

THE IMPACT OF A CHRISTMAS GIFT

BY DOUG BENDER

Jasmine didn't expect any presents for Christmas. She was only eight years old, lived in extreme poverty, and suffered abuse and neglect from those who should have protected her. She had learned enough about the world to know that no magic sleigh would deliver her the love that she needed.

"It was rough," she says. "It was not a good childhood."

Jasmine saw her father once or twice a month and her mother was too caught up in the street life to take care of her daughter. Jasmine's grandmother, Sarah, ended up raising her. But Sarah, too, was trapped by the same cycle of poverty and mistreatment that kept Jasmine from seeing hope for the future.

Worthy of love

"My grandma did the best that she could," Jasmine recalls, "but being around my mom, her friends, and grandma's boyfriend, they were always stealing her checks, stealing her gifts, and all kinds of things."

Jasmine's mother struggled with addiction throughout her life.

As early as Jasmine can remember, her mother used drugs and alcohol. This resulted in multiple stays in prison.

"I can remember all through elementary school, she was in and out of prison," Jasmine says.

"Middle school, high school, even when I was in college, she was in and



Jasmine

out. She missed all of my graduations because she was in jail, prison, or some sort of correctional facility."

This left a hole in Jasmine's heart. As a young child she struggled to interpret the meaning of her situation.

"I struggled heavily with identity crisis and not feeling good enough because my parents weren't there," she says.

Jasmine can remember hearing the kids at school asking her, "Why don't you have your mom or dad? Where are they? Don't they love you?"

Her grandmother's boyfriend made her home life even more intolerable. He was violent and sexually abusive towards Jasmine.

A simple gift

Something changed for Jasmine when she saw her name written on a card hanging on the Christmas tree at church.

"I remember the tree," she says. "There was an actual tree that had a little angel on it, and my name was on it!"

The church invited Jasmine and her grandmother to a dinner. Other kids with a similar background to Jasmine's also came. The church was filled with smiling faces.

There was a Christmas tree and presents – and one of the presents was for Jasmine.

She hadn't expected to receive

anything for Christmas, but her mother signed her up to receive an Angel Tree gift.

The church presented her with a pink sweatshirt with a matching top and bottom. But it was the present that wasn't wrapped – the love it represented – that changed her the most. "It opened my eyes," she says. "It healed me in ways I didn't realize I needed to be healed."

By giving Jasmine a pink sweatshirt in the name of her mother, the church imparted something infinitely more valuable. They gave her a new identity. She was not an abandoned child. She was loved, and that changed everything.

The church continued to include Jasmine in their Angel Tree ministry for several years afterwards. One year they delivered presents to her house.

"It was a nice lady who brought the gifts," she remembers. "She sat there as we opened the gifts. Had she not given me gifts, I honestly don't believe I would have had any."

Ready to respond

These acts of kindness prepared Jasmine to receive and respond to God. She remembers hearing a sermon while playing with her dolls under the kitchen table one day. Her grandmother was cooking. The television played in the background.



Stock photo

You are not alone

CHRISTMAS IS OFTEN pictured as a joyful time, filled with family, friends, and celebrations. Yet for many, it can feel empty or lonely. Even in a crowded room, we can sense something missing – a quiet longing in our hearts that no gift, meal, or festive event can fill. That sense of emptiness is real, and it points to the One who came at Christmas: Jesus.

For those behind prison walls, that loneliness can feel even sharper. The holidays remind us of family gatherings we can't attend, traditions we can't take part in, and faces we might not see for years.

Some may not even have anyone on the outside to send a letter or make a call. The silence of Christmas night in a cell can feel overwhelming. But it's in those very moments that God's message of Christmas shines brightest: you are not forgotten, and you are not beyond His love.

The reason for this emptiness is the reality of sin. We've all fallen short of God's perfect standard, and that separation from Him brings pain, guilt, and loneliness.

As the Bible says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). For some, prison itself feels like proof of failure or shame. Yet the truth is, whether inside or outside the walls, every one of us is in need of the same forgiveness and grace. None of us can bridge the gap on our own.

But Christmas brings good news. Jesus came to bridge that gap. He lived a perfect life, died on the cross in our place, and rose again so that anyone who trusts Him can be forgiven and restored.

"The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). That gift is not locked away, and no bars or fences can keep it from reaching you. The gospel is not limited by circumstance – it is just as available in a prison cell as it is in a church pew.

Jesus offers more than comfort; He offers salvation and a relationship with Him. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). This is a promise you can cling to no matter where you are. The world may label you by your past, but Jesus offers you a new identity – forgiven, loved, and made new in Him.

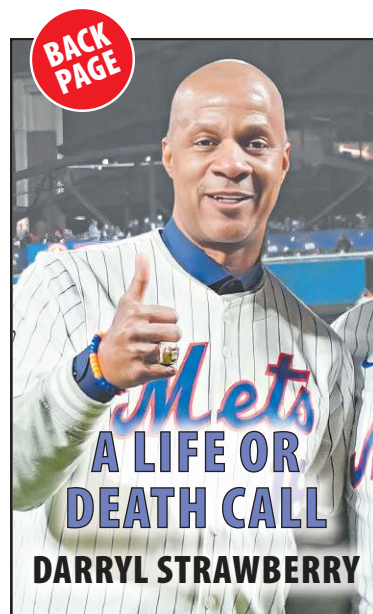
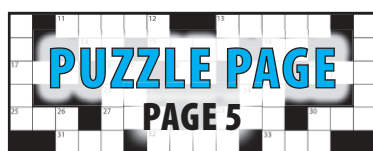
So this Christmas, even if you can't be with family or exchange gifts, you can receive the greatest gift of all. You don't have to face loneliness alone.

You can take a step today – speak to Jesus, invite Him into your life, and discover the peace, love, and hope that never leaves. He can turn even the darkest place into a place of light, because He Himself is the Light of the World.

This year, let Christmas remind you that while the world may overlook you, God never will. His Son came for you, right where you are. And when you put your trust in Him, you can carry His presence with you every day – a gift no one can take away.

“
You don't
have
to face
loneliness
alone.
”

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The impact of a Christmas gift

• From page 1

A preacher shared about God's love and invited viewers to commit their lives to Jesus.

"I remember him saying, 'Say this prayer with me,'" she says. "My little self got on one knee under that table, and I quietly repeated what he said."

Looking back, she knows it was the Holy Spirit who spoke to her and led her to that decision. She didn't understand much of what the preacher said in that sermon, but the Holy Spirit prompted her to respond.

"I've heard the Lord talk with me throughout my life," she says. "It was the Holy Spirit. He was always talking to me, guiding me, keeping me out of certain trouble. He was a parent that I didn't have."

Full circle

Jasmine chose a different path for her life than the ones her parents took. It came with many struggles and difficulties, but she always felt God's guidance along the way. Jasmine was baptized and regularly attended church throughout her childhood.

She and her grandmother even sang in the choirs at church. As she grew up and had children of her own, she sought more ways to serve God. Eventually she began her own ministry, New Nation Ministry, which provides numerous services and outreaches into her community.

This past Christmas, Jasmine's children helped bring her story full circle. Jasmine shared with them some of her own story and the ways that Angel Tree helped change her life.

They decided to pay it forward. They gave some of their own money to bless other children whose parents are incarcerated. Jasmine and her family want other children to experience the same love that she found through the program so many years ago.



Jasmine with her grandmother.

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

GRACE IN THE DARKNESS

In 2005, Kyle Quilausing was the most wanted man in Hawaii. After getting arrested for drug-related offenses, the 29-year-old escaped from prison through a skylight. Twelve days later, he was arrested again and moved to solitary confinement.

It is a far cry from Kyle's early years, when he was described as a 'child prodigy'.

At three years old, Kyle's grandfather introduced him to golf and they would go to the course behind his house to practice.

