage, and live the life I wished I had lived.

I am a new creation and the life I’m living is a do-over. I’m getting a second chance to be a new and improved me.

That doesn’t mean it’s always easy! But God is good...and with His help I’ve learned how to find the purpose He created me for.

In October 2014, I graduated university Magna Cum Laude with a BS in Christian Addiction Studies and Urban Missions. In June 2016 I officially became the Executive Director of a local non-profit agency.

I am also an Alabama and Nationally Certified Addiction Counselor. It took commitment & determination on my part not to quit because I wanted to, many times, which is old behavior for me!

I am convinced that freedom comes when we face the fact that we can’t change ourselves and that no one else can change or fix us.

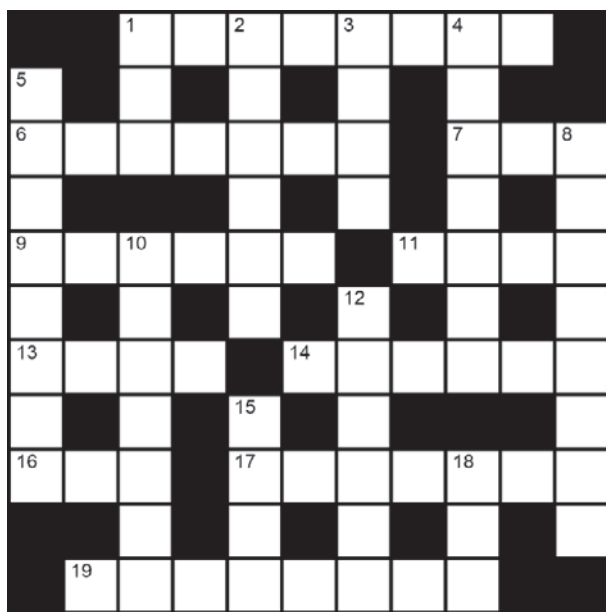
We can then embrace that there is only one who can set us free and that is THE ONE, Jesus who created each of us.

Today I am a free woman...today my life is God’s story of triumph.

**I am Princess Tina: beloved daughter of The King.**

## Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

- ACROSS**
- 1 Viewers, listeners
  - 6 Vast
  - 7 Bunk or berth
  - 9 Decay and disappear
  - 11 Like many old cellars
  - 13 Highway off-ramp
  - 14 Desert mammals
  - 16 Pull along
  - 17 Old as the hills
  - 19 Engine chamber
- DOWN**
- 1 Chair part
  - 2 Relating to Denmark
  - 3 Used for seeing
  - 4 A leaf vegetable
  - 5 Easiest to do
  - 8 Down-payments
  - 10 Network of trains
  - 12 Waltzed, for example
  - 15 Dry watercourse (North Africa)
  - 18 Organ for hearing



**SOLUTIONS PAGE 7**

## THE BIG QUESTION

BY GREG LAURIE

IN one of the oldest books of the Bible, the book of Job, the question is asked, “If a man dies, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14). That is a question everyone should ask in life. What will happen when we die? What is there beyond this place called Earth?

Before I was a Christian, I thought about this quite often. I was only a teenager. It was sort of a heavy subject to be contemplating, but I did find myself thinking about death on a semi-regular basis. My belief at the time was that once you stop living, you simply cease to exist. I wasn’t certain there was a place called Heaven. I definitely was hoping there wasn’t a place called Hell. My conclusion was that when you’re dead, you’re dead. And it really scared me to think that I could simply cease to exist.

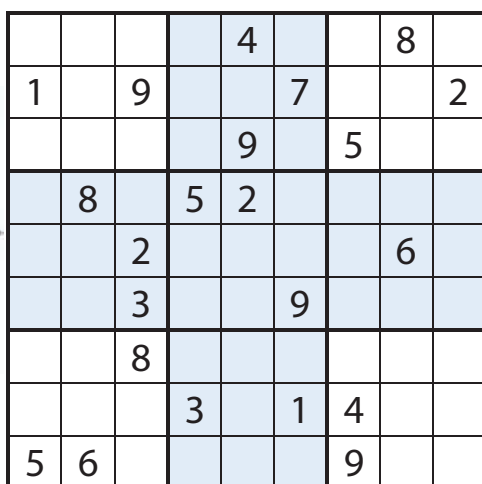
For my generation, the Baby Boomers, the inevitability of death is approaching.

What happens beyond the grave? According to the Bible, there is life beyond the grave, either with God or eternally separated from God and His goodness. Because of what Jesus Christ did on the cross, and His resurrection three days later, we as Christians have the certainty that when we die, we will immediately go into the presence of God to a wonderful place called Heaven.

The question you need to ask yourself is; where am I going? •



“Once I got my barking under control the neighbourhood fell in love with me.”



### GOD’S LOVE DISPLAYED

A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. - ROMANS 5:8 NIV



# In the business of getting clean

BY EMILY ANDREWS

When 10-year-old Derrick Ervin came home early from family vacation, he knew something was going on. Then he learned the news that changed his life forever: His father had died unexpectedly.

