

HOPE BEHIND BARS

BY ANTOINE DAVIS

My mother's screams pierced my ears as I sat at the top of the stairs, holding my siblings for comfort.

My stepfather repeatedly slapped, slammed, and choked her until she was nearly unconscious. Between her cries and the shattering of broken picture frames, I struggled to keep my violently pounding heart from breaking through my eight-year-old rib cage.

Many of these fights resulted from my stepfather's infidelity and blatant disrespect of my mother. Whenever she confronted him about coming home at 3am or sleeping with other women, he would respond with anger and aggression. On many occasions, she would apply makeup in the morning to cover the scratches and bruises on her face.

For years, my mother worked tirelessly at multiple jobs to provide for her family, giving everything she had to take care of her children. Unfortunately, she went months without knowing about the frequent beatings I was receiving in her absence.

Whenever she would leave for work, my stepfather would accuse my mother of sleeping with other men – an obvious projection of his own wrongdoing. Because I was a child from my mother's previous relationship, he began accusing me of covering up her alleged affairs, despite the fact that I was too young to process the concept of adultery.

Ideally, home should have been a refuge from the harsh realities of life in the outside world. Instead, it became the source of my trauma. Beatings and brutal words were the norm. When my mother finally noticed the black-and-blue marks that decorated my body, she confronted my stepfather, only to be met with more of his brutish attacks, the consequence of his toxic masculinity.

Believing I had nowhere to turn, I suffered in silence, stuffing my hurts, pains, fears, and anxieties deep inside, trying to make sure my mother wouldn't get punished for trying to protect me. I had no idea these traumatizing experiences would crack my internal mirror, distorting my view of reality and fueling a twisted sense of self.

Somewhere deep within me, I believed that God was real, but He didn't seem relevant in my struggle to survive. I endured the feelings of emptiness alone, which set me searching for anything that would fill the hole in my heart.

Hanging with the 'big boys'

The ceiling fan did nothing to clear the cigarette smoke that filled the air. Beer cans and alcohol bottles covered the countertops, and no one seemed concerned about the three-year-old toddler wandering in the living room. I had just sat down at the black wooden table in the kitchen after being invited to play dominoes with my older cousins and their friends. Most of them wore blue bandanas around their heads and necks, indicating their affiliation with the Crips, a neighborhood gang based in South Seattle.

While Dr. Dre's *The Next Episode* blared over the sound system, a spark from a clear blue lighter illuminated the tip of a brown cigar filled with marijuana. My cousin took a pull, holding the smoke

in before passing the blunt around the table. When it finally reached me, I leaned back, expecting to be excluded from their smoke session.

When my older cousin, whom we called E-Tray, noticed my hesitation, he began calling me "Lil' Chow Chow," a knockoff of the kid rapper Lil' Bow Wow, and everyone at the table burst into laughter. "What, you can't hang with the big boys?" he asked, adopting a high-pitched voice meant to sound unmasculine.

On the surface, it was fun and



Antoine Davis

games, but he didn't know about my unhealed wounds of rejection, the deeply rooted insecurities I had developed after years of being abused by my stepfather. Although my 13-year-old conscience told me not to give in, my hunger for acceptance won out.

I took the blunt and placed it to my lips. Within seconds, I began

coughing uncontrollably, as if someone had vacuum-sealed the air from my lungs. Nothing was enjoyable about that experience. But the unpleasant feeling of getting high was overshadowed by the cheers, fist bumps, and pats on the back I received from those around the table. When they passed me the alcohol, I took that too.

Gradually, the intoxication settled in, not merely from the drugs, but from feeling validated. For that reason alone, I kept smoking, determined to show the fellas that I belonged. In retrospect, I realize the insight of Proverbs 27:7, "To the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet." I was starving for love and acceptance, and this bitter introduction to drugs, alcohol, and gang association appeared to provide both.

Weary and unfulfilled

It was a little after 2am when I made it back to my duplex. Opening the bedroom door, I found my two-year-old son and his mother sound asleep. Before getting undressed, I emptied my pockets, pulling out a gun, some drugs, and money I had collected from the women I prostituted. Together, the items gave a snapshot of my life as my 21st birthday approached.

Sitting on the edge of the bed – still high from the pills I took earlier – I contemplated the road I was traveling. A lot had transpired in the previous four years. I had been shot at, held at gunpoint, and assaulted multiple times and had lost close friends to senseless violence during my high-school years.

I had gone from smoking and drinking to womanizing, pulling off bank scams, dealing drugs, and popping ecstasy pills – all intended to numb the pain of the lingering void I felt inside. I had the money and street cred I longed for as a 13-year-old, but none of these things provided fulfillment.

Compelled by my weary soul, I slid from the edge of my bed and onto my knees. While resting my head in my hands, I began praying to a God I had never met, speaking with an unexplainable confidence that he could fill the emptiness within me.

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My scars aren't the end of my story

BY EMILY ANDREWS

The night before Nancy (pictured) turned herself in for robbery, she could barely think straight. She was malnourished. She hadn't slept in more than a week. Track marks on her arms traced a long struggle with addiction.

She reached up to the sky and said, "Lord, please help me, because I can't do this to myself anymore."

No home, no hope

Raised in Southern California, Nancy grew up going to church, but her home life was not always stable. During her adolescence, her parents separated. Nancy forged her own path as a teen, acting out and seeking independence. Her behavior led to being kicked out of school and spending time in juvenile hall. Eventually, she turned to drugs.

Nancy had her first child, a daughter, at age 15. When this child was two, her grandmother stepped in to help Nancy raise her. By 21, Nancy was a mother of three. As a young single mom, Nancy juggled two or three jobs at a time, doing drugs to stay awake. Though she would start to seek treatment at times, she never followed through. It steadily

became more difficult to keep a job. Once her addiction spiraled out of control, Nancy chose for her children to stay with family and a close friend.

After 14 years of addiction, Nancy had no home and no hope. Though she had found a new partner, she felt an emptiness she couldn't shake. Then she robbed a gas station and landed in prison with a six-year sentence for second-degree robbery and coercion, along with drug possession.

By the time she arrived at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility near Portland, Oregon, she had lost her partner to a drug overdose. She mourned the loss of her own life, too, due to all her destructive choices and wasted years. She was ready to try anything if it might help her change.

Where everything changed

At Coffee Creek, Nancy attended church services led by Prison Fellowship volunteers. They praised God together in worship and read His Word. Over time, Nancy noticed many of the same volunteers returned every week to share Jesus' love with her and pray over her.

That's where Nancy says everything changed.

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EYES ON THE HEAVENS

Ask Y: Peter Meadows answers your questions about God

QUESTION: DOES THE CLAIM THAT GOD IS 'HOLY' HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH REAL LIFE?