"I instantly fell in love with the game," he tells Delafe Testimonies.

When he was 10, Kyle won first place at his first golf tournament which qualified him to represent Hawaii at the Junior World Championships where he competed with Tiger Woods.

Deemed a child prodigy, Kyle was set on a new path.

"As soon as the sun came up over the mountain... I grabbed my golf bag and I started golfing.

"Because I had a goal.

"I would come home from school, open my mailbox, and there would be a stack of letters from different universities offering me full-ride scholarships to their schools – stacks of them."

He thought, "I'm going to graduate college, I'm going to buy me a mansion and I'm going to be a millionaire."

"I let that seed of arrogance in my mind blossom into a tree."

However, pride got the better of him.

Trying to impress a girl he liked at school, he hit a teacher with a piece of clay.

That same day, Kyle got expelled from school for assault and lost his scholarship.

"I reached home, grabbed my golf bag and I put it in a closet and locked it. I killed my passion for golf."

Soon after, he moved to Alaska for five years. When he finally came back to Hawaii, he landed right in the middle of a crystal meth epidemic.

"When I blew out this crystal smoke for the first time, I blew out everything that was instilled in me as a child – all my love, all my respect, all my etiquette, all my morals, everything.

"Every ounce of goodness in my body came out with that one hit of crystal, and I instantly became an addict."

With that, Kyle's life turned down a dark path.

"I did a lot of bad things to people here in Hawaii for my addiction – things that I'm not proud of," he admitted.

Kyle was now back on the news. But for a different reason.

"They put me on the news because they labelled me as 'Hawaii's most wanted' and they needed the public's assistance in apprehending me."

Kyle was given a 20-year prison sentence. But things got worse when, consumed by his meth addiction, he broke out of prison.

"I squeezed through this little skylight. I cut my arm and back – [there are] scars all on my back."

When he was arrested again, he was sent to solitary confinement for three years.

"My cell was a seven-by-seven hole with a mattress, a sink and a toilet connected to the wall in the corner, no windows.



Kyle Quilausing

"Every day, all I did was pace from door to wall. It was three steps: one, two, three. I'd touch the wall, turn around, and I'd walk back to the door."

“The only direction I could go was down – down to my knees.”

Haunted by the voices in his head, he tried to smash his head against the wall.

"So I backed up as far as I could in my cell, and I was ready to lunge forward.

"But no matter how hard I tried to lunge forward, I couldn't go. Something was holding me back. And the only direction I

could go was down – down to my knees." Kyle hadn't heard much about

God or gone to church. The only experience he had was from watching television. But now on his knees in his seven-by-seven isolation cell, he could only do one thing.

"All I said was, 'God, my name is Kyle. I'm sorry for what I did to all those people. And if You're really out there, help me. I need help.'

"I felt the best feeling that I ever felt in my life – the warmest, most comforting feeling I ever felt.

"The voices of isolation were gone. When I rose to my feet, I stood a new creation."

Having repented [turn away from wrongdoing] of his sins [anything we think, say, or do that goes against God's way], Kyle surrendered his life to God.

His time in a high security prison wasn't easy – he was punched and stepped on, losing two of his teeth. He witnessed men being killed. On the day he was told he'd be released, Kyle thanked God for being with him the whole time.

Twenty years later, Kyle remains addiction-free and travels around the US sharing about what God has done for him.

"Every morning when I get up, the first thing I do is glorify God and give Him all the credit. As I said, if it wasn't for Him, I wouldn't be here today.

"If God can save me, He can save anybody."

This story has been adapted from Delafe Testimonies and used with kind permission.

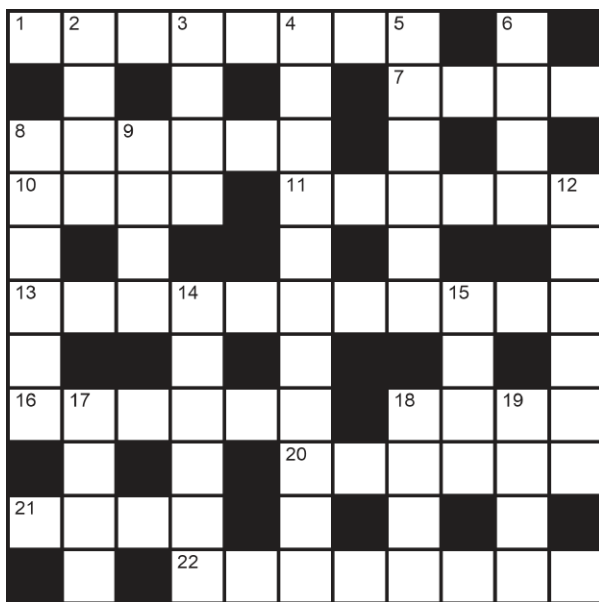
Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

ACROSS

- 1 Loch Ness site
- 7 Off-ramp
- 8 Changing house
- 10 Inviting store sign
- 11 Restored to health
- 13 Winter sleep
- 16 Beard removers
- 18 Gardener's gear
- 20 No longer a teenager
- 21 Bath stopper
- 22 Good-looking, ... man

DOWN

- 2 Farm harvest
- 3 Identical individual
- 4 Kabul's country
- 5 Take off, as a plane
- 6 Abrasive tool
- 8 ___ of pearl
- 9 Action word



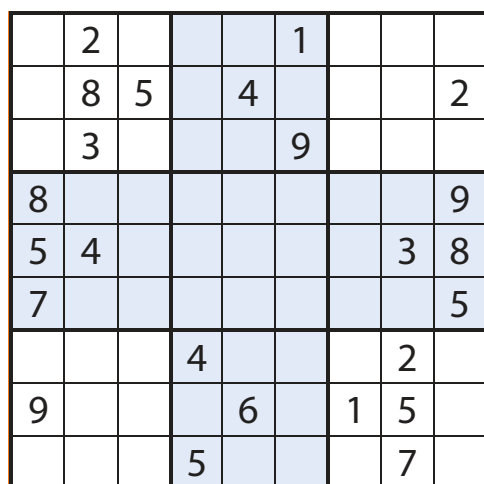
- 12 Shrek's bestie
- 15 Clothes presser
- 18 Coop females
- 14 Adequate for need
- 17 Friend in war
- 19 Flower's stalk

SOLUTIONS PAGE 7

Smile files...



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Ask Y: Peter Meadows answers your questions about God

QUESTION: SURELY IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT I BELIEVE AS LONG AS I DO BELIEVE?



ACTUALLY THERE MAY be no bigger issue than what it is we believe in. That's how it is in life so why should it be any different when it comes to our relationship with God?

For example, imagine you are about to leap from an airplane to make a sponsored parachute jump. You do the training, understand the techniques, and believe the physics of billowing parachutes will not let you down – other than gently.

You are free to choose your own parachute – the one you 'believe' in. There are three options. One has bloodstains on the outside and a tag saying, "Secondhand – one unlucky owner." The next has a note saying, "Packed by the Scouts to raise funds." The third is in the hands of your highly experienced instructor – he packed it himself and has double-checked everything.

Which one are you wearing? I thought so. Because it is what our faith is in that matters – not how much faith we have or even that we have some at all. A small amount of faith in the right parachute is never worth trading for an overwhelming faith in the wrong one. To put it another way, the fact that you believe the train you are on will take you to your hometown is of no value if it's intended destination is a different location altogether. Your belief, however sincere or how many others may share it with you, is not going to change anything, for you or the train.

It's not the fact that we may have a belief, however sincere, but what that belief is in that is the real issue. So assuming you want your belief/faith to lead to you a close relationship with the God who made you, what or who does that faith need to be in?

The answer has to be, "In the one who will get me there." And that must be Jesus. That's the reason He died on the cross – to offer you forgiveness with God and His companionship forever, if you'll trust/believe in Him. But, of course, to believe 'about' and to 'believe in (trust in)' are two very different things.