Derrick says his father was his “Superman.” He remembers his dad as the man who woke up at two in the morning, worked all day as a truck driver, and came home by six in the evening to organize team sports for local children.

The youngest of six children, Derrick grew up in a predominantly Black, low-income neighborhood near Birmingham, Alabama. It was a close-knit community. His parents, both hard workers and people of faith, taught their children about Jesus and raised them to respect others.

“Everybody looked at my mother and my father as their mom and their dad, because they raised so many children in our neighborhood,” Derrick says. “Those are some of my fondest memories, when I speak of my family.”

The sudden loss of his father devastated Derrick. He remembers how the pain overcame him: “I’ll never forget going into my bedroom that particular day when I found out, and I just let out this loud cry. I remember saying to myself, ‘I’ll never hurt again. No one will ever hurt me again.’”

When he walked out of his bedroom that day, Derrick didn’t know how to bear the weight of his pain. His deep grief cast a darkness over his life, but for some time, nobody knew the depth of his struggle.

Derrick kept up appearances for a while. He earned good grades in school, excelled at sports, and received a football scholarship to attend North Carolina State University.

But even with a change of scenery, Derrick felt broken. He struggled to cope with the loss of his father. Then, when Derrick was 21, his mother died of a brain tumor.

Heartbroken and angry at God, Derrick realized his past wounds had never healed. After college, Derrick worked many jobs and married a woman named Shemelia. But soon he was hiding a double life, dealing drugs. He convinced himself he was

providing for his family at all costs. Before long, he was staring down a long sentence for offenses related to dealing large amounts of cocaine.

When the judge spoke the words “life without parole,” Derrick heard a loud cry across the courtroom. It was his oldest son, who was 10, the same age Derrick was when his father died. He remembered being that 10-year-old boy crying out in his bedroom. Now, his own son was about to lose his father to the prison system.

Derrick says, “It broke me, because for the first time I realized that the choices I made not only affected me and impacted my life, but everything that was connected to me.”

Alabama’s St. Clair Correctional Facility felt like another hopeless stop on a long, dark road for Derrick. The loneliness and despair of incarceration weighed on him daily. But the hardest part was being separated from his family.

He was desperate for a way to cope with his sentence, especially when he had no release date.

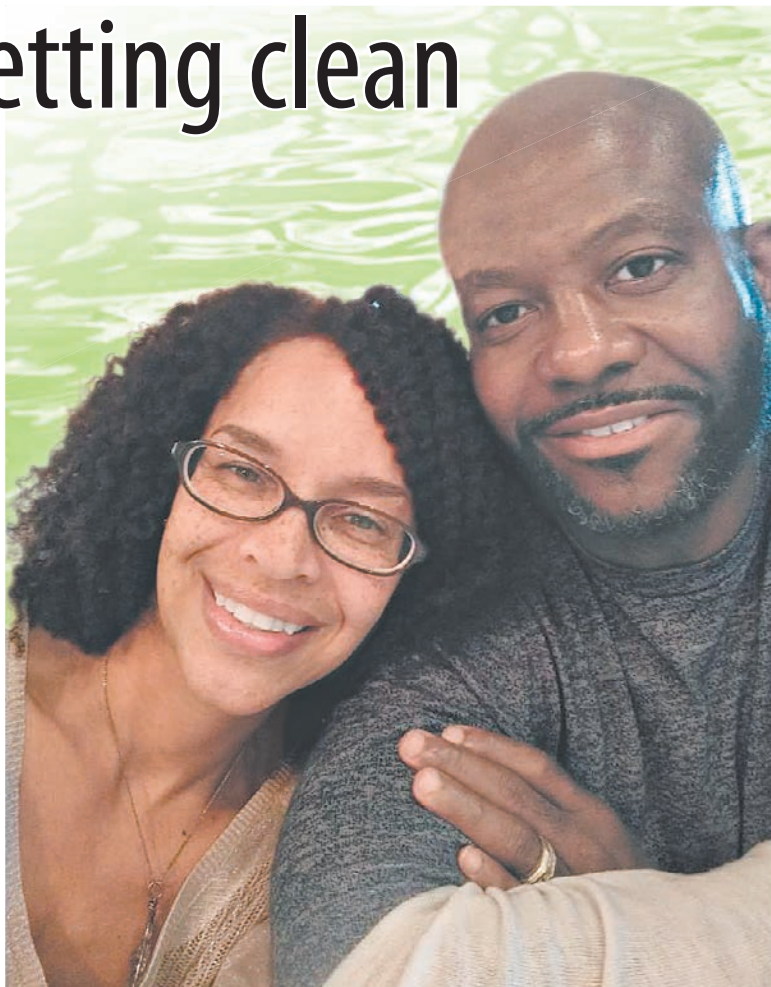
Alone with his thoughts, Derrick remembered the faith of his parents and how they brought him up to serve others. He longed for purpose and direction in his life. With nothing else to hold on to, he felt a nudge to take a “leap of faith” and pray.

