

The Conversion

J. Phillip Huggins

At first, I entertained myself by catching mice. Each morning there were droppings throughout my cell, so I unraveled some thread from my mattress and tied it to the corner of a box. Then late at night, I would set my trap next to the wall, get in bed, and pull on the string, causing one side of the carton to rise. Before long one of the filthy varmints would appear.

"There's one," I thought one night as a nasty little rodent scurried from behind the toilet. He hesitated, then ventured out farther, running along the wall. When he got under the trap, I let go of the cord, allowing the box to drop, capturing my prey.

It wasn't long until I wearied of the cat and mouse game. About three months had gone by. Until then, I had hung onto a shred of hope that the warden would relent and let me back into the general population. The finality of my plight had sunk in, and I was getting bitter.

One morning I found more droppings on my belongings and went into a rage. "Stinkin' little scum bags!" I swore and wiped more dung pellets off my dictionary. "I'm sick of this _____!" I yelled. "You hear me?" I said, "I'm sick of this _____!" Outraged, I bolted to the front of my cage, grabbed the bars, and started shaking the door with all my might. I stood there screaming vile, venomous curses, towards the guards, their families, and even their pets.

Deep, dark hate had settled in my heart. I began spitting and throwing foul toilet water on my keepers as they passed by my cell. I taunted the guards with horrible threats. "One of these days I'm going to blow your brains out," I swore savagely. Eventually, I was consumed with so much hate that sleep eluded me. I began pacing inside my cell, sometimes all night, like a deranged psychopath, fantasizing about murdering cops by using slow, agonizing methods. For the next few months, bitterness pulsed through my veins. I would have gladly given my own life if I could have just taken a guard with me.

One evening, an officer shoved some mail under my cell door and hurried off. When I opened the letter, there were some pictures enclosed. My people had gathered in Texarkana for a family reunion, and Mom had sent me some snapshots that had been taken during the occasion. "Well I'll be," I muttered, examining the flicks. I was looking at some of my cousins that I hadn't seen since we were small kids.

While staring at the photos, my thoughts reflected back to my childhood. I remembered my excitement during the drive to my grandparents' house soon after getting my BB gun. They lived in a wooded area, and I was planning to shoot a bear.

I recalled my parents surprising me with a new bicycle on my birthday, and how proud I was riding it to school, and the times that I had crawled inside our dog's house to love on my hound, Cindy. Tears streamed down my cheeks as the memory of my adolescent years unfolded in my mind.

"God! What happened?" I whispered shattered by the realization of what that innocent, happy, carefree little boy had become. Overcome with grief, I began to weep.

Later that night, while lying on my bunk feeling totally empty and dejected, I remembered something that my mother had often told me throughout the years. "Son, if you ever get so far down that there's no place to look but up, call on God and he'll help you." After the recollection of her words, I rolled off the bed onto my knees and asked the Lord for help.

Having no idea how to recite a formal prayer, I simply kept repeating my plea for mercy over and over. That night, for the first time in several weeks, I rested well.

Strangely, the next day I received a large brown envelope in the mail that had been sent from a prison ministry in Florida. The package contained several religious leaflets. As I was shuffling through the material, one of the tracts in particular caught my attention. It read in big, black, bold letters: "What Must I Do to Be Saved?"

After reading the little booklet, I bowed my head and said a sinner's prayer. "Guess I'm saved now," I thought hopefully. Even though the tract had given assurance of the Lord's willingness to forgive, in my heart I was concerned that my despicable past had even exceeded the boundaries of God's grace.

I ambled around my cell for a few minutes, meditating on what had transpired. I had been in solitary for almost six months and hadn't received mail from anyone other than my mother and an aunt. Now, the day after petitioning the Lord for help, I received a package from people that I'd never even heard of.

"How did they get my name and prison number?" I wondered. After considering the facts, I came to the conclusion that somehow, God had orchestrated it. "He really does care." That thought made me happy.