It's like someone with their hands and face caked with dirt and grime saying, "I believe in soap." Ask what they mean and they say, "Well, I believe soap is a good thing and to be much admired. I believe soap has made a great difference in world history. I believe soap has a lot to offer. I believe soap would get me clean if I were to use it."

In the same way, so far as Jesus is concerned, He does not ask us merely to admire the excellence of His life or the quality of His words. Rather He asks us to actively believe by trusting in His death on the cross to work in our lives – by faith.

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.

Heart of stone softens

For over six decades, Nathen wanted nothing to do with God.

“[My parents] went to church three to four times a year – holidays. I slept through it,” he says. “I was a criminal since five years old.”

As a young adult, Nathen had a successful business career, got married, and had two sons. But selfishness and greed eventually led to a tragic crime.

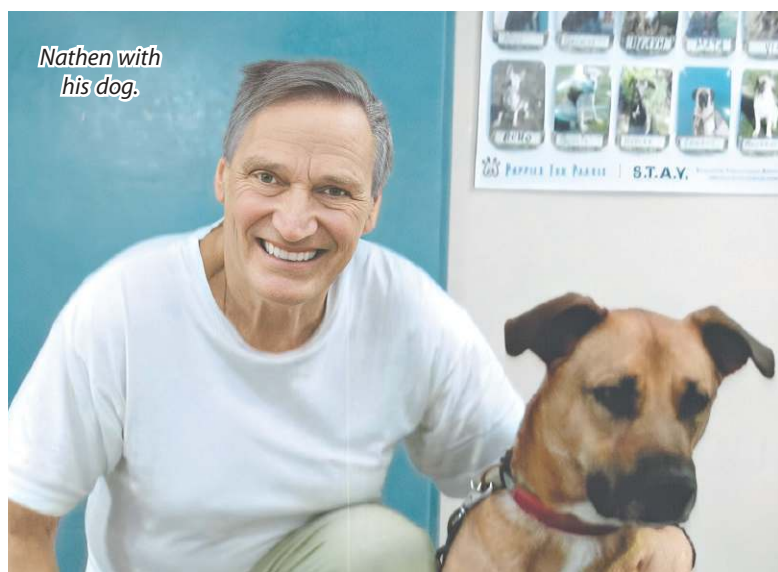
He was sentenced to life in prison for second-degree murder.

Once the doors slammed shut behind him, he made no effort to remain connected to his family but instead immersed himself in prison culture.

“[I] lived the life of a heathen,” he says.

One day, nearly 20 years into his sentence, he suddenly collapsed, falling face down on the concrete floor.

Unconscious and unresponsive, he was thought to be dead until he



abruptly sat up, prompting staff to call an ambulance to take him to a nearby hospital.

The surgeon told him it was a miracle he was alive and informed him he would need double bypass surgery.

“I said not-good words to her,” he remembers, “and then this [chaplain] wants to pray over me. I told him where he could go.”

A week after the surgery, Nathen was cleared to return to the prison. Instead of praising God for healing and saving him, as some might be inspired to do, he took pride in his own strength.

Not long after he returned, a riot placed the entire facility on lockdown for six months.

Two months in, a correctional officer came to Nathen’s cell with a book that had arrived for him. Though he told her he hadn’t ordered anything, she insisted he take it.

The book was a Christian daily devotional (a passage from the Bible along with a short message).

Bored from the extended isolation and with nothing else to read, Nathen decided to give it a chance. He ended up reading the whole thing in just a few days.

“Then the Holy Spirit [the unseen presence of God] tells me He wants me to get a Bible to prove the [book] right,” Nathen says.

“Immediately, I said, ‘Absolutely not. I’m not getting a Bible. I got an image to live up to.’”

After struggling to get any sleep for a week, he knew he had to do something about the Holy Spirit’s prompting.

A friend gave him his extra Bible, and Nathen started reading it regu-

larly. Once the lockdown was over, he began attending church at his facility – first hiding in the corner with the Bible concealed in his jacket, and later, upon request of the chaplain, arriving early to shake hands with everyone who entered the chapel.

Eventually, Nathen could no longer deny the transformation in his heart.

He decided to give his life to Christ. “A calmness came over me, and I just knelt down and said, ‘God, I worked for the devil for 63 years. I’d like to work with You,’” he says.

In his quest to continue learning about God, he signed up for Crossroads upon recommendation from another correspondence study he’d completed.

“I greatly thank God for putting you in my path,” he says.

“[I learned] that God is a loving, caring God. I enjoy the mentors’ letters. I [recommend Crossroads] all the time. I usually carry an application with me to give to whoever I see.”

Looking back over his life, Nathen feels immense gratitude for God’s persistent love and forgiveness despite all his years of denying and rejecting Him.

“Before coming to prison, I had everything, but I was stone dead in the heart,” he says. “God replaced that heart.” Living without God, he says, “was suffering [and] emptiness. But God has [shown] me joy, peace, love, faith, and healing.”

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.

NEVER THE SAME AGAIN

BY FAY FOSTER

IT STARTED AS just another night at work for the shepherds around Bethlehem.

Taking care of sheep was a 24-hours-a-day job, so the shepherds lived out in the open with their sheep. They made, or found, ‘folds’ in which to keep the sheep at night. A fold could be a cave, a circle of stones with some branches or thorns for a roof, or a basic shed.

Each day, the shepherds led their flocks out of the fold to find pasture, then at night, once all the sheep were counted back into the fold, they would lie across the door of the fold to protect their flock.

Thieves, wolves, lions and bears were constant dangers. It is very likely that the shepherds took turns to sleep.

Shepherding was considered an unskilled job, and shepherds were on the lowest levels of society. How amazing then is this account from Luke chapter 2, verses 8-14, of the night when Jesus was born: “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on Earth peace to those on whom His favour rests.’”

Sometimes God does things quietly. But on this occasion, this holy night, He announced the birth of His Son Jesus with a sky full of angels, with singing and light and prophecies.

The second chapter of Luke’s gospel, verse 15, tells us that after the angels had made their stunning announcement, they returned to heaven, leaving the shepherds in the fields.

Having witnessed this spectacular direct-from-heaven announcement, the shepherds were clearly expected to do something about it! Why else would the angel tell them they would know they had the right baby when they saw Him wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger? And how could they NOT respond on such an amazing night?

So the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about” (verse 16).

I suspect that none of the shepherds stayed in the fields that night – hopefully God looked after the sheep on this very special occasion.

We don’t know how long it took the shepherds to walk to Bethlehem, or how they managed to find the right building. Luke just tells us that they “found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger”. And once they had seen the baby for themselves, they couldn’t stop talking about what had happened. Everyone who heard them was amazed at what the shepherds said to them (verses 17-18).

The shepherds returned to their flocks, but they would never be the same again. They had seen and heard things that filled them with a new kind of faith. As they walked back to the fields, they glorified and praised God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Sometimes, when we decide to act of the good news we have heard, God provides such great evidence of His truth that we are overwhelmed with the reality and the goodness of it all. And we will never be the same again.

This article was first published in Salvos Magazine and is used with kind permission.



The thief that stole Christmas

I wrote this poem on Christmas day in jail. I pray that it can lift someone’s spirit. - Tracey*

It was the night before Christmas
And all thru the day
Everyone walked around with an attitude
No one had a word to say.

They all thought, ‘How can we enjoy ourselves?
How can we even think of this day
While we sit here behind these prison walls
And our freedom has been taken away?’

It was a thief who stole Christmas
That left everyone feeling sad and blue
Then someone shouted, ‘Let’s call on the Lord Jesus!
A prayer will help us through.’

So everyone opened up their hearts
Then they called out the Lord’s name
Then, in that very instant
Everyone’s Christmas was not the same.

Everyone received the most precious gift
Way better than any toy.
They received their gifts inside of their hearts
And it filled them all with joy.