“I had an encounter with the Lord that transformed my life miraculously,” Derrick recalls. “I never received the Lord to get out of prison, but I received Him because I knew that I needed a change. I knew that something in me had to be broken and put back together again. I felt [Christ] was my only hope. I tried everything else; it just didn’t work.”

Derrick began his new journey with a question: Who is this “Jesus” that his parents had believed in? He longed for a faith that was his own. He dove into the Bible, from the Old Testament to the New, where he encountered the living God—the One who could transform his life from the inside out.

Every day, Derrick spent hours poring over scripture. Soon, he also enrolled in **Prison Fellowship Academy**, a yearlong program that helps participants embrace biblically based values.

In the Academy, Derrick found a safe place to be transparent and to grow in community. After graduating the program, he made good on



Derrick Ervin with his wife Shemelia.

his promise to be a better man. He was no longer getting into trouble but setting an example. He coached others as they worked to obtain their GED. He served as a hospice worker and worked in the chapel, cleaning floors on his hands and knees with a toothbrush.

Then, the miracle: In 2019, Derrick’s sentence was reduced. There was no explaining it apart from the work of God.

Derrick faced many challenges upon re-entry. He struggled to relate to his sons, who were 19 and 24 when he was released. He wanted to rebuild their relationships, but he knew it would take time and patience.

Derrick also had to learn to be a present, devoted husband. Shemelia had been surviving on her own for so long and even started a cleaning business while Derrick was locked up. When Derrick came home, he made it a point to support her and help the business continue to succeed. Through that commitment, they developed a vision to help other returning citizens receive a second chance. Their model involves providing well-paying jobs so people can support their families and feel stable.

The original of this story can be found at [www.prisonfellowship.org](http://www.prisonfellowship.org) and it is used with kind permission.

# Holiness

BY JODY BENNETT

**HOLINESS** is not really a concept bandied about much in our culture today. If the term is used, it would most likely be negatively, as in “Stop being so holier-than-thou!” Meaning, “stop being so self-righteous”, or “stop judging me for my bad behaviour”.

‘Holiness’, as far as our culture understands it, is something we think we ought to avoid in order to make others feel better about themselves. Even exercising a free choice, like not drinking alcohol, not swearing or not sleeping with someone can be construed as some sort of super-spiritual behaviour depending on the company, and elicit an accusation of being too ‘holy’.

In the Bible, however, the word ‘holy’ in the Hebrew language means ‘things belonging to God’.

Things and people are ‘made holy’ by dedicating them for use by and for God.

When God shows up somewhere, like in the Jewish temple or at Moses’ burning bush, He transforms that space into a holy place. Even coal shovels and candlesticks can be holy, because they are set aside for use in God’s service.

Other words that convey that special use for God’s purposes are ‘sanctified’ or ‘consecrated’.

The New Testament calls Christians “a holy people”.

Looking around at those who follow Jesus that you know, you might disagree. But the point is that they are not holy because of what they do, they are holy because they belong to God and God is using them for His purposes.

Christians should indeed act in a manner that is upright and sin-free, but that comes out of the identity of holiness that God has already given them by forgiving their sin and accepting them as His children, not out of a striving on their part to become ‘good enough’ for God.

The Christian God, Yahweh, is perfect, sinless and all good. God’s standards are high and holy.

Apart from Jesus’ atoning [paying the debt] sacrifice on the cross there is no way humans could meet them.

However, with Jesus as both Savior and Lord of their lives, Christians are empowered to live holy lives — not sanctimonious lives, but lives full of humility, love, kindness, patience and self-control.

You too can be holy and live holy, no matter how you have lived up to this point.

You can change the script of your life by committing yourself to God by means of a simple prayer such as the one on page 7.

“**Something in me had to be broken and put back together again.**”

## Content yet discontent

BY KARL FAASE

**WHEN** Paul the apostle wrote a letter to his friends at Philippi, he told them that he had learned the importance of being content. Whether life was great or an awful challenge, he had learned to be content by trusting God.

It would seem that this is desirable for everyone; to be relaxed, content and peaceful.

But there is more to this than first meets the eye. In another section earlier in the same letter, Paul says he is straining and working with every sinew of his body as he pursues his goals. On one level, there seems to be a contradiction here but it is helpful to see that both of these attitudes are complementary.

We need to be relaxed and peaceful in the knowledge that God holds and knows our future, but we also ought to strain with every fibre of our being to come to know Jesus personally, and to be as much like Jesus as we can.

**“I shall pass through this world but once. Any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”**

— Scottish evangelist Henry Drummond

**“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretence, jumbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficult life can throw at us.”**

— Timothy Keller

## 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



# A VERY HAPPY EASTER FOR JORDAN

Jordan Wilson was a popular teenager who loved to throw parties with his friends. He loved the party lifestyle and everything that went with it from girls to alcohol, to marijuana and pain pills.