THIS IS A great question. And when it comes to 'real life', to talk about God as being 'holy' has everything to do with it. Real life is about knowing the God who made us and experiencing His help to live the kind of life He has in mind for us. All of which involves taking into account what God is like – which is where 'holy' comes in. It is easy to imagine that God is much like a puppy dog – safe, agreeable and okay to take on – no matter what. But that's not how Jesus conveyed Him. Not as 'safe' at all. That's not because God is nasty, cruel or vindictive, but because of the very substance of what He is. Let me try to explain. Day by day people sit within reach of an electric socket and don't give it a second thought. Of course they are careful. They don't stand in a bowl of water, lick their fingers and stick them in the sockets just for the fun of it. They are simply happy to use electricity to run their appliances. But many miles from them a huge power station is generating raw, naked, electrical power. This electricity is nothing like the few meager watts that help keep their hair curled, their model train chuffing or your toaster toasting. No way. If this kind of electricity went straight into their home there would be a meltdown. Everything would be left as a charred blob on the landscape. We can too easily assume the great God of the universe to be like common domestic electricity.

Tame. Safe. Manageable. But those who heard Jesus' offer to follow Him knew God to be like the raw power that comes from the electricity plant. The ancients had a technical word for this kind of power – 'holy': God is holy. Pure, powerful and unspoiled goodness. A searchlight, not a flashlight. A forest fire, not a flickering match. A tsunami, not a wave. And 'holiness' consumes anything that is not of the same substance – in the same way darkness is consumed by light, forests are consumed by fire and whole swathes of land are consumed by a tsunami. What turns that raw electricity in to a safe power that makes life work better? A transforming sub-station. A go-between that stands between the ultimate power and us. And that is exactly what Jesus came to be – so we could have real life. By His death on the cross Jesus stood between God and us – and goes on doing so. Through our faith in Him we have a way to relate to an all powerful and 'holy' God. To know Him. And to make it possible for that same God to be our strength and help. This is what makes 'real life' possible. Peter Meadows is the co-author with Joseph Steinberg of *The Book of Y* the basis for the eight week Y Course that explores life's biggest questions.

Bruce Bailey isn't joking when he says he lived in the days of the horse and cart. The 90-year-old Western Australian and his four siblings, who lived on a farm in the rural Western Australian town of Wongan Hills, used to go to school on one of those – until their mother found it too exhausting and stopped taking them. Bruce ended up having only two years of school but being a determined young boy, he taught himself maths and spelling. Growing up in a Christian home, Bruce had learned about God from a young age, but it wasn't until he attended a Christian meeting at 14 that he made the personal decision to commit his life to Jesus Christ. "The Bible message that day made me realize I was a sinner before a holy God," he tells *Challenge News*. "I deserved His righteous judgement for my sin. I heard that God still loved me. He sent His Son Jesus to take the penalty for all my sin when He died in my place on a cross and rose again. "He was offering to save me and make me His loved child if I would ask the Lord Jesus to forgive me and receive Him as the Lord of my life. "So that's what I did – I gave my



Bruce Bailey in the Aeropup he built in his carport.

life to Jesus that night. I remember crying because I knew I was now saved." In 1950 Bruce started to learn to fly aeroplanes. "I remember the chief flying instructor taking me into his office and saying to me, 'Don't do any more flying because you'll never pass the flying exams'... I obtained my license about two years later. This instructor sent me a telegram saying, 'Congratulations Bruce, flying wonders never cease!'" In 1990 Bruce was appointed as a Magistrate in the Prison Department and worked in prisons for 10 years. He remembers vividly an encoun-

ter he had with a prisoner who had been convicted of murder – he had killed his wife and three children. "If you ask the Lord Jesus to forgive you, He will," Bruce told him. "No He won't! It's too bad!" the prisoner responded. As Bruce got up to head back to court, the man put his head on the table and began crying his eyes out. "I bent down and whispered in his ear with my hand on his shoulders that the Lord would forgive him and I encouraged him to accept Christ as his Saviour and go to a Prison Fellowship meeting." Bruce has now been a Christian for more than 70 years and admits there have been "hard struggles" as well as good times. "I've been selfish and sinful more times than I would care to admit, but I am so thankful that all my sin is forgiven because Jesus died for me. "I'm thankful that God has made me one of His loved, saved children through faith in the Lord Jesus. And that He will not only guide me through this life as I seek to follow Him but that He will take me safely through death into the next life where I can't wait to be with Him and enjoy Him forever. "I hope you will join me there too."

My scars aren't the end of my story

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"Nobody wanted anything to do with me before I went to prison, because I was so far out there on drugs," says Nancy. "I wanted to have a new life and be a new creation. That's why I wanted to start going to church, and I wanted to be in the presence of others who were following Him. I just wanted to know Him." In prison, Nancy began a close relationship with Jesus. For the first time, she found a faith that was all her own. And because she was surrounded by a loving community of believers, she didn't feel alone in her journey. Before long, Nancy had a reputation for being joyful. Her brown eyes, once dull and empty, now sparkled at everyone she met. "You are way too happy to be in prison," people told her. She would say, "I'm happy I'm alive. I made it out of almost death, and I'm the Lord's child now. I'm His daughter." Whenever Nancy saw a chance, she shared her story with others. She also looked for opportunities to share love with her family, even though they were separated by prison walls. Nancy signed up for Prison Fellowship Angel Tree, which enables incarcerated parents to strengthen their relationships with their children. Through Angel Tree, a local church delivered Christmas presents to her children on her behalf.

A new creation

Nancy was released in 2010 after serving three years. First, she went to live in a faith-based halfway house. Then she moved to another re-entry home closer to a bus stop in town. An employment agency helped her create a resume, but her work history was sparse. Nobody wanted to hire her due to her criminal record. Though she had become a new creation in Christ, her past crimes cast a shadow over her future job prospects. Her brother stayed by her side every step of the way. With his support and her parole officer's guidance, she attended college and graduated with a business degree. She began working at a call center and became the top member of her sales team. Then, her brother had an idea for them to open a gym franchise together. They still co-own the business in Lebanon, Oregon, today. "It felt like a miracle," says Nancy. "When I actually saw my name on there as 'franchise owner,' that became surreal, like, 'Wow, I get this second chance.'" Nancy went on to help start a recruitment agency helping others with a criminal record to find gainful employment. When Nancy isn't busy helping others with stories like hers, she is staying involved with her church community at New Hope West Church in Eugene. She treasures her morning Bible study and praying through the Word. Nancy also finds joy in rebuilding family bonds. Now in their 20s, her children have faced their own triumphs and trials, but Nancy is grateful for the progress she has made in healing her relationships with her two oldest children and her grandchildren. "I want to thank Prison Fellowship from the bottom of my heart," says Nancy, "because I was at my most vulnerable, darkest, worst, hardest part of my life, and I was just looking for somewhere to turn. I felt just washed [by] the blood of Jesus Christ, forgiven and a new creation. I was able to have that start inside of the walls because of Prison Fellowship, and I am forever grateful. If there's any way that I can give back in any kind of way, I'm here."