That old Satan the devil was angry
And said, ‘That this is not how Christmas is supposed to be.
Everyone should be feeling sad and blue,
And thinking only of me!’

So everyone shouted, ‘Get behind me, Satan!
You will not steal our joy today.
We will not open up our hearts or minds,
We will not hear a word you say!’

Then everyone had the most wonderful Christmas
And nothing but joy filled the air.
Then old Satan slowly left the room,
He saw that no one cared.

This poem was originally published by Prison Fellowship Australia at prisonfellowship.org.au and is used with kind permission.

About Crossroads

The Crossroads Prison Ministries mentorship program connects you with mentors who help you study the Bible.

Mentors write to you, answer your questions, share stories from their own lives, help you see how God is speaking to you through His Word and encourage you to continue to grow in your faith.

Through the mentorship program, Crossroads offers more than one dozen different correspondence Bible study courses that each contain up to 14 lessons.

Each course is designed to help you learn more about God and how to follow Him.

If you are interested in joining the program, please fill out the attached application form and mail it to us today!



Name: _____
First Last

ID #: _____

Date of Birth: MM DD YYYY Earliest Release Date: MM DD YYYY

Gender: _____ Complete Mailing Address: _____

Referred by: **CHAL** Institution Housing

Prefiero el curso en español. Street or PO Box

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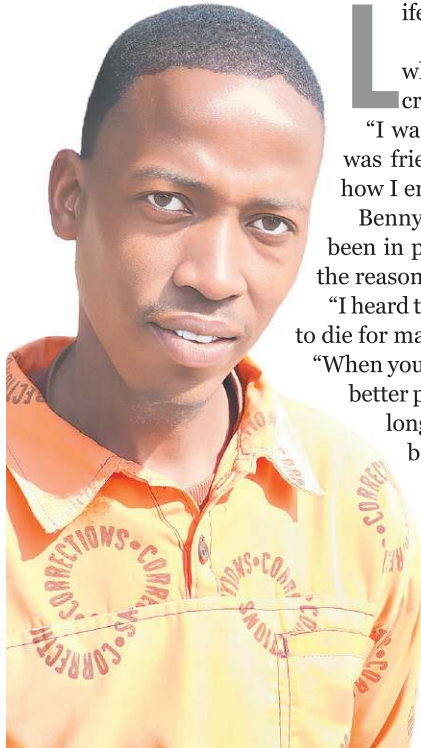
STUDENT COMMITMENT

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

Struggle street



Benny Psholofelo

Life was always a struggle for 28-year-old Benny Psholofelo. He started out as a good kid, but says everything changed when both his parents died. It was then that he got into a crime in his hometown of South Africa.

“I was always struggling in life,” he tells Challenge News. “I was friends with bad guys,” he tells *Challenge News*. “That’s how I ended up in jail.”

Benny is serving time for taking his cousin’s laptop and has been in prison since September 2022 – and that has given him the reason to change his life.

“I heard the good news about God (that Jesus Christ came to Earth to die for mankind’s sins) in prison,” he shares.

“When you are in prison you must go to church so that you can be a better person. I started to pray. My friends encouraged me for so long to give my life to God when I was in prison. I decided to become a Christian because I wanted to change my life.”

He says he is certainly very different since becoming a Christian. “I was struggling before I met Jesus Christ.

“The best part about being a Christian is that God is always there. We should pray to Jesus and read the Bible and go to church.”

Benny’s favourite verse is John 6:13, which tells how Jesus miraculously fed a crowd of 5000 with only five loaves of bread and two fish – “So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.” •

I found freedom in prison

Trademore Sithole is not ashamed to say he struggled with many bad habits.

He tells Challenge News, “I was addicted to sexual immorality, alcohol and drugs. I was angry, proud and a liar. I had jealousy and unforgiveness in me.”

Trademore, 28, says he grew up in a Christian family but never took God seriously though his grandmother tried her best to teach him.

In 2018, he moved to South Africa. “I continued to live my own life there and I landed up in prison.

I was in prison for three years.”

In 2017, while he was still in jail, Trademore finally turned in earnest to God.

“I started to seek His

face and that’s when I heard His voice calling me into ministry, to preach the Gospel (the good news of Jesus Christ).

“The life in prison was not good at all, but I really saw the hand of God move.”

He shares that it took about four years after first committing his life to Christ for him to truly understand the call on his life.

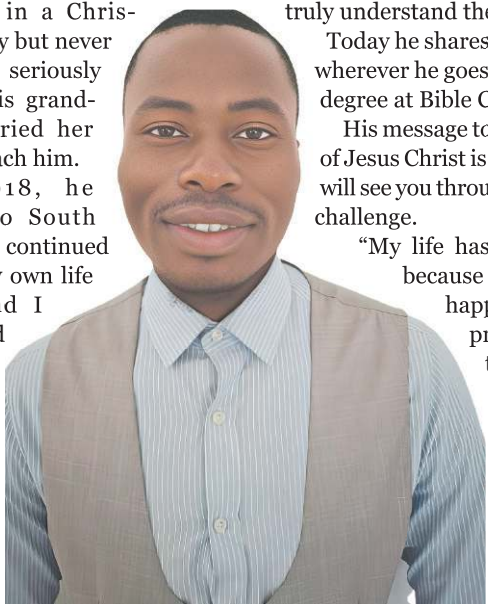
Today he shares the truth about Jesus wherever he goes and is completing his degree at Bible College.

His message to others is that the love of Jesus Christ is unconditional and He will see you through every hardship and challenge.

“My life has changed completely because of Him and I am so happy. I thank God for the privilege of being able to preach His Gospel.

It has not been easy and I thank Him for his grace and mercy.

“God has a better plan for our lives. He knows best.” •



Trademore Sithole

The truth about hypocrisy

IT’S A QUESTION many ask, often out of disappointment or deep wounds caused by people who claimed to follow Jesus but didn’t reflect His character.

The word “hypocrite” means someone who pretends to be something they are not. Sadly, many who call themselves Christians have acted in ways that contradict Christ’s teachings – some even causing harm. So why be part of a group that often fails its own standards?

Let’s start here: becoming a Christian isn’t about following other Christians. It’s about following Christ.

Christianity, at its core, isn’t about perfect people – it’s about a perfect God reaching out to broken people. Jesus acknowledged there would be hypocrites among His followers. Some of His strongest rebukes were directed at religious leaders who said one thing but lived another. He called out their pride, judgment, and lack of compassion. Jesus didn’t approve of hypocrisy – He exposed it.

That alone tells us something important: Jesus isn’t asking you to follow the crowd. He invites you to know Him personally.

If hypocrisy offends you, you’re not alone – it offends God, too. That longing for authenticity and integrity is a reflection of God’s own heart. Your frustration with hypocrisy may not be a reason to reject faith – it might actually mean you’re closer to God’s truth than you think.

If Christianity isn’t about people pretending

to be good, what is it about? It’s about grace.

Christianity isn’t a club for the morally superior – it’s a hospital for the spiritually sick.

Jesus came for the messed up, the ashamed, the lost, the confused, and yes, even the hypocrites.

Every real Christian begins their journey by admitting they aren’t good enough. That’s the point. We don’t earn our way to God – we receive His mercy.