"I thought that I was Superman," he told CBN. "I thought that I was invincible."

Before long, Jordan was addicted to drugs, spending a hundred dollars a day on pills. Without 20 pills a day, he suffered extreme withdrawal symptoms.

Jordan also became addicted to methamphetamines. To fund his addictions, Jordan and a friend started manufacturing and selling synthetic cannabinoids (Spice).

Eventually an informant tipped off the police about Jordan's dealing.

"When I was busted and the police

picked me up and threw me on the ground, I was so obliterated from the drugs that I really couldn't grasp just how hot the water was that I was in," Jordan says.

Over the next three years, Jordan was in jail 10 times and kicked out of rehab six times.

"I knew for sure that I was going to die a drug addict," Jordan admits. "I started shooting up. I shot up crystal meth. I was addicted to pills again. And I had no desire to continue living."

Jordan's dad, Roger, was at a loss for what to do about his son. A committed Christian, he prayed for a miracle. Roger recalled his son's strong faith as a teenager, before he became consumed with girls and drugs, and walked away from God. He prayed for Jordan to find his

faith again and for God to give him the strength he needed to become sober for good.

With the support of his parents, Jordan tried to stop using and began detoxing.

On Easter Sunday in 2016, Roger asked Jordan to attend church with him.

"I said, 'No, Dad, I'm sick, I'm detoxing from drugs. I can't go,'" Jordan remembers. But it was also Roger's birthday, so he asked him again to go, as a birthday present to his father.

"I was 27 years old and I didn't have a birthday gift for my dad," Jordan explains. "I thought, this is the least I can do. And so I agreed to go to church with my dad for his birthday on Easter Sunday."

During that service Jordan recalls feeling the first spark of hope he had felt in years. When the pastor invited people to dedicate their lives to Jesus, Jordan jumped out of his seat.

"As I was at that altar, I felt like God was sweeping me off my feet,"

Jordan shares. "I realized that this is Resurrection Sunday. Jesus Christ has risen."

Roger was over the moon. "It was absolutely, other than the day I watched him be born, the greatest day watching him give his heart back to

God," Jordan's dad told CBN.

"I've never been the same since," Jordan says.

"I never drank another drop. I never used another drug since that day! So now I'm closer with the Lord than I've ever been, more so than when I was a teenager. But I walk with Him and talk with Him every single day.

"If I don't get that one-on-one time with Jesus every day, I'm just not right... This relationship with Christ has taught me to love people. He has enabled me to care about people.

"And I realized that my life is bigger than me. I'm not the lead role in my story. He is. And realizing [that] gives me a life truly worth living."

Jordan is married with two children and has written a book called, *Jesus > Drugs: The Only War Won by Surrender*.

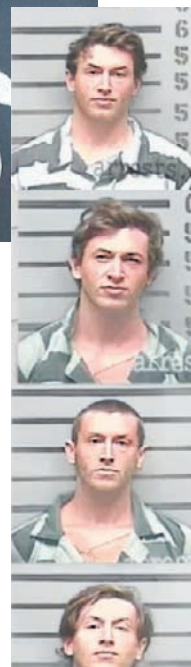
He is also the development director of a rehab facility he was once kicked out of.

"If you surrender to Christ, He'll fight for you," Jordan says to those who are in the same place he once was.

"He'll do what you can't do. As someone who tried it without Jesus, there is a big difference. You may be able to get sober without Christ, but you'll never be free without Christ. And Christ is what sets people free."



Jordan is now married with two children. INSET: Jordan's mug shots.



## Special day for inmates



Inmates at Decatur County Detention await their turn to be baptized. Baptism is an outward expression of an inner change that has taken place for believers in Jesus Christ.



(REC) members baptized nearly 40 men and women after a personal, public profession of Jesus Christ in their lives," Decatur County Sheriff wrote on its Facebook page.

Over the past four years, almost 300 people have given their life to Jesus Christ while incarcerated at the center.

Baptism is instructed in the Bible as the next step after repenting of your sins (wrong-doing against God) and coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism symbolises Jesus' death and resurrection as you are submerged under water and rise up again.

It is a public declaration that you have died to your old life of unbelief, are washed clean of sin, and are now following Jesus.



THE Decatur County Sheriff was excited to announce that 40 inmates at the Decatur County Detention Center (DCDC) were baptized late last year.

"DCDC Chaplain Dave Burnett along with Residents Encounter Christ

## I found a door to faith

"I was 16 years old and homeless living on the streets in Mackay, Queensland. I had no job, I was living off Centerlink, and I had a warrant out for my arrest."

Merv Raymond Stewart, who is now serving time in Townsville Prison, talks about the troubles and trials that riddled his youth. His problems seemed to start escalating as soon as he left home as a teen.

"I was in and out of homelessness, sleeping under park benches and in tents at beaches – all sorts of things," he says. "I remember waking up one cold morning around 3 a.m. and seeing the police talking to another homeless couple down the road." They were looking for Merv but did not find him that time.