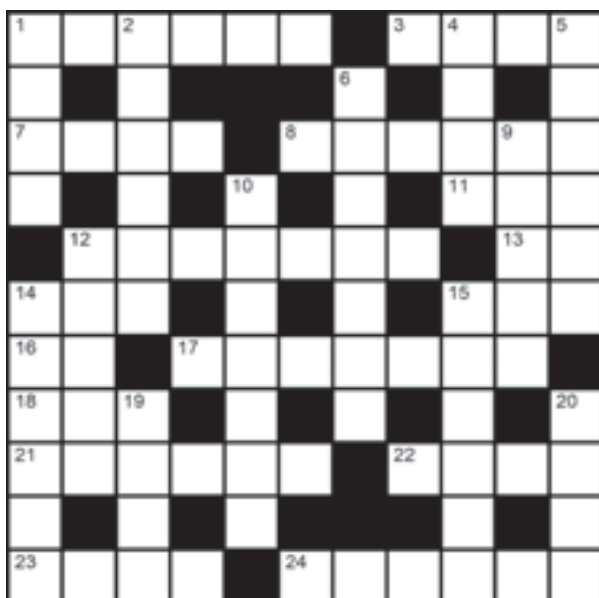
Nancy now works with a recruitment agency that helps others with a criminal record find gainful employment.

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

Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

ACROSS

- Amount coming in
- Wound sign
- Mediator's skill
- Baking soda (coll)
- High looping ball
- East-West hostility (4,3)
- "Ready, set, ___!"
- Model T
- Close star
- ___ or about
- Raise, promote
- Pickup truck, to Aussies
- Type of fertiliser
- Cast wearer's problem
- Audio reverberation
- Like the Marx Brothers



- Colliery's output
- Hair ornament
- Two-shelled mollusc
- Scoundrel
- Revere excessively
- Poem section
- Duo, twosome
- Radio trouble
- Engrave (on metal)
- Boat, vessel

DOWN

- Engrossed by
- Talent show, X ___

SOLUTIONS PAGE 7



"They are not the ideal doubles pair!"

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	4	7	6		5		1
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HOPE BEHIND BARS

• From page 1

After praying, I wiped the tears from my eyes, returned to bed, and fell asleep. But less than three weeks later, I would be caught in a situation that would alter my life forever.

It began with a devastating phone call from my son's mother, who delivered the news that my best friend had been shot multiple times at an auto parts store. I squeezed the phone in tears as she related the details, exclaiming, "He might not make it!" The shooter had fired on my friends and me numerous times before, leaving 25 empty shell casings at one of the crime scenes. Despite our attempts to defuse the ongoing tension, which sprang from a senseless argument, he was bent on establishing his street credibility, even at the cost of trying to murder someone I loved.

Hours later, my friends and I prepared to take our revenge. We climbed into our Ford Taurus, one of us armed with an assault rifle and the other two (including me) carrying handguns. As the car stopped at a red light, pulling close to our target, we jumped out. Filled with grief and anger, one of my friends approached the other vehicle, firing multiple rounds in its direction.

When I lifted my handgun to join in, I thought about how often this man we were attacking had threatened my life. I thought about the friend I loved lying in a hospital bed after this man had shot him seven times just hours before. My 21-year-old mind was consumed by fear, pain, sadness, anger, and frustration. Mindlessly, I chose to squeeze the trigger. By the grace of God, my gun jammed. I didn't realize that on the other side of those tinted windows was a two-year-old child.

Healing behind bars

Within a few days, I found myself lying on a concrete floor of an overcrowded county jail cell, watching the headlines flash across the screen of an old television hanging from the ceiling. Above the "Breaking News" of my capture was a mug shot, showing an intoxicated 21-year-old whose fuzzy French braids and glossy eyes fit the media's image of a criminal.

I closed my eyes in disbelief, wondering how my life had been reduced to the label of murderer. As I contemplated my reality, a waterfall of depression poured from my chest into the depths of my bowels, and I felt overwhelmed by fear as I envisioned life in prison.

Getting up from my cot, I asked the young man in the cell for the Bible that he had offered and I had rejected, just hours earlier. I had always believed in God, but I had never considered what he required of my life. I was too angry and bitter, never realizing that my pain had become my prison, first figuratively and then literally.

This Hispanic kid handed me the blue book, with a warped partial cover. Beneath the title, *The Message*, were broken handcuffs torn from a man's wrists, symbolizing the freedom I desperately wanted. For the following week, I lay on the floor, reading the Bible for hours. Its truths cut me like a surgeon's knife, removing the moral cancer that nearly consumed my heart through years of trauma.

I felt exposed before God's Word. It penetrated through everything I had used to hide my childhood scars. I saw the truth of my brokenness, pointing me toward the cross where God promised wholeness through faith in Jesus.

The night before I was extradited back to Seattle, I sat up wrestling with a series of questions. How can God love a murderer? How can He accept this flawed and fragmented person I've become? Can I come before Him utterly broken and empty-handed? My heart ached for mercy and grace. Before long, I had dropped my head in prayer:

"God, if You're real, I want this new life You're offering through Your Son. Please forgive me for the things I've done, and give me the heart to be the person You created me to be."

In that dark jail cell, I wept until my eyes were swollen. This time, a sense of peace flooded my heart like water bursting through a broken pipe. I knew I was accepted – not by the men whose affirmation I once sought but by the God who held my life in his hands. From that day forward, I studied the Word of God like my life depended on it, and through my relationship with Christ, the holes in my heart began to heal.

Walk with Me, Son

On September 24, 2011, I was found guilty of all charges and sentenced to 63 years in prison. Before I was transferred from King County Jail to Washington State Penitentiary, I poured myself out before God yet again, praying that he would give me the grace to endure what he had in store for me.

I'll never forget the words the Lord placed on my heart in that jail cell: "Walk with Me, Son, and I promise to work it out for your good." I didn't fully understand the details of that promise, but I clung to him without compromise.

It's been 16 years, and my imprisonment hasn't been easy. But God has been faithful.

After receiving my certificate in Christian leadership from The Urban Ministry Institute, I became a licensed pastor. I've been privileged to minister to countless folks who have been hurt, broken, and overwhelmed by their traumatizing experiences. And I've watched the Gospel message radically change the lives of fellow prisoners who, like me, were dismissed as irredeemable.

As a child, I never imagined that God would use someone as broken and messed up as I was. But I have found that even in the messiest lives, God can produce a message – if only we have the audacity to trust Him. •

Antoine Davis is an incarcerated writer and journalist serving a 63-year sentence in Washington state. He is the author of *Building Blocks: Curriculum for Creating Wholeness*.

This article was first published by Christianity Today and is used with kind permission.

Finding purpose in prison

BY AMY CAIN

Scottie's introduction to the criminal justice system came at a young age.

"I was born to parents who were involved in drugs and alcohol and were abusive towards one another and me and my siblings," he shares. "Because of their lifestyle, my mother was incarcerated while I was young, and my father was deemed to be an unfit parent."

Scottie's grandmother adopted him and his siblings. Under her care, they had a vastly different experience.

"My grandmother raised us in a home that was filled with love, compassion, and mercy," he recalls. "She made sure we were up early on Sunday morning to go to church, and you best believe she better not hear us complain – she was taking us to evening service as well!"