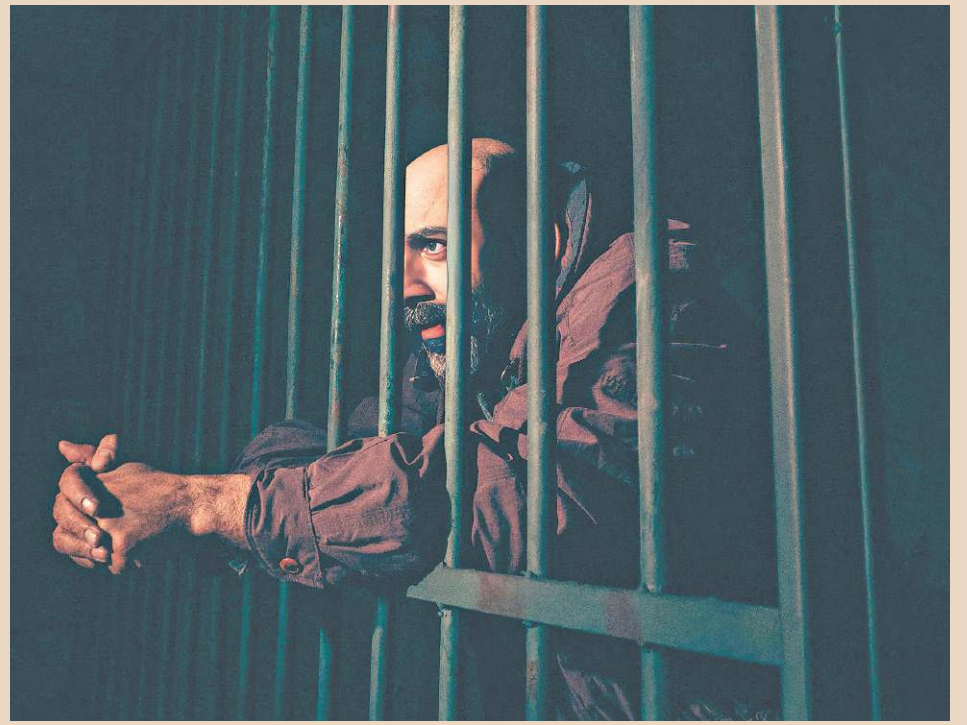
This doesn’t excuse the failures of those who claim to follow Jesus. Christians are called to live differently, and when they don’t, it causes damage. Some walk away from faith because of what they’ve seen or experienced. If that’s your story, I’m sorry. But I hope you won’t judge Jesus by those who fail to live like Him.

In Jesus you’ll find a Saviour who lived without hypocrisy, loved without limits, and gave His life for people who didn’t deserve it.

So why become a Christian? Not because other Christians are perfect. They’re not. Not because you’re trying to look like you have it all together. You don’t need to.

Become a Christian because you’ve encountered the truth of Jesus – the One who sees your flaws and still loves you. The One who offers forgiveness and new life. The One who welcomes even the most broken person and says, “You belong.”

Yes, Christians can be hypocrites. But Jesus never was. And He’s the one worth following. •



STOCK PHOTO

FREEDOM WITHIN

BY SARI PALOMÄKI

Arif grew up in a radical Muslim family and ended up in prison for his actions. In solitary confinement, he saw a strange revelation that led him to reflect on his own faith and life.

Arif’s Muslim family was deeply devoted to their faith. His grandfather translated the Qu’ran from Arabic to Indonesian and was one of the founders of the radical Muslim Brotherhood.

His father became an imam who, along with his comrades, went to fight communism. Arif followed in his father’s footsteps and also became an imam and a fighter.

He joined a student movement that violently opposed the government, military rule, and communism. To finance their activities, they sold drugs and the money from this was used to make bombs. Arif was one of the drug dealers. After the police caught him, he was sent to prison.

A strange encounter

In prison, Arif was placed in solitary confinement. For a month he languished in a tiny cell, not seeing much sunlight or anything else. To ensure that prisoners did not hang themselves, they were only allowed to clothe themselves in their underwear.

After two weeks in the cell, he woke at 2am; a man entered the cell and said to him, “Follow Me and you will find freedom.” Arif sat down against the wall and squinted.

Suddenly, there was no one in the cell, but the door was open.

To his surprise, he stepped out and saw the guard outside, fast asleep. Arif woke him up, and the man was horrified, thinking he had forgotten to lock the door.

Together they lit cigarettes, and Arif wondered who had come into his cell and left the door open. After a month, he was transferred to a large prison, where Arif took his place as imam in the prison mosque.

“My God does not die on the cross”

One day, Arif was sitting in front of the mosque with some of his friends. Suddenly, the same man who had appeared to Arif in solitary confinement came to him and said again, “Follow Me and you will find freedom.”

Then the man disappeared. Arif asked his friends who the man was. His friends wondered who Arif was talking about. They had not seen anyone.

Arif was really confused and feared that he was going mad. He went to the prison library and looked for all the books on mental health. He was frightened, confused and did not know what to do.

The following week, a friend took Arif to see one of the members of the Bali Nine, Andrew Chan, who was facing the death penalty for drug trafficking.

Andrew had met Jesus in prison and had become a Christian leader in the prison church. Arif told him about the man he had met. Andrew then told Arif that he had met Jesus.

Arif became furious and shouted that Andrew was talking rubbish. He also insisted that Islam was the only true religion and that nothing could compare to it.

“Christians believe that Jesus is God, but He couldn’t even save Himself, He died on the cross. My God doesn’t die on the cross,” Arif snarled. Andrew looked at him silently and said, “Say what you will, but you have met Jesus.”

Arif returned to the mosque indignantly. He began to read everything about Jesus written in the Qu’ran and was driven to deep reflection. He struggled with the matter for months and finally ended up leaving his position as imam of the mosque.

Blasphemy charge

In his search for the truth, he returned again and again to talk to Andrew and finally became convinced that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Andrew taught him to pray, and Arif received his first Bible.

His disciples at the mosque wondered why he had stopped being an imam. One day, one of the Muslim prisoners followed Arif and saw him go to visit Andrew. He saw Andrew lay his

hands on Arif and pray for him.

When Arif returned to his cell, 11 men were waiting for him, angry. They beat him, badly; only the intervention of Arif’s good friend saved him from death.

The prison authorities were called and they interrogated Arif about his conversion to Christianity. Arif was then charged with blasphemy.

He was supposed to be released the following month, but instead, he was tried, and his prison sentence was extended by a year. Arif says it was the best time of his life.

During that year, he studied the Bible intensively with Andrew. He says his mentor, the former drug trafficker, converted to Christianity while in prison and had baptised 200 men in prison.

A call to serve

After his release from prison, Arif’s family tried to kill him. He wondered if he should share the truth about Jesus [the Gospel] to Muslims because it was so dangerous. Would it be better to just let them die in their sins?

Then Arif had a wonderful dream in which Jesus took him over mountains and valleys that were full of people.

“All these are for you,” Jesus said. God led Arif to an island called Sulawesi, where he began to share the Gospel with the Muslim community.

At first, they resisted and even called the police. But gradually their trust grew. He began to teach the villagers one by one, and after three months, 70 people had given their lives to the Lord. The work continued and soon there were 700 converts. Arif has been doing this work for 10 years and says that he baptises about 100 new Christians each year. •

This story was originally published by Voice of the Martyrs Australia at vom.com.au and is used with kind permission.

A bond that won't break

BY LOU HAVILAND (ABRIDGED)

Ray can never forget the moment he felt profound betrayal.

Late one night, when he was 14, Ray heard his mother cry for help. He grabbed a bat and ran to her room. He kicked the door in to find her being assaulted by her partner.

To defend himself and his mother, Ray repeatedly struck her assailant. Weeks later, he was arrested and charged with attempted murder and placed in a juvenile residential facility. At that time, he learned his mother had taken back her partner, despite the assault, with little concern for what happened to Ray.

"I had so much hate and anger against him and towards God for allowing this to happen," Ray recalls.