It was a good thing they didn't as, the next morning, Merv had his first encounter with several chaplains who talked to him about God.

"I wasn't much of a Christian growing up," he recalls. "What I knew about God was from my Granny."

The chaplains gave Merv a Bible and told him to read John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Merv read further and came across 1 Peter 5:7: "Cast all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."

"For weeks I had these two verses stuck in my head," Merv says.

"One day, the chaplains came back to see me." They encouraged him to take 1 Peter 5:7 literally, to pray to the Lord and cast his worries on Him.

Later that day, Merv looked up to the sky and said, "Dear Heavenly Father, please forgive me for my sins. Lord, I cast all my cares and worries onto you because you truly care. Lord, I pray that I can find help in these tough times – to find a home and a job to keep myself clothed and fed. I pray in your Name, Amen."

After this, Merv says he felt a big weight being lifted off his shoulders and it was only a few days later that God answered his prayer. He got a job and made enough money to rent a small van at a caravan park. Eager to learn more about the Person who answered his prayers, he started going to a local church but was hurt by the judgment he received from the people there. "I was judged before anyone really got to know me," Merv sighs. "I felt bullied. I stopped going to church and I closed the door on the Lord for some time."

Merv had been put in prison for minor traffic offences and in 2015, during one of these incarcerations, he met another chaplain who encouraged him to try God and



STOCKPHOTO

church again. Once he was released, he started going to church but had the same experience as before.

"I felt bullied again because I smoked and I had been in prison, so again I shut that door," he says, shaking his head sadly.

Merv, who turns 32 later this year, is currently serving a seven-year sentence. He has been in prison four-and-a-half years and during this time, has genuinely come to know Jesus for himself. He says he diligently reads every issue of *Challenge Newspaper*.

"One chaplain in particular is very inspiring," he smiles.

"He helped me reopen the door to my faith. He helped me see clearer that God is my Savior who died for my sins. Every Sunday, he comes and shares the Word of the Lord with us. I want to thank him and the other chaplains who come into the prison to help us in dark times. Without them, I don't think I would be where I am today."

Merv now experiences joy and fullness where there was once an empty, dark void. His walk with Jesus is stronger than it has ever been and he approaches life with a positive attitude.

"I now look forward to a bright and happy future once released," he says. "I hope to join a local church in Townsville so I can continue my walk with the Lord."

“ I now look forward to a bright and happy future. ”



# No longer hopeless

With visions of becoming a drug kingpin, 18-year-old Eduardo F. Rocha left his brother's house in New York with 4.5 ounces of cocaine in his pocket and drove away to make his first drug deal. But before he reached his destination, police noticed one of his headlights was out and pulled him over. That's when they also noticed he was driving under the influence and had a large package in his jacket pocket. He was arrested before he made his first deal.

Later that night Eduardo found himself in a county jail, completely hopeless.

"I wrapped a bed sheet from an old cot around my neck and began tightening it," he recalls in an article for *Christianity Today*. "Death seemed like the only way out of this mess. I was trapped. Hopeless. Finished. As the sheet got tighter, the world started fading away. But just before succumbing to the darkness, I heard a voice in my native Spanish: 'Eduardo, no lo hagas. Hay esperanza para tu vida.' ('Eduardo, don't do it. There is hope for your life.')

That voice saved his life and set him on a new course — one that has seen him in prisons for entirely different reasons.

Eduardo's feelings of hopelessness started when he was just a boy.

He was born in Uruguay but moved to the USA shortly after. But when he was five his parents divorced, and Eduardo was sent back to Uruguay to live with his grandparents. He felt lost and alone.

Two years later his mother returned to Uruguay and she met a man she would go on to marry. Eduardo and his mother moved in with the man into an apartment complex. Eduardo

told *The Tennessean* he was sexually abused several times by a teenage boy from the apartment complex, who would babysit him while his mother and stepfather were at work.

Eduardo started rebelling and was expelled from several schools.

When he was 16 he returned to live with his father in the USA, where he learned he had an older brother, Danny.

"Danny had the life any teenage boy would envy: cars, clothes, money, women," Eduardo remembers. "And soon enough, I began tasting small samples of that life myself."

“It was drugs, disco and girls — rinse and repeat.”

Eduardo started hanging out with Danny at the disco he owned. One day he saw huge bags of white powder, scales and packages wrapped in brown tape in Danny's office.

"Danny introduced me to marijuana, but that high just wasn't enough. Before long, I tried my first hit of cocaine. From there, it was drugs, disco, and girls — rinse and repeat. I was hooked on the whole lifestyle."

But that lifestyle that led Eduardo to jail and the brink of suicide. When the voice told him there was hope for his life, Eduardo wondered if God was speaking to him.

He got on his knees and cried out: "God, if that's really you, please help me."

"When a guard gave me a Bible, I started reading the Gospels, and I was captivated by the stories of Jesus — how he would speak to people in great need and meet those needs in miraculous ways. But the verse that made the deepest impression was 2 Corinthians 5:17, where Paul promises that 'If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!'"