Children with incarcerated parents face many disadvantages and challenges in their formative years, including an increased likelihood of becoming involved with the criminal justice system themselves. Despite his grandmother's encouragement to follow Jesus, Scottie ended up following in his parents' footsteps instead.

"I sadly chose the world and what it had to offer," Scottie admits. "I used drugs and alcohol, and I became violent and hurt others, and because of those decisions, it led me to multiple incarcerations."

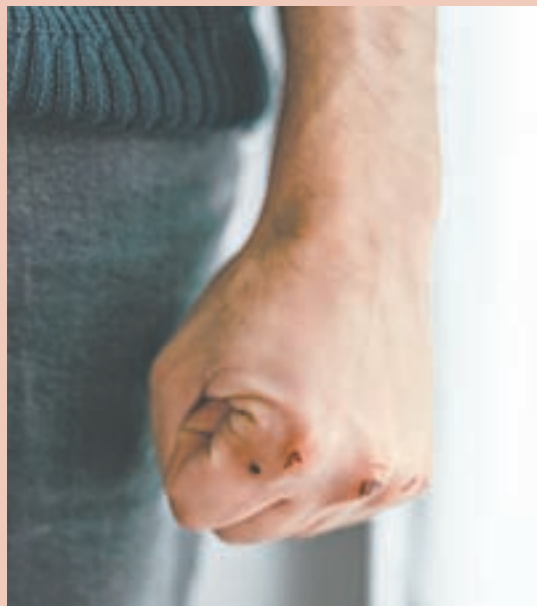
His choices also led to family separation. His first wife divorced him, and he has never met his 20-year-old daughter.

Years later, he met his current wife through pen-pal correspondence while they were both incarcerated.

"She got released from prison on my birthday," Scottie says. "I met my wife face-to-face on our wedding day in the prison I was in!"

Scottie's life seemed to be headed in a positive direction when he was released on parole in 2021. But the pull of alcohol and drugs was too strong to resist.

"I made a decision to do something that shattered all trust my wife had in me... [and] violated my parole," he explains. "My wife went to my parole officer and told her she didn't want me there anymore."



STOCK PHOTO

Back in a jail cell, feeling defeated by his choices and his wife's request for a divorce, Scottie knew he needed to find his way back to God.

"I started reading my Bible and praying," he says. "I rededicated my life to the Lord on January 15, 2022, and started the path in the right direction!"

As Scottie continued to seek the Lord and turn his life around, his wife took notice. God restored their relationship, and Scottie led his wife to follow Jesus as well. Through faith-based apps available on the tablets in Scottie's prison, he and his wife watch sermons together despite their physical distance.

To further grow in his faith, he signed up for Bible College and the Crossroads mentorship program.

"[Crossroads] is helping me to grow spiritually because it's helping me to see myself as God sees me. I often thought He was mad at me because I messed up, but He's not; He's pleased that I am pursuing an intimate relationship with Him [and] seeking Him rather than my former way of life."

Crossroads has made such an impact on Scottie that he eagerly spreads the word about the program and shares the good news of God's love.

"Thank you so much, Crossroads, for providing a Bible correspondence course that helps people grow in their faith and stay grounded in [their] beliefs," Scottie says.

After a lifetime of dealing with family dysfunction and numbing himself with drugs and alcohol, Scottie is grateful to have found his place and purpose in the family of God.

"I have often seen myself as being unimportant, but God has shattered my expectations because I am important! I know this because He has a purpose for my life!" he attests. "The life I thought was a failure, the life I thought was messed up... He has a purpose with! And I'm seeing that purpose as I witness to my family and the men on the yard here at the prison." •

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

NUDGE WITH KARL FAASE

Drifting in a sea of darkness

EARLY IN 2012, a piece of ocean junk was found floating off the Canadian coast. This though was not an ordinary piece of rubbish, it was a 50-metre long fishing boat washed out to sea by the Japanese tsunami twelve months before. This vessel had once been a commercial fishing boat but had been drifting in the ocean for a year. Life can do this to us. We can go from fully functioning people to hollow individuals drifting in a sea of darkness or anxiety. The tsunami can be personal loss, the pain of conflict, significant health issues or a traumatic experience that leaves you shattered.

Unlike the Japanese fishing vessel, you can and will be restored. God cares for you and will restore you. Take time to reach out to God in your darkness and know He won't leave you drifting. •

"The Christian life is not a set of rules to follow, but a relationship with Jesus Christ. No matter where you are, what you've done, or how far you've fallen, God's grace is greater. He can forgive, restore, and transform your life, giving you a fresh start and a new hope."
— Billy Graham

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: _____
Institution Housing

Referred by: CHAL _____
Street or PO Box

Prefiero el curso en español.

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

STUDENT COMMITMENT

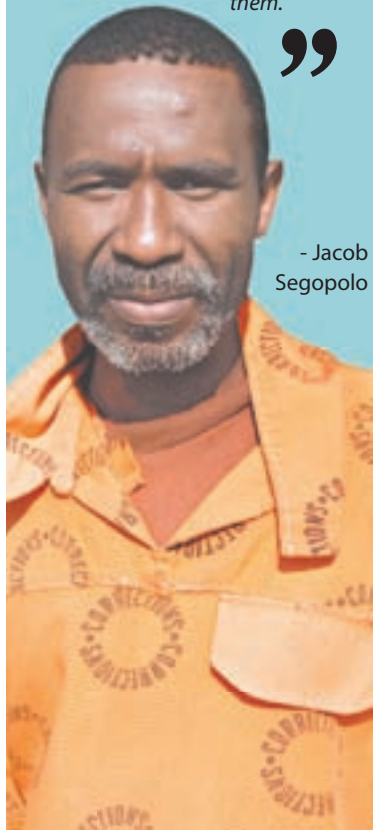
I will finish each lesson I receive in a timely manner and, with the help of my mentors, I will complete each course that I start. I agree that Crossroads may use anything I submit, such as my picture, testimony, writings or artwork, for promotional purposes or to further its mission.

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

From crime to obedience

“ My childhood was very good at first but at the age of 13 my life changed to crime. I started drinking alcohol and abusing drugs. Then I started stealing people’s items to sell so that I could buy drugs and alcohol. I heard about the good news about Jesus when I was very young, at the age of five. I accepted Jesus into my life later, when I understood that Jesus loves me, and that’s why He died for me. My favourite Bible verse is John 14:21: “[Jesus said] Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love Me. And because they love Me, my Father will love them. And I will love them and reveal myself to each of them.”



- Jacob Segopolo

REDEMPTION AFTER TRAGEDY

Matt took a life. Then he found life and purpose in prison.

BY STEVEN ANTHONY (ABRIDGED)

When Matt felt the unexplainable inner stirring, he had just begun serving 25 years for vehicular manslaughter. He was attending a Christian service at his Iowa prison. Somewhere amidst the worship and the Gospel message, Matt felt drawn to put his faith in Jesus Christ. Looking back, he now realizes the Holy Spirit was at work inside him.