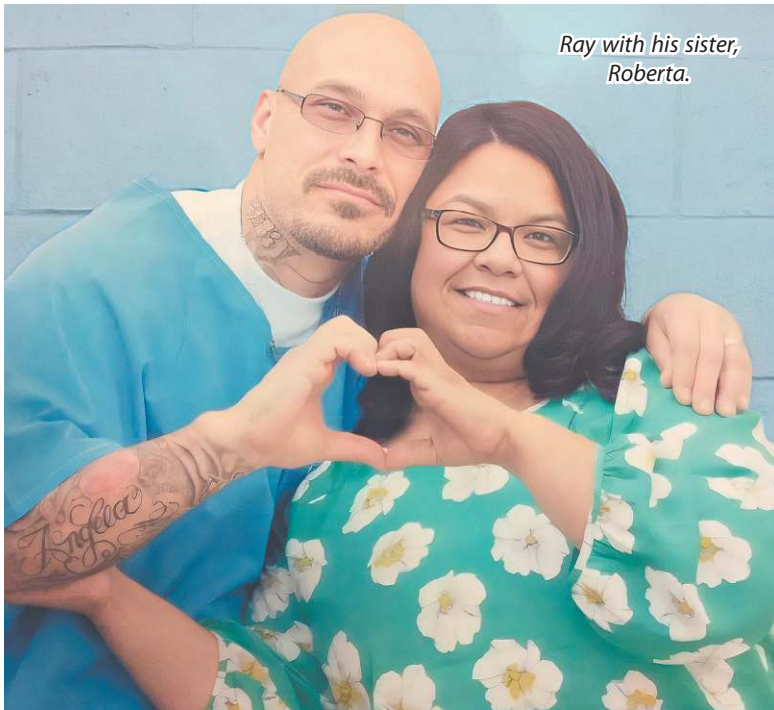
"I felt so betrayed. I felt useless. I felt like I was a mistake. From that point on, I knew that I was going to live for me.

"I gave my life to gangs. I gave my life to drugs. I did just a little over five years in the Youth Authority."

This experience, as well as physical abuse Ray suffered at the age of 10 from his stepfather, left him unable to trust anyone. It sealed Ray's decision to face life on his own.

In his late teens, Ray became a father to his son, Ray Jr. But instead of taking responsibility for his son, he took part in the gang life.

He sought a form of respect and acknowledgment that he had lacked



Ray with his sister, Roberta.

at home.

But then he participated in a robbery that resulted in a man's death.

Ray would go on to spend nearly 30 years in prison for his involvement in the crime.

When Ray looks back on his incarceration, he sees God reaching out to him. He can see God's presence in the form of a corrections officer praying for him and of a prison staff person who placed tracts about God's love in his cell.

But it wasn't until one morning, when Ray was 35, that he reached back out to God. He had walled himself off for so long.

Through all his painful trauma, he had never let himself cry. Not when he learned of the deaths of five uncles, all due to drugs.

Not when his grandmother died or when one of his sisters died.

But one morning he woke up feeling cold and bleak. And he did something he had never done: he prayed.

"I felt the heaviness and ugliness like something was going to happen, like I was going to die that day," he recalls. "I tried to talk to God for the first time in my life."

Ray prayed for hours. At first, his words felt empty, as though he had been speaking into the air. As he went on, something in him opened up, and he felt heard,

seen, and loved by God.

"Deep inside my spirit, I begin to cry," he says. "God, are You there? God, I'm scared. God, I don't know what to do." I was crying and crying. God showed up when I was in that place in the darkness. I [had] kept running from the truth that there was a God. From that point on, I began to trust in God."

He began to find community in the incarcerated church and in Bible study.

During Ray's first years in prison, he was invited by the facility's staff to take part in Prison Fellowship Angel Tree.

Angel Tree enables incarcerated men and women to provide their

children with the Gospel message, as well as a Christmas gift and handwritten note in their name, all through a local church.

At first, Ray was not interested, but when he realized Angel Tree would help him maintain his close connection with his three-year-old son, he signed him up.

"I felt complete," Ray recalls. "I felt like even behind bars, I can still be a dad."

During Ray's incarceration, Ray's younger sister Roberta was granted custody of his son, raising him with the same affection and discipline as one of her own children.

Ray had taken steps to draw closer to God, but he knew something was holding him back from growing further in his faith. He knew something else had to give.

"There was still unforgiveness in my heart," Ray says.

"I thought if I walked away from the gangs, getting high, and drugs, then all my problems are going to leave... [God] was bringing me to a place where I couldn't stand reading the Word no more because there was unforgiveness, I couldn't stand being amongst people that were living right and who were talking about forgiveness, because there was unforgiveness inside my heart."

Ray knew God wanted him to begin the work of forgiveness. During a time of ministry in prison, Ray and other prisoners were encouraged to write on pieces of paper the names

of those people in their lives they needed to forgive. The papers were placed in a bowl and dissolved in the water.

"[The pastor said], 'Forgive and be set free.' As I began to forgive my mom, as I began to forgive my dad, as I began to forgive my uncles for leading me down the path, and my stepdad, more peace ushered in," he recalls. "And I began to find power, joy, direction, identity, love, and hope."

Forgiving others was a step of obedience Ray had to take, but accepting responsibility for the actions that brought him to prison was another.

When he became sick with valley fever in prison, requiring hospitalization, Ray realized he could not rely on anyone other than God. During his sickness, he thought for the first time about his victim and what they had gone through. He knew God had forgiven him and asked God to help him forgive himself.

Ray began to participate more in ministry and study the Word of God.

"My hate and unforgiveness were gone," he says. "God began to use me. I began to teach and share my life, and as I did, peace resided in me."

Roberta helped Ray in his parole process, and he was released in March 2023. The siblings try to get together whenever their busy schedules allow.

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

“My hate and unforgiveness were gone.”



The fish symbol – what does it mean?

BY WIL POUNDS

YOU see the symbol of the fish all the time on the rear of cars, trucks, briefcases, lapel pins, entrances to houses, logos on businesses, etc. Sometimes the symbol contains five Greek letters, IXOUS. It is pronounced "ichthus." What does the fish represent?

Because of intense persecution of believers in the early church, when two complete strangers met they would enter into a conversation, and after a few minutes one of them would take his foot and draw an arch on the ground. It would be the top or bottom half of the fish symbol. If the other person were a Christian, he would take his foot or finger and complete the other half of the symbol of the fish.

Then the other person would put the first of five Greek letters inside the fish. After writing the letter "I," the other person would write "X," and then the other person "O" and vice versa until the two had written the word "IXOUS" inside the fish symbol. The Greek word "IXOUS" means "fish," and is the normal word for fish in the Gospels.

However, the early Christians gave the word for "fish" an even greater meaning. It became the acronym for four of the great truths of Christianity.

I represents Iesous, which is the Greek word for "Jesus." An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and told him that his fiancée Mary, "will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The Hebrew form of His name was Jehoshua, meaning "Yahweh saves," "Jehovah saves." He was named after His Father in heaven. Jehovah, Jesus will save His people from their sins.

X stands for Xristos, meaning "Christ." The word means "anointed." Jesus is God's "Anointed One." "Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "Messiah." "He is Christ the Lord," the angels said to the shepherds after Jesus was born (Luke 2:11). Peter declared, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16).

O stands for Theos which is translated "God." Jesus the Messiah is God.

U represents Uios translated "Son." Jesus is "the Son of God." "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:1-3). The angel told Mary the only way to account for her pregnancy was the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).



STOCK PHOTO

S stands for Soter, meaning "Saviour." "Today in the city of David there has been born for you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). He is the promised "Saviour of the world" (John 4:42). The idea is a deliverance, saving from disaster, rescue from a hopeless situation, breaking the chains of bondage.

Indeed, the Bible tells us, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is for everyone who will "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).

The next time you see the sign of the fish and the letters IXOUS remember that Jesus is the Christ, the very Son of God, and our Saviour. Jesus is the perfect man, incarnate of God among men, fully human and fully God. He is the Christ, the Anointed One of God, the Messiah. He is the unique, only begotten, eternal Son of God.

There are children by adoption into God's kingdom, but no one like the Son of God. He is our Saviour who voluntarily went to the cross and died in our place to save us from our sins.