Eduardo F. Rocha

Eduardo began attending church in the jail's gymnasium. One day a church volunteer hugged him and said, "I just want you to know, God loves you and I love you too."

"I had forgotten what it felt like to be hugged," he says. "That very night, October 6, 1986, I surrendered to the love of Christ, accepting His offer to be my Lord and Savior."

Eduardo started growing closer to Jesus as he continued to read the Bible and pray.

"I went from being filled with rebellious thoughts to appreciating the gift of life, no matter the circumstances. With the aid of numer-

ous chaplains and Christian volunteers, I overcame hatred toward my father and brother and learned to forgive them. In the Spirit's power, I battled to rid myself of foul language and break addictions to pornography and masturbation."

Eduardo was overjoyed to discover his sentence was reduced and that he was eligible for parole after three years.

He was released in March 1989, but was immediately taken into custody by immigration officers. He was deported to Uruguay and banned from ever returning to the USA.

Eduardo attended Bible College and met, married and started a family with his wife Sandra. All the while he fought to return to the USA to thank the guard and church volunteers who had led him to God. He tried six times over two decades to get a tourist visa.

He was finally able to do so in 2010, after writing to the US Attorney and receiving a pardon from the State Department.

He connected with a church in Tennessee, which hired him as the pastor of a Hispanic church two years later.

Soon he started volunteering and sharing his story in prisons, while also earning a master's and doctorate degrees.

"Over time, the Tennessee Department of Correction hired me to serve as psychiatric chaplain in a maximum-security prison," Eduardo shares. "Joy filled my heart with each conversation, hug, and promise of hope in Christ that I was blessed to share."

Eduardo is now a US citizen, a corporate chaplain for Charter Construction in Tennessee and a military chaplain for the Tennessee State Guard.

"That sweet voice that cared enough to whisper encouragement into my prison cell still cares deeply for me now," he attests. "Life has not been easy, but I have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, even to those who make terrible mistakes like mine."

## Waking from a nightmare

BY EMILY ANDREWS

Jeremy Hart spent much of his early adulthood chasing the American Dream: the idea that if he just worked hard enough, he would achieve great success.

For Jeremy, success looked like climbing the corporate ladder and gaining wealth. As a financial adviser in Colorado, he took on ambitious business ventures, always striving for more. He wanted to provide plenty for his family and look good doing it.

"I placed my value in what other people thought about me," says Jeremy. "[My life] had to look a certain way. We had to have a certain amount of money."

But, he adds, "It's just impossible to keep up with that." Eventually, to stay ahead, he started making poor choices and stepping over legal lines. His family had no clue what was really going on behind closed doors. Around 2008, the economy crashed, and Jeremy's secret business dealings came to light.

His American Dream became a nightmare.

### An American nightmare

In 2010, Jeremy was indicted on 31 counts of fraud. He couldn't bear the shame of his betrayal and the pain he had caused others. He tried to overdose on prescription pills mixed with alcohol.

The next morning he opened his eyes in bed, severely hungover and depressed. Then the phone rang. It was Jim — a pastor and former financial client of Jeremy's who had seen his case on the news. Jeremy would never forget that phone call.

"He started talking to me about what love looks like, what hope looks like, and what forgiveness looks like," says Jeremy.

Jeremy didn't know much about hope. But he could have used some on sentencing day when he heard the judge speak his fate: nine years in the Colorado Department of Corrections. He turned around to see his fam-



Jeremy Hart

ily's faces as they looked at him — "one of the hardest things you'll ever do," he remembers.

After a few quick hugs, Jeremy walked from the courtroom into the holding room and sat down. His family was gone. He was alone.

For so long, Jeremy had found worth in others' opinions of him. Now, he'd ruined his reputation and destroyed relationships in the fallout.

### The chance to live

In January 2011, Jeremy walked into a Colorado prison to begin his sentence. His anxiety medication wasn't helping. The facility deemed him at risk for self-harm and placed him on suicide watch.

Lying on his bunk one night, he heard an announcement over the loudspeakers. Three men from a local church were visiting to pray with prisoners.

"Something just got me up out of that bed and walked me into that room," Jeremy says. "The moment they just

touched me to start praying, it all just finally came out — the emotion, the weight, I think, was starting to lift. I knew that that my heart was starting to realize what it meant to find

the hope in Christ." A few days later Jeremy responded to the altar call at a church service in prison. He received Christ as his Savior and never looked back. He dove into the Christian community in prison and eagerly studied God's Word.

As Jeremy's faith became real to him, he started to evangelize behind the walls. Men on the prison yard noticed his joy and peace, and it sparked conversations. Still, prison was a struggle for Jeremy. The hardest part was being separated from his children.

### Keeping the connection

Jeremy wrote his children letters once or twice a month. He never knew if they received the mail, but his chaplain encouraged him to keep writing.

Jeremy also signed his children up for Angel Tree, a Prison Fellowship program, and his children to receive personal messages, the Gospel, and Christmas gifts in his name.