“Talking about it gives me goosebumps,” he says. “That’s when I was spiritually reborn, and it was a beautiful time in my life despite being in prison.”

Depression and anxiety

Matt credits his mom and dad for his positive upbringing in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

“I couldn’t ask for better parents,” he says. “They invested a lot into [my] education.” He went to private school where he excelled academically and athletically.

Things changed when Matt went to college.

He broke up with his girlfriend and lost interest in sports.

Matt began experiencing depression and anxiety. These feelings were compounded by a lack of goals and direction for his future.

“I didn’t really understand at the time what I was going through,” Matt admits.

I had these negative emotions that I wasn’t really dealing with in the right way, because of my lack of maturity.”

Matt tried dealing with his emotions by distracting himself with partying and chasing girls. One night,

Matt drove home drunk from a bar. He passed out and ran a stop sign, resulting in a bad collision.

“I stepped out of the vehicle, and everything was a haze,” Matt recalls. “It was a nightmare.” He remembers thinking, This isn’t real. This isn’t really happening.

Matt looked into the other car and saw a woman struggling to keep her eyes open. At the police station after the crash, Matt found out she had died.

“I fell to my knees and cried,” Matt says. “I couldn’t believe it. I was in a state of disbelief, a state of shock.”

Matt made bond, but his attorney told him he could go to prison for 25 years.

Matt’s deepened depression made it harder for him to see any hope. In March 2003, he was sentenced to the exact term he was warned about – 25 years.

Forward looking

Upon starting his sentence, Matt endured a difficult four months at an Iowa prison.

“I wasn’t in any physical danger or anything like that, but it was just a really dark place,” Matt says. But then he was transferred to another facility where he got involved in the Prison Fellowship Academy.

“I’m really going to make the best of my time,” Matt determined. “I want to take advantage of everything, anything that I can do to better myself.”

After Matt gave his life to Christ at the revival service,

it took a mindset shift for him to fully comprehend the new direction of his life.

“I never had thought about God as a relationship, as a personal God,” Matt says.

“I always thought about God as somebody to be feared and revered.”

Walking alongside like-minded people helped with that shift in his mindset – as did reading the Bible daily.

Eventually, Matt’s passion for his newfound faith leveled off, and sometimes he battled doubts. He brought these questions into the Academy, where peers and volunteers were understanding and willing to discuss them.

Starting a new life

Matt was released after serving seven years and says he had an easier time than many do adjusting to life on the outside.

“I was able to get a job. I had housing secured. I had [the] support of my brothers and my parents,” Matt says.

Matt was also able to complete the schoolwork he began behind bars. He took liberal arts classes in addition to business classes.

He earned a bachelor’s degree and entrepreneurial management certificate.

He was working as a sales rep but continued his education through a Master of Business Analytics program and got his degree.

He’s been working in that field ever since and enjoys what he does.

Matt’s newfound freedom led to him finding something else – love.

He was working at a hospital in the radiology department when a certain woman caught his eye.

They got married and bought a house. Matt found a church where one of his mentors attended and they began attending, as well.

However, Matt and Allison went through a rough patch in their marriage. Matt’s ongoing battle with depression contributed to their struggles. He looked to the past to help him through it.

“I started really going back to everything I had learned,” Matt says. “I had strayed away from my faith, and I was really more consumed with running the race and being successful. I think God really got my attention.”

That attention-grabbing moment included a desire to return to prison, this time as an Academy volunteer. Matt connected with

a prison ministry manager at Prison Fellowship and completed his training so he could serve the men at the Anamosa State Penitentiary.

A new calling

Pouring into and listening to the men

has helped Matt find his purpose. “My calling is through Christ,” he says. “It’s to be able to make disciples of others and just to be able to pour myself into other people and be a servant.”

Matt knows he’s not perfect, but he has a clear picture of the goal: helping bring others to Christ. He’s grateful that his own story – as painful as it was at times – is being used to accomplish that mission.

Embracing forgiveness

Despite his questions, Matt didn’t stray from his mission to learn and become a better person.

Matt specifically credits a study by Prison Fellowship founder Chuck Colson for moving him forward. The subject was shame and carrying past burdens. Matt was struck by his inability to forgive himself for the crash while at the same time realizing he was forgiven by God through Jesus’ death on the cross.

“That was a huge pivotal turning point where I was able to go forward from that and really forgive myself for what happened,” Matt explains.

Then mother of the woman who died reached out, and she and Matt communicated through a victim’s advocate in the department of corrections. Their correspondence eventually led to the mother visiting Matt in prison.

“That was very surreal,” Matt admits. He wanted to tell her how sorry he was, but she quickly reassured him that she already knew. Matt says their conversation felt natural and that she simply wanted to get to know him.

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

I finally surrendered my heart

Anthony Skhobana’s parents always taught their son to be respectful and to be a good person, to be a positive member of the community.

Anthony tells Challenge News he tried to obey them, but that he was easily provoked and could not forgive those who offended him.

He was raised in a Christian home and had heard about Jesus Christ and the love of God from the time he was a child.

“When I was 16 I started to know that his goodness and love will be with me all my life, and that His house will be my home for as long as I live,” he says.

“My parents always talked about

Jesus Christ. I saw that those who understand better about Him show love and forgiveness. They treat other people with respect.

“During my early years I attended Sunday school at the local church.”

But Anthony got into trouble with the law and has been convicted for attempted murder and robbery. In 2014, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

He says even though his parents set a good example, it wasn’t enough for him to commit his life to Christ.

It wasn’t until someone else shared the Gospel message [the good news about Jesus dying for him on the cross] with him that Anthony finally

surrendered his heart.

Since then, his ambition is to, “Know Jesus and the Holy Spirit to a deeper level and to live pure and safe in Christ.”

“I want to proclaim the good news and teach others about Him.

“I want to tell others He is the Saviour who shows us the direction to take in life. That there is life after death – eternal life.”

His favourite verse is Proverbs 3:5-7 which encourages Christians to trust in the Lord with all their heart.

