

"Son, do you understand that when you leave prison you will be in a box?" the judge told me as I plead to three life sentences plus an additional 80 years in 2009. This was the result of a crime spree of violence and robbery in 2006. At the age of 26 my life was over on the outside of Prison Walls. At this point I had been locked up for three years in the Greenville County Detention Center, since I was 23. So the sentence I received wasn't a shock to me. Prison was already familiar because of a youthful offender sentence I served exactly one year (to the day) prior to the day I was arrested.

My life before prison was out of control to say the least. I had been smoking cigarettes since I was 9, smoking and selling bud since I was 15, at 16 I was carrying weapons, and at 18 I started selling cocaine and developed the habit of snorting powder. I was always a leader so as I was growing up I led many people down the wrong path. That is the short version of many war stories that have been told in prison and on the streets. Shameful acts that tear us away from society and our family are applauded and glorified in prison cells and on prison yards.

My life in prison was a different location for the same habits, ways, and schemes that I had been developing for years. My mentality was that I had no reason to be anything other than a gangster. In prison, my crime spree continued in a different form. I was carrying weapons, selling drugs, and doing anything necessary to make the almighty dollar. My time in prison is full of war stories of knife fights and the no-nonsense reputation I worked hard to build. I lived like I had no reason to live. My philosophy was that if I got killed my sentence and pain would be over, if I lost a battle and went to the hospital there was an opportunity to take a ride, or if I won, my reputation was built up and solidified. I would tell you that it was win-win for me. And what could the police do to me? At the end of the day I'm not free no matter where they put me. The only hope I could see was to embrace my identity as a convict and have as much control as possible of the world I had ended up in.

In 2016 I was introduced to a man who God used to lead me to His kingdom. I saw that he was a strong man of God instead of what I considered weak men running from something. By the grace of God I ended up in the same dorm with him after a short lock up stay. At this point I was broken and I couldn't see any purpose for my life. Deep depression gripped my mind and wrung my soul of any resemblance of hope. David befriended me and learned what my interests were, he started speaking into my life, and he was praying for me.

David was a chapel worker. He told me that there was a man coming to teach a class for creative writing. He also told me about a program that would allow me to spend a real day with my daughter. He knew these programs would appeal to me because he had built a relationship with me. When I started to go to the chapel and take part in these different classes I met more solid men of God. These men were praying for me and speaking truth into my life. I started reading the Bible. I had an issue with Jesus being man and God. I couldn't wrap my mind around his divinity.

A brother that was in Malachi dad's program with me introduced me to Lee Strobel's, *The Case for Christ*. That helped with my doubts and allowed me to see the truth of who Jesus is. Shortly after that I read 2nd Corinthians, chapters 5 and 6 and it really opened my heart and showed me that through Christ I can be a new creation no matter what I have done. I cried my eyes out as I read the Apostles words to the Corinthian Church. "Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation" (2nd Corinthians 6:2).

As I prepared myself for the day with my daughter, I was getting closer and closer to God by reading His Word and getting involved in as many Bible classes that I could pack into my days. I remember going to property control to pick up the shoes I purchased for the big event. The officer handed me my shoes and told me to hold on for a minute because she had something else for me. When I saw what she had in her hand I got chill bumps all over my body. It was a leather-bound journal devotional called *God's Calling*, that my family gave me while I was in the county jail. I misplaced it years before I walked away from property control on a cloud. God's timing is perfect.

The day with my daughter arrived and God showed me his love through my beautiful 12 year old little girl. It was an amazing day and all of the reunions taking place around me were overwhelming. Ashton and I took a picture together that day. God was restoring one relationship in my life and setting the stage for a new one. I sent the picture of Ashton and I to a long time friend of mine. When she saw the picture of us she saw something different than what she knew of me.

Rose Anna had just come out of a bad relationship that she'd been in for years. I was able to talk to her and at the end of our conversation I told her I would be praying for her. That was different than all of the corny lines and compliments that she expected to hear from me. She could tell something was different and we stayed in as close contact as we could. She was living in Colorado at the time. Once again God's timing was impeccable and so many things lined up to continue to draw us closer in love that was built upon the Rock of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In less than a year she moved back to her native home in Greenwood. Since her first day back in South Carolina she has not missed one week of visitation. I proposed to her shortly after she arrived in Greenwood and by the grace of God she said yes.

As our relationship grew and we grew stronger in our faith, God Was preparing myself and a long time friend to attend Columbia International University Prison Initiative Program. We both made it in, once again I was shocked that God had chosen me for such an incredible responsibility. The two years of school was the most impactful thing I have ever experienced. It prepared me to be an apostle in dorms, on yards, and to roommates like the Apostle that brought tears to my eyes when reading his words to the Corinthians. God has truly created me anew. I am no longer an inmate with a life sentence. I am now a missionary living in the mission field that He created me to impact.