### Answering God's call

Jeremy came up for parole and left prison in the summer of 2015. He landed in Chandler, Arizona, and started attending a local church. He also knew God had called him to vocational ministry, so he enrolled in seminary while he worked for his parents' company. He hoped to one day minister to prisoners, former prisoners, and their families. "Everybody used to always say, 'Man, you want to get back in as soon as you can. You're crazy.' I'm like, 'I can't get back in fast enough,'" says Jeremy.

### Full circle

In May 2020, Jeremy graduated from seminary. In August, he became an ordained chaplain. He has come full circle in ministry, facilitating Angel Tree to help other prisoners' families experience the same joy and connection that the program gave his family.

Holding his old prisoner ID in one hand and his DOC volunteer badge in the other, Jeremy is quietly amazed. If he could sum up his life in a word, he says, "It's 'grace (the undeserved love of God).'"

The original of this story can be found at [www.prison-fellowship.org](http://www.prison-fellowship.org) and it is used with kind permission.

“I placed my value in what other people thought about me.”

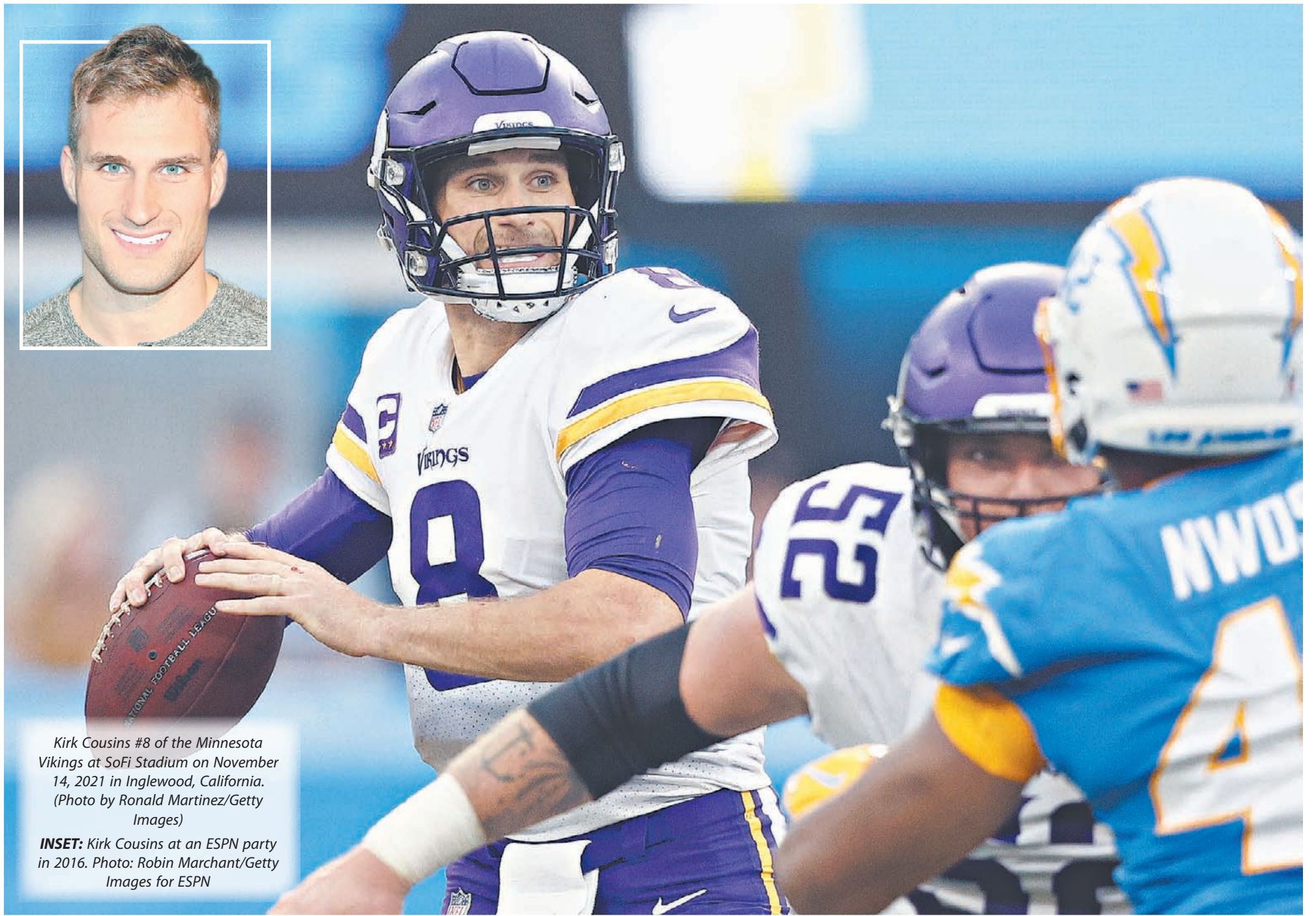
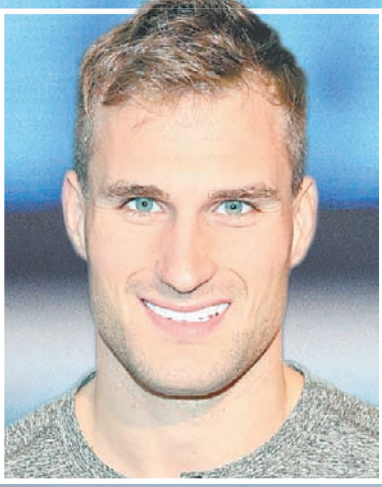


Eduardo with his wife Sandra, celebrating their 32nd anniversary.