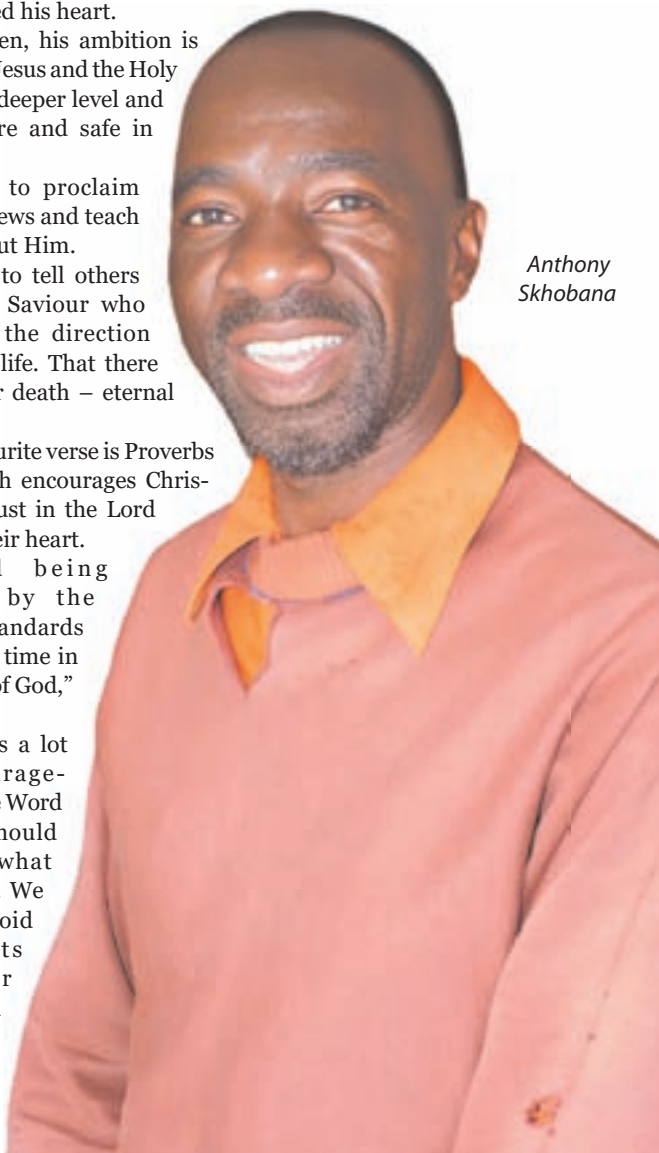
“Avoid being trapped by the world’s standards and spend time in the Word of God,” he adds.

“There is a lot of encouragement in the Word and we should practice what we preach. We should avoid arguments and never be tired of doing good.”

“ There is life after death – eternal life.”

Three short prayers

Lord, save me	“But when he [Peter] saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’” - Matthew 14:30
Lord, help me	“The woman came and knelt before Him [Jesus]. ‘Lord, help me!’ she said.” - Matthew 15:25
Lord, remember me	“Then he [the thief on the cross next to Jesus] said, ‘Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’” - Luke 23:42



Anthony Skhobana

RAY'S SECOND CHANCE

Thirty years after missing his first chance at fatherhood, Ray has another opportunity.

BY STEVEN ANTHONY

Addiction often demands a high price: money, reputation – even freedom. For Ray, one of those costs was fatherhood. His first arrest, a couple of years after his son was born, started a 20-year journey of intermittent imprisonment.

“I chose my addiction over family,” Ray admits.

Now, Ray is relishing another opportunity at fatherhood. He has a newborn daughter, and he knows he has a rare chance to try again.

“I’m beyond words how blessed I am to have a second chance,” Ray says, fighting back tears.

Beginnings of trouble

Ray grew up in a loving home with happily married parents who supported him and attended his baseball games. But Ray saw the impacts of addiction early on in his life. His dad was an alcoholic and had trouble expressing his emotions.

Ray’s early exposure to addiction eventually led him down his own unsavory path. He struggled with low self-esteem and the need for reassurance growing up. He felt the need to fit in. As a result, he and his friends began experimenting with drugs and alcohol. Substance abuse left Ray with a cloudy vision of his life.

“I don’t really think that I knew what taking responsibility was,” Ray says, “and I don’t think that I really realized what life was all about.”

Ray got married despite his admitted lack of clarity and purpose, and his wife got pregnant soon afterward. Because of their acrimonious relationship, they separated.

Running away

Ray cared more about having enough drugs and money than caring for his son. He told himself he would stop when he felt his actions were wrong. But that didn’t happen, and Ray failed to realize the damage he was inflicting on others.

That included his initial arrest in 1995. For the two decades that followed, he was in and out of prison four times. One of his sentences was almost 10 years long.

Ray was on the run for almost a year when he was caught for the final time. He had been required to go to court every month but was high on drugs for his first appearance – and after that, he didn’t go back.

Ray shoplifted while eluding authorities. He became paranoid, always looking around and never staying in one place for long. But his time on the run eventually ended, and he felt a burden had been lifted. He no longer had to deal with the

stress of hiding. That’s when Ray reached the end of himself.

“I was just done living the way I was,” he says.

Back to childhood

Ray cried out to God from behind bars. He went to church growing up, but was turned off by messages about hell, fire, and brimstone. He ran away from that.

But after his time running from the law, Ray thought back to his days in the church and decided to give God another try despite having questions.

He admitted out loud to God, “I don’t know what this is all about.”

Then it hit him. Ray realized God didn’t promise life was going to be easy or that he would understand what was happening. It was clear to him that putting God first didn’t mean

everything would be alright. Despite this, Ray knew Jesus had died for him – no matter what he put his family through. He wanted to know more about God, and he trusted God would bring him peace.

Restoration despite separation

Ray’s time behind bars shattered any connection he had with his son and ex-wife, who was raising him. However, he was determined to re-establish a bond with his son, and he asked his parents for help.

Around that time, the chaplain at Ray’s facility told him about Prison

Fellowship Angel Tree. Ray signed up, and he credits Angel Tree for getting him and his son back together. His son asked if he could go see his dad, and that started the process of restoration.

Despite their reconnection, their relationship wasn’t fully healed. The first three times he was released, Ray told his son he wouldn’t make the same mistakes and go back to prison, which led to trust issues each time Ray was sent back.

But the last time he got out – in 2015 – Ray made no such promise. God-driven changes in Ray’s life captured the attention of his son, and their relationship is now better than ever.

Anxiety to elation

Ray’s renewed relationship with his son coincided with another chance at marriage. He and his current wife married in 2021.

There came a time when they began thinking about having a child. The thought stirred up anxiety in Ray, who’s in his early 50s.

But he realized he was being selfish. He remembers thinking that if he truly loves his wife, how could he take the chance of being a mother away from her?

His wife’s chance at being a mother and Ray’s second chance at being a father came when their daughter was born at the start of 2024. With a clear mind, Ray knows things are different now.

“I feel like I’m so much more prepared for this at [my age now than] when my son was born,” Ray says.



He realizes his daughter depends on him for everything, and he understands the concept of self-sacrifice.

“It’s not all about me,” Ray says.

Back in prison

Ray’s self-sacrifice extends to prison. He’s back behind bars but, this time, as a program manager for Prison Fellowship Academy at a prison in Oklahoma. The yearlong program brings men through a journey of transformation with the help of targeted curriculum and compas-

sionate coaches.

One thing Ray has emphasized to the men inside is having someone they can talk to about anything, any time.

Ray tells them, “This is prison, and you guys don’t want to share personal information, but there’s got to be one guy around here that you can talk to because you need it.”

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

Saved from the pits of Hell’s Kitchen

The first time Hector Vega was arrested for selling drugs, he was 15. By then, he had been addicted to hard drugs like cocaine and heroin.

Growing up in the chaos and instability of Hell’s Kitchen, a gritty neighborhood in New York, drugs and crime were the norm.