He gives us eternal life through the power of His shed blood. Have you put your trust in Him to save you for all eternity?

This article was first published on abideinchrist.com and is used with kind permission.

Hope in your hands

New app offers a different kind of connection behind bars

THERE'S A NEW app showing up on prison tablets across the country, and it's not about games, movies, or news. It's called Pando, and it was created especially for people in prison – to explore faith, find encouragement, and hear stories from others who've faced hard times and found a way forward.

Pando was launched in 2021 by a group called God Behind Bars. Since then, it's quietly spread to over 180,000 tablets in more than 100 facilities across the U.S.

The app is full of powerful content – like uplifting music, honest stories, and messages about faith and second chances. You can watch sermons, listen to podcasts, read the Bible, or even check out the hit series The Chosen, all from your tablet. It's designed to meet you where you are, no matter your past or what you believe right now.

It's free, and it doesn't require internet access.

Whether you've never set foot in a church or you're just looking for something real, Pando is available 24/7.

A lot of the content deals with real struggles – addiction, anger, regret, purpose – and how people are working through them. Some are pastors. Others are former inmates. All of them get it.

If it's already on your tablet, open it up. If not, ask your facility if it's available. Hope might be one tap away.



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 7:31-37, 8:1-17

INTRODUCTION

WE HAVE BEEN reading about the very busy lives that Jesus and His disciples lived during the height of Christ's ministry. They are meeting people of all kinds, answering questions and healing the sick.

It is obvious that where the Lord Jesus is, there is action. Sometimes opposition, sometimes popularity that takes up all their time. But what this Gospel of Mark does, is to show us that He is unique.

How can anyone be compared to Jesus? No one else has shown the amazing powers that we are hearing about. We are about to see more evidence of His divine identity. He is man, but much more than man.

Ch 7, verses 31, 32 Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought a man to Him who was deaf and who could hardly talk, and they begged Him to place His hand on the man.

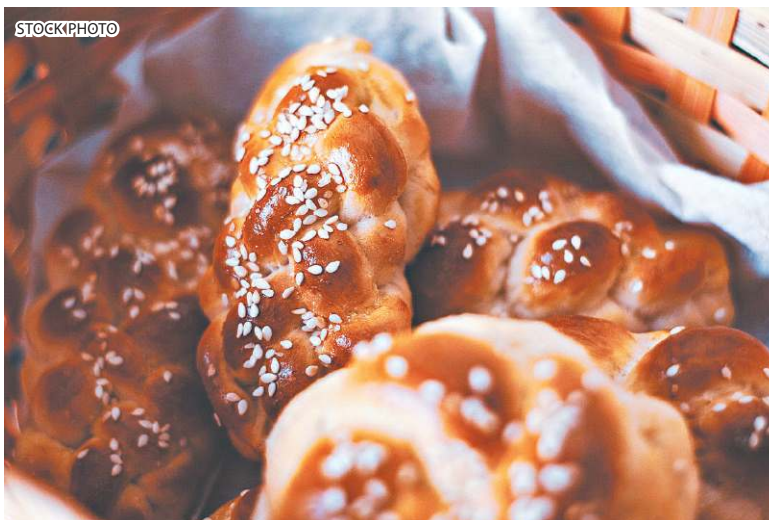
Jesus had been in places north of Israel and was now returning to more familiar areas. The Decapolis was a circle of 10 towns. In no time people are coming to Him with their needs. In this case, they brought a poor soul who was deaf and dumb.

Verses 33-36 After He took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then He spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him "Ephphatha" (which means, "Be opened!") At this, the man's ears were opened his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone, but the more He did so, the more they kept talking about it.

This is another miracle of Jesus showing His mercy for the needy. The man was completely healed and the people so amazed they wanted to talk about it. The Lord's warning to them not to talk about it was in order to keep the crowds from growing and overwhelming Him and His disciples.

Verse 37 People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak."

There was a great deal of excitement about what Jesus did, but many people missed the real



importance of what they saw. They didn't grasp just how great Jesus was. If they had, they would have worshipped Him. Curiosity was all that moved them. We should be careful not to be the same.

Ch 8: Verses 1-3 During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to Him and said: "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."

No doubt people were drawn to the presence of Jesus. So much so that they were doing without their daily food – something people will not usually do. But Jesus cares about them and wishes to do them good.

Verses 4, 5 His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?" "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked them. "Seven," they replied.

Readers will remember that in chapter six there is the record of Jesus feeding 5,000 people. Here is a separate occasion with 4,000. We

know they are not the same event as later on, Jesus mentions both occasions as separate. Just why the disciples were slow to recognize the Lord's ability to handle the situation we don't know.

Verses 6-10 He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When He had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, He broke them and gave them to His disciples to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; He gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About 4,000 men were present. And having sent them away, He got into the boat with His disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.

The way this happened is certainly similar to the earlier event of feeding the 5,000, but the fact that the figures are quoted, the 4,000 and the seven loaves, shows that the writer wants to make clear that this kind of miracle occurred twice. It must have had a profound effect.

Verses 11-13 The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test Him, they asked Him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it." Then He left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.

These leaders of the people, the Pharisees, were probably not present when some of these miracles occurred. But they surely heard about Jesus' reputation. They were envious of Him and did all they could to discredit him. Now they ask for a special sign to convince them that Jesus was a genuine prophet of God. Jesus sighed out of impatience with them as the request was so unnecessary. His whole record was a sign. His words, His actions, all spoke of His claim that He came from God. The "other side" is the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

Verses 14-16 The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread."

They missed the point. The Lord was talking about the teaching of the Pharisees and Herod. As far as actual bread was concerned, how easily the loaf they had could be multiplied.

Verse 17 Aware of their discussion Jesus asked them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?"

Jesus went on to remind them of the two occasions that He fed a crowd and how much extra food was left over. He was pointing out that there was no room for unbelief; all was in front of them. They ought to be able to see that nothing was impossible with Jesus.

CONCLUSION

This record was written for people like us. We must face the questions and be honest with ourselves and God. If Jesus shows Himself to be the Son of God as He claimed, we need to respond. He came to save us. He is addressing us as He speaks. We either believe and yield to His words, opening our hearts to Him, or we harden our hearts and thus condemn ourselves to the darkness of unbelief. What a challenge that is!

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." (Acts 16:31) ●

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HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

Anyone can gain the eternal life offered through Jesus Christ

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

| | | |
|---------------------------------|--|----------------|
| OUR PROBLEM: | Separation from God "Everyone has sinned. Nobody is good enough because God's standards are perfect" (Romans 3:23) | ADMIT |
| GOD'S REMEDY / SOLUTION: | Jesus died on the cross "God demonstrates His own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8) | BELIEVE |
| OUR RESPONSE: | Trust Jesus by receiving Him "To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12) | COMMIT |

Here is an example of how you can pray.

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

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

What now?

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

AS A NEXT STEP: Please send me: Bible Some 'starting off' literature Information on a helpful church

I have prayed the prayer [ABOVE]

* Please check and write clearly *

Name _____ Age _____

Address _____

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

All overseas enquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

TRUE FRIENDSHIP

BY CAROL ROUND

IN HIS BOOK, *The Pleasure of His Company: A Journey to Intimate Friendship with God*, author and pastor Dutch Sheets opens Chapter 15 with the following statement:

"I called myself a Christian for 17 years before I discovered I could have a truly personal relationship with God. Prior to this, I certainly knew Him as God and I definitely knew Him as my Savior. I didn't, however, know Him as my Father, and walking with Him as a friend wasn't even in the field of view."

I can relate to Sheets' statement, except I was in my mid-40s. It took a life-changing situation to lead me to the foot of the cross. Yes, I knew of God but didn't know Him personally, let alone have a friendship with Him.