Kirk Cousins #8 of the Minnesota Vikings at SoFi Stadium on November 14, 2021 in Inglewood, California. (Photo by Ronald Martinez/Getty Images)

**INSET:** Kirk Cousins at an ESPN party in 2016. Photo: Robin Marchant/Getty Images for ESPN

# DEFINED BY TWO DECISIONS

From the time he was a little kid, Kirk Cousins would walk around the house holding a football, almost as if he just knew that he wanted to be a ball-player one day.

Now 34, and the quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings, Kirk recalls two big decisions he has made in the intervening time that have defined his life and career.

The first was a decision he made when he was seven, to become a Christian.

In an interview with [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org), he explained: “When

your dad is a pastor, you get the opportunity to give your life to the Lord at a pretty young age. So I was probably seven or eight years old when the gospel was explained to me. I made that decision ... I was in a Christian school all the way through high school.

“It was probably midway through high school that I had a Bible teacher who challenged me and my fellow classmates about what it meant to not just pray the [sinner’s] prayer, but to actually become a disciple of Jesus. To be a fully devoted follower, as the Bible says in 1 John 2:6, *‘Those who claim to be in Him [Jesus] must walk as He walked.’*

“The Bible teacher challenged us; ‘How does your walk really look and does it really resemble the rabbi Jesus and His walk? Are you the real deal or are you just an imposter?’

“And so in high school, that’s when it became real for me. I said, ‘Okay, I’m going to become a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ, whatever that may cost me or whatever that may change in my life, I’m all in at this point.’”

Going to a small school, Kirk was not going to be seen by the selectors until junior year in college. That first year would be crucial for his career goals – however, he broke his ankle in the first game of his first varsity season.

That was when Kirk made the second life-changing decision.

“I remember coming home with a cast on my leg, calling my dad, giving him the update that I had broken my ankle and there were tears in my eyes and I said, ‘Dad, this means that I’ll never be able to play college football at a high level.’ Because I was already an under-recruited player, no one knew about me. I knew I was not going to be able to play my junior year.

“My dad said, ‘Kirk, you don’t know that. You need to trust in the Lord and His plan for your life.’ And he referenced Proverbs 3:5-6: *‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your steps.’*

He challenged me that day to take that verse deep into my heart, and make it a reality for me. At that moment, I decided, ‘Okay. Whether it’s my football career or the path of my entire life, I’m going to trust you, Lord, to lead.’

“And the Lord found a way for me to play college football and He was so much bigger than a broken ankle. Looking back now, I realize that He’s so much bigger than so many things. What we see as a mountain, God sees as just nothing.”

Kirk told FOX in 2020: “My faith is important to me, it’s the foundation of my life. And ultimately that’s where I gain my peace and my strength. Win or lose today, God is still on the throne and I take

comfort in that.”

“The ultimate foundation of my life is to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus,” he told the Sports Spectrum Podcast. “And that means so much more than just checking a box and saying you’re a Christian.”

**“What we see as a mountain, God sees as just nothing.”**

Kirk, who is now a married father, says prayer is not a religious ritual for him but part of his relationship with God.

“I want to talk to Him; I want to be giving Him my requests and my worries and my stresses and the pressures I face,” he says. “I want to give that over to Him because He says, *‘Cast your burdens on Me because I care for you.’* (1 Peter 5 verse 7)

“Some of my favorite verses are Colossians 3:23-24: *‘Whatever you do work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,*

*since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.’*

“While I seek to apply this verse to football, I know that football will one day end. Jesus however, and all who know Him, will live forever. This great truth means I have an identity, a foundation that can never be taken from me,” the wise player explains.

In 2018 when he ran a football camp to encourage young athletes, Kirk told them to use the Bible as a “playbook for life. Choosing to follow Jesus instead of the world ... in the long run, it pays off.”

Maybe that explains the paradox of Kirk’s career, as his dad once described it: “He’s consistently been overlooked and underestimated. He’s seldom the biggest, fastest or strongest, but in the end he’s had a lot of success.”

Maybe that is because ‘Captain Kirk’, as he has been called, has the biggest, fastest and strongest God on his side. ●



Kirk Cousins playing against the Detroit Lions in 2021 in Detroit, Michigan. (Photo by Gregory Shamus/Getty Images)

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