“I had too much freedom for someone so young,” he tells Christianity Today.

Desiring to be part of the ‘in’ crowd, Hector was drawn to alcohol and marijuana. This led to trying harder drugs like cocaine and heroin.

He shares with Challenge News, “I used the drugs to escape the pain, shame, and guilt I was feeling. It was a vicious cycle which I was powerless to stop!”

Hector started selling drugs to support his habit. He was eventually arrested but was given the opportunity to attend school at a youth detention center where he got his GED. His talent for baseball was noticed and he was scouted to join the baseball team.

“I started representing the state of Pennsylvania in the regional championships,” he recounts in a video interview with Hear My Story Co.

“I was offered an opportunity to come back to play in a Division 3 school after I completed my time.”

But while on a home pass, Hector went back to his drug habit. “I just did everything I could in those 48 hours.”

His parents bumped into him at the corner store and, “They saw that I was high, that my eyes were dilated. I just looked at them and said, ‘Don’t worry, I’m leaving tomorrow.’”

His coach told him, “You’ve got a choice to make now, you could stay here and pursue that Division 3 school thing or you can go back to the streets.”

“I went back, and within a month I had been arrested two more times.” Hector was imprisoned for a year.

“I remember being in that jail cell and thinking to myself, ‘I wish I could go back to that school and pursue that Division 3 opportunity,’ but the door had closed.”

His then-girlfriend, Michelle, was pregnant with his child at that time. But she was growing frustrated with Hector’s drug habit.

She started attending the church and began praying with other believers. She also insisted that Hector get help at a Christian recovery programme. It was at this programme that Hector first learned about Jesus.



Hector Vega, once trapped in addiction and crime, now stands as a testament to redemption. INSET: Hector’s book about his life, *Arrested By Grace*.



“I started to hear about Jesus and I started to accept Him.”

However, while speaking at East Harlem Fellowship, Hector admits that, “I wanted Him to be a Saviour of my life but I didn’t want Him to be Lord.”

Eight months later, he went back to the streets and back on drugs.

In 1994, Hector got arrested for the last time.

While in prison, he met a chaplain and inmates who encouraged him to read the Bible and talked to him about God.

“Looking back, I can see that God was pursuing me even before my encounter with Michelle.

“I also started feeling deep remorse and shame over the pain I had caused people in my family, especially my mum and dad.”

He started attending chapel services to break the monotony of prison life. But he began to look forward to the services.

“I was always deeply moved, even to the point of tears, when we sang the song, Lord Prepare Me to Be a Sanctuary.”

Once, Hector had a nightmare and he cried out to Jesus in his dream. When he woke up, he knelt down and asked God about it. A still small voice directed him to Galatians 5. The first verse in the chapter reads: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

“My seminary was the Holy Spirit meeting me in the prison cell, where I could spend hours reading and praying without boredom.

He eventually joined a group of men who would gather and read the Bible in prison together. These men also acted as mentors to Hector.

“Following their example, I decided to surrender my life to Christ.”

Hector began to see Jesus as not only his Saviour but as Lord over his life.

“When I left prison for good in 1996, I knew Christ had remade me from the inside out.”

Since then, Hector’s life has transformed. He is now the pastor of the church he first attended when he was released. He has also been married to Michelle for 30 years, and they have four children together. In 2018, Hector released his biography *Arrested By Grace*, which tells the story of how Jesus transformed his life.

“The brokenness of our lives, the pain and sin we carry, can be the very thing that brings us to Christ. God’s grace is not for the perfect but for the imperfect. He meets us where we are, in our struggles, and He offers us forgiveness, freedom, and a new life in Him. No one is beyond His reach, and no situation is too hopeless for Him to redeem.”

— Chuck Colson

WORDS FOR THE HEART

STUDIES IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Welcome to this Bible Study. Read slowly what I have written. If you have a Bible, look up the reference verses given, and allow the Holy Spirit to minister to your soul through them. – ALAN BAILEY

Mark 6:30-55

INTRODUCTION

WE HAVE REACHED a point in Mark's Gospel where sad news was being shared. John the Baptist, so honoured by many people, was executed by the order of King Herod. The disciples shared this news with Jesus. Straight away, He led them to another place for a time of rest. But it turned out to be something more than that. Let us read on.

Chapter 6, verses 30, 31 The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to Him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, He said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

The 12 disciples had been moving around the country, preaching and healing.

Now back together, they share their report with Jesus and no doubt talk about this news of John's death. We can be sure this was a sadness for them all.

Also, because the place where they were was busy with people, Jesus called them to go to a place of quietness. They all needed a break.

Verses 32-34 So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So, He began to teach them many things.

The group left in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. They went across a portion of the lake to the shore where there would be privacy.

But there were people who were watching who wanted to be with Jesus, to hear Him and to receive healing.

So, they ran around the edge of the lake to intercept Him. This spelt an end to the group's quiet time.

Yet, Jesus has feeling for them, wanting to help them. Once again, He takes up the task of teaching.

Verses 35, 36 By this time it was late in the day, so His disciples came to Him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy



Jesus teaches thousands of people before feeding them all with only five bread loaves and two fish. Photo: AI image from BiblePics.

themselves something to eat."

Obviously, the people were quite a distance from their homes and would by now be hungry. Keeping them any longer would make matters worse.

They would be getting home in darkness.

Better to encourage them to go without delay, the disciples thought.

Verses 37, 38 But He answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to Him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "How many loaves do you have?" He asked. "Go and see." When they found out they said, "Five, and two fish."

The Lord's suggestion that they give food to the people must have sounded quite impossible.

But Jesus knew what He was about to do and He wanted it to be a lesson for His men.

So, they looked around and found a boy who had small loaves and two

fish. (John's Gospel speaks of a boy.) But how could this be any help?

Verses 39-44 Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to His disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up 12 baskets full of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was 5000.

This is one of the most well-known of Jesus' miracles. We find such stories hard to believe.

But we should pause and remember that the whole universe was made by God at the beginning. How small an act of creation is this one in comparison.

Jesus did not simply want to feed the people. He wanted to teach truth. He wanted them to know that He

was bread from heaven which they needed. He could supply spiritual food as well as physical food. Much is said about this in John 5 & 6.

Verses 45, 46 Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to Bethsaida, while He dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, He went into the hills to pray.

We can see that for some reason Jesus did not want to leave just yet. He instructed the disciples to cross the lake again to Bethsaida which was like their hometown. He moved up into the hills where He prayed.

Verses 47-50 When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and He was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night, He went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw Him walking on the lake, they thought He was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw Him and were terrified.

This day was a remarkable one for the disciples. They had witnessed the feeding of the great crowd and now were watching their Master walk on water. Unforgettable sights!

We can see that their faith in Him was being tested and made stronger. These were evidences of the power of God.

Though they felt their own weaknesses they learned that they had a powerful leader.

Verses 50-53 Immediately He spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Then He climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their minds were closed.