Having a friendship with God

I attended church faithfully until my early 20s. I drifted away but returned in my early 30s. Even then, I didn't understand I could have an intimate relationship with Him. At that time, God was always painted as a distant being, someone to fear, judge, and punish me for my sins.

As a child, I felt a pull from God when I was outdoors. Spending time in His creation helped me to understand a different side of the Lord. He was a Creator God. I found joy and contentment when I was in His presence.

But having a friendship with God never crossed my mind. Even in my childhood, though, God was reaching out to me. 1 John 4:19 says, "We love because he first loved us."

What does friendship mean?

What does the word, friendship, imply? First, friendships take time to develop. Like Sheets, I "have many acquaintances but very few people I call my friends."

Ironically, Facebook changed the definition of friendships. For some of us, our list of friends grew to include people we've never met. Many are friends of friends. As a writer, my "friends" list on the social media



AI-generated image

platform has grown to include family members, former students, teaching friends, other writers, and church family. Of the nearly 5,000 on my list, most are acquaintances.

However, I have a few close friendships. I enjoy spending quality time with those friends and sharing life's experiences. We trust each other, have mutual interests, and share our hopes, dreams, and fears.

Knowing God as a friend

In Genesis, we read about Adam and Eve's relationship with God. They spent time together as friends in the garden. Life was good. Then, Satan entered the picture. After the couple's fall from grace, they were dismissed from the garden and estranged from their Creator.

But Romans 5:10 reminds us that our friendship with God was restored when Jesus died for our sins. This verse invites us to consider how much God loves us.

Just as we spend time with our close friends, being God's friend requires us to spend quality time with Him, being honest and trusting Him with our deepest hurts and fears, and sharing our joys and dreams. Let's not forget we have a divine friend who walks beside us each day, guiding and loving us unconditionally.

"For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of His Son while we were still His enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of His Son" (Romans 5:10). ●



Darryl Strawberry of the New York Mets bats against the Pittsburgh Pirates during a Major League Baseball game at Three Rivers Stadium in 1987 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Photo by George Gojkovich/Getty Images)

A LIFE OR DEATH CALL

Throughout his 17-year-career, Darryl Strawberry has made eight consecutive All-Star game appearances and captured four World Series championships.

Yet, the Mets and Yankees star was suspended three times throughout his career which was overshadowed by controversies, drugs and incarceration. Growing up in a home that was filled with abuse and violence, the former athlete struggled with anger and brokenness.

“My early years were a real struggle because I grew up in a very broken, dysfunctional home,” he tells the *Jesus Calling Podcast*.

“My dad was a raging alcoholic and he would come home night after night, drinking and disturbing the whole house and waking us up in the middle of the night.” One night, his father had come home drunk.

“My older brother Michael said, ‘Why don’t you just get out of here and leave us alone?’ And [my father] actually pulled out a shotgun and said he was going to kill the whole family at that particular time.”

Darryl’s older brother grabbed a butcher’s knife while Darryl got hold of a frying pan. Though only 15 and 14 at that time, Darryl and his brother were determined to protect their mother. “And had it not been for Mom getting us out of that house that night, it would have been a tragedy in my life,” he recounts.

After that day, his parents divorced and his mother was left alone to raise

five children. Though peace had finally come to the household, the anger and brokenness from growing up with abuse had remained. Baseball was an outlet that he could use to channel his anger and hurt. His talent got noticed and he was drafted as the first pick into the New York Mets in 1980. That was the beginning of his life as a star baseball player.

But despite his achievements, Darryl could not escape from the pain from his childhood. Eventually, the pressure to do well drove him towards alcohol and drugs.

“I did everything to make me feel good,” says Darryl in an interview with *CBN News*.

“I drank alcohol, took amphetamines. Later down the line, I got introduced heavily into cocaine, which was my outlet and my escape. That was the biggest escape for me. When I found that, I can escape away from everybody and everything.” His struggle with addiction soon led to his suspension from baseball. Darryl’s career was hitting rock bottom.

“My mom passed away. I wasn’t going to play any more baseball, because I had been suspended from the league for drugs. I went through that battle, and I just kind of like had had enough.”

It was at this point when he got invited to a convention by evangelist Morris Cerullo. This was his first encounter with God.

“That weekend, all I did was cry when I heard him

up there preaching,” he says.

Darryl’s career got back on track after he got out of rehab. He was asked to play for the Yankees in New York and he helped his team win the ‘96 and ‘98 World Series championships. He also married his second wife, Charisse. However, his drug habit resurfaced which affected his marriage.

Things took a turn for the worse when Darryl was diagnosed with colon cancer. Though he was miraculously back on the field again after six months of treatment, he got arrested for soliciting a prostitute and drug possession. Once again, his life had hit rock bottom. Over the next few years, Darryl lost everything, including his career and his marriage.

It was at a drug convention centre where he met Tracy, whose influence as a Christian had encouraged Darryl to turn to God once again.

“I just had to surrender. I had to get with God myself. I had to separate myself from everything and everybody. God was calling me, and it was either I was going to answer this call or I was going to die.”

Darryl made the decision to come back to God. In 2006, Darryl and Tracy got married and they founded the Darryl Strawberry Foundation, which is dedicated to children and adults with autism.

Though Tracy had a direct influence on his faith journey, Darryl also credits his late mother. Darryl and his siblings had found their mother’s journal under the bed where she wrote prayers for all five of her children to be saved.

“Her faith is probably why I am who I am today, where I sit today,” says Darryl. “Because her prayers were, ‘God, knock him off his throne, save him. I don’t care what you do. I’m not concerned about his celebrity lifestyle, his fame, and his fortune. Do what only You can do: save him.’” Since rededicating his

life to God, Darryl has been used in powerful ways to reach out to the rest of his family – including his estranged father. “God... speaks to me: ‘How dare you not forgive him when I forgave you.’”

“I asked my father to forgive me, and he did. A tear came out of his eye and he said, ‘Yes.’ And I just lost it. I just laid in his lap and cried so hard.”

Darryl led his father in a prayer of

repentance and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord.

Reflecting on his faith journey, Darryl says that, “I had every earthly thing. I had money, I had fame, fortune, women, whatever it was. But at the end of the day, I’m so glad that He found me where I was in a pit and brought me to a pulpit.”

Today, Darryl is an ordained preacher, sharing the hope of Jesus Christ.

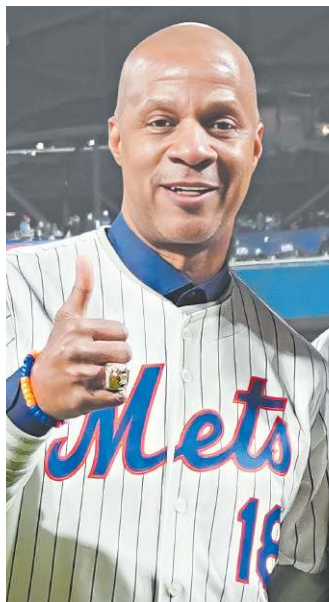
Running the race that lasts

IN SPORT, EVERY athlete trains hard for one goal – to win. They discipline their body, push through pain, and stay focused, all for a prize that eventually fades. A trophy gathers dust, a medal tarnishes, and the glory of victory quickly passes. But the Bible tells us there is another race with a prize that never fades.

The apostle Paul wrote, “Don’t you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize. Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown.” (1 Corinthians 9:24–25).

Life can feel like being stuck on the sidelines, especially in prison. But God has not counted you out. In Christ, you are invited to step onto the track and begin a race of faith – one marked not by perfect performance but by trusting Jesus.

Through His death and resurrection, Jesus offers forgiveness, freedom, and eternal life. That is the true victory. You don’t have to stay trapped by the past. In Him, you can start running today – and finish strong with a crown that never fades.



Darryl in October 2024. (Photo by Daniel Shirey/MLB Photos via Getty Images)

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