It was even more amazing when Jesus joined them in the boat. The wind storm ceased. The experiences of the disciples seemed to be too much for them. Just what is meant by their lack of understanding of the loaves' is not clear. Perhaps it means that they had not grasped the fact that Jesus was empowered by God Almighty and that these miracles were confirming that fact.

Verses 53-55 When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognised Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard He was.

No doubt this was a most demanding time for the Lord and His followers. No rest yet, though they had been looking for it many hours previously. The crowds kept coming.

CONCLUSION

No doubt the 12 disciples were receiving lessons from the Lord in all these events. They appeared to be slow to learn.

But we must remember that these miracles were totally out of the ordinary.

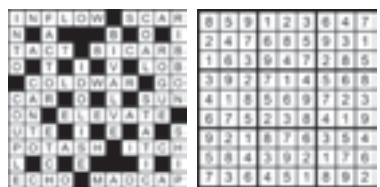
Human minds are not quick to accept strange ideas.

Any suggestion that the people of Christ's day were gullible and easily led is completely wrong. They were just as sceptical as in our modern day.

We all must realize that God who made all things is well able to do just what He will in this world.

People turning from sin and self and receiving Jesus as Lord and Saviour are experiencing another miracle.

How good to know that such an event is God's desire for us. Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near (Isaiah 55:6)



HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

Anyone can gain the eternal life offered through Jesus Christ

We read in God's word: "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16)

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

ADMIT

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

BELIEVE

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

COMMIT

Here is an example of how you can pray.

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

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

What now?

1. Tell someone - either a fellow prisoner who is a Christian, or your Prison Chaplain.
2. Ask a friend or family member to bring you a Bible. Ask the Prison Chaplain to sign you up to a correspondence discipleship program.
3. Keep praying. Talk to God anywhere, about anything. He is always listening, and you don't need a formula.
4. Find out if your prison has church services and attend them regularly.

AS A NEXT STEP:

I have prayed the prayer [ABOVE]

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

* Please check and write clearly *

Name _____ Age _____

Address _____

Send to: Challenge Literature Fellowship, 2634 Drake Road, Lebanon Ohio, 45036

All overseas enquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

The list that matters most

BY HARRIET COOMBE

WHEN PASTOR Greg Laurie was invited to lead a prayer at the White House's Easter worship service, he didn't expect to be turned away at the door – but his name wasn't on The List.

The List, it turns out, is very important and dictates whether people are allowed inside or not.

Greg made a few calls, filled in an official form he'd forgotten to submit, and was eventually allowed to enter the White House. But as he reflected on the experience, he realized it pointed to a much weightier reality.

Greg wrote in a post on X, "It reminded me of something far more serious – what Jesus said will tragically happen to some people one day when they step into eternity. "They'll expect to be welcomed into Heaven, but their name won't be in the Book of Life."

The Bible talks about the Book of Life as God's record of those who belong to Him and will spend eternity in heaven when they die.

Revelation 20:12,15 talks about the alternative: "And if anyone's name was not found written in the Book of Life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

How can you be sure your name is written in the Book of Life? See the box entitled *How do I Become a Christian* on the left for more information.



Stock photo

Matthew Maher in action on the field.
Photos: Facebook/Matthew Maher

SOCCER STAR'S GREAT SAVE



Matt was convicted of aggravated manslaughter charges and sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison.

Professional soccer player Matthew Maher was a gifted defender on the field, but as he faced a judge in January 2010, he found himself staring down a penalty he had no hope of avoiding.

Matt, then 24, had gotten drunk – and then got behind the wheel of his hulking Cadillac SUV. He was depressed because he had badly torn his knee muscles during training, an injury that could spell the end of his career.

He was speeding down the freeway at 160km/h when tragedy happened. He crashed into the vehicle of 55-year-old immigrant Hort Kap, killing him instantly. Police said Matt's blood alcohol level was 0.21 – three times the legal limit.

It was a cruel irony. Hort had escaped death in the killing fields of Cambodia in 1980 and immigrated to the US, where he worked as a fac-

tory worker and raised six children. Matt was convicted of aggravated manslaughter charges and sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison.

"My world exploded – not to mention somebody else's world, a family, who I did not know at the time, their world imploded," Matt told the Christian Broadcasting Network's *Faith vs Culture* program.

He hit rock bottom harder than any soccer tackle. Yet it was there, where the ground rose up and smacked him in the face, that the re-building of Matt's life began.

Still speaking to CBN, he said, "The cliché goes like this: when you hit rock bottom, you discover Christ is the rock at the bottom.

"And that kind of began the reckoning of God getting my undivided attention. I came crashing down, or falling back on this faith foundation. And that became my reality."

The bedrock of that foundation was the forgiveness unexpectedly offered by the victim's third son, Noun Ung.

At first the devastated Noun unloaded his grief onto Matt, rebuking him for "destroying his world".

But moments later, according to Matt, "a composure came over this young man that only heaven could provide, and his very next statement to me was, 'But I forgive you, my brother.'"

"He came over to me right in the courtroom... and he and I embraced and hugged, and I tell you the truth, all that weight, all that guilt that I carried into the courtroom, it completely evaporated; it completely melted away.

"In that moment, before I would be physically incarcerated... I was spiritually liberated."

"Before I spent even a single second as an inmate in the state of New Jersey, the Lord had given me something that I did not deserve, and that was forgiveness."

Speaking of that moment to *The Star-Ledger*, Matt added: "I did not even care about anything else at that point. The judge could have said 10 years. I would have said, 'Thank you!'"

He immediately saw a purpose for his devastating experience. In the three months before he began his prison term, Matt visited 34 high schools and colleges and told the students his story of how one irresponsible decision can take and change lives.

He is now an author, speaker, and pastor, passionate about sharing his testimony in hopes it will illuminate for others the power the Gospel has to redeem and restore a life of

pain and suffering. His website, truthovertrend.com, shares his tale to an even wider audience and has chalked up tens of thousands of hits.

Matt explained to CBN that the Lord used the horror of his sins to reveal the way Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection – the Gospel story – redeems suffering, for the good of all who trust in Him as their Savior.

He said his experience with earthly justice was "a picture of the Gospel. Everyone will stand before a judge one day, and we're all guilty as charged for breaking the laws of God.

"No one can get out of it – not by good works, not with a résumé, not with a lawyer who can articulate the law of God eloquently. Everyone is guilty as charged; that's what the Word of God says. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

"The wages of sin equals death," he continued. "That's terrible news, unless you understand there's an advocate in that courtroom: a Son

“
I was
spiritually
liberated.
”

who decided to step up, step out, and give the offender what he did not deserve.

"And that's what that sentencing day became for me: a perfect picture of Romans 5:8, how God demonstrates His own love toward us in that, while we were in our sin... far from God, that is when Christ died for us."

But he also speaks of the kindness of God that saved him from drowning in the guilt of what he had done.

"All of us have that same testimony," he explained.

"Jesus' death on the cross – if you believe He died for your sins and He would redeem and recycle all suffering – you become born again.

"I stand in awe of what God has allowed in my life as a testimony of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." ●



Matt after his release from prison.

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