Shortly after I was permanently assigned to solitary confinement, Mom had sent me a Bible. It had been just laying around in my cage collecting dust. I decided to check it out. Since I didn't know anything about the Bible, I started at Genesis and began reading the Scriptures like a novel. Before long, I became transfixed and devoured the Holy Word for hours. When I finally fell asleep, Scripture continued going through my mind. After waking the next morning, I grabbed my Bible and began reading again. Within a week I had reached the book of Job. By then I was on fire. I could feel the power of God's almighty Word penetrating into the deep reaches of my heart, cutting out evilness and replacing it with a peace and contentment that I never knew existed.

I soon became physically aware of the Lord's presence. An atmospheric change had occurred inside my cell. It was like a very slight electrical current filtering through the air. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck were continuously on the verge of standing. Since there wasn't anyone for me to ask questions of, the Holy Spirit enabled me to comprehend God's Word through divine revelation.

"What's that mean?" I often wondered while reading the Holy Scriptures. Then suddenly, the eyes of my understanding would pop open and the passage would become crystal clear.

About two months after my conversion, several other inmates were put in solitary for offenses that were similar to mine. I knew some of the guys from my time spent in the mainstream population, and even though we couldn't see one another, we were able to converse.

I began to pass time "gangster riding" with my old buddies. We would shout from one cage to another, reminiscing about our past criminal ventures. Soon, the awareness of God's glory that had previously engulfed my cell was gone. Devastated by the sudden disappearance of the Lord's presence, I tried to figure out what had happened.

"Please come back," I prayed. Finally, after three days, the Lord spoke to my heart very clearly. "I can't have anything to do with you if you continue to sin." I instantly knew that He was referring to the ungodly conversations I had been having with the other cons. Even though I was lonely and starved for companionship, after God's gentle chastisement I never again took part in unwholesome chatter. At

times I actually clamped my hand over my mouth to keep myself from participating with my colleagues in their sinful discussions.

I started corresponding with a lady who was involved in prison ministry, and she sent me a big concordance and a couple of different translations of the Bible. I began to spend even more time in God's Word.

Early one morning while reading the Holy Scriptures, I came across a passage that had special meaning to me: *"I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I can't. I do what I don't want to - what I hate. I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong, and my bad conscience proves that I agree with these laws I am breaking. But I can't help myself because I'm no longer doing it. It is sin inside me that is stronger than I am that makes me do these evil things. I know I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn I can't make myself do right. I want to but I can't. When I want to do good I don't; and when I try not to do wrong I do it anyway. Now if I am doing what I don't want to, it is plain where the trouble is: sin still has me in its evil grasp."* Romans 7:15-20 (Living Bible).

After reading those verses, my mouth dropped open. God had revealed to me through His Word why I had always been powerless to quit using drugs. Even though I had desperately wanted to stop, the relentless evil forces the Apostle Paul just described had gained dominance over my will and driven me to horrendous acts of depravity. I reflected back to the countless, torturous times I had sworn never to use dope again, only to find myself committing violent crimes to get more only hours later.

"That's why I couldn't stop," I realized. "Sin had me in its evil grasp!" I continued on, and when I got to the end of the chapter these words seemed to jump off the page: *"Who will free me from my slavery to this deadly lower nature? Thank God! It has been done by Jesus Christ, our Lord. He has set me free!"*

[Insert: Brother Huggins knew for sure he was saved when Jesus revealed to him that He (Jesus) *had already* delivered him from drugs. He knew he was a brand new creature! He was a pure, blood-washed saint of the living God. Think of it! Without questioning God in any way, this imprisoned brother in Christ realized the corruption in his heart was a part of his previous *pre-Christ* life; and he realized the blood of Christ completed a full work of redemption. *He was truly free!*

Thousands of Bible scholars in the Church today believe—and erroneously teach—that Apostle Paul, in Romans Seven—was a wimpish, weak Christian! But in reality, in Romans Seven—Paul spoke of an unbeliever named Saul, and not Saint Paul. He (St. Paul) said of these false teachers, *"But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed"*. (Galatians 1:8, 9)—**end insert**]*

After reading that great truth, a tremendous joy sprang up from within my spirit, so overwhelming that I couldn't contain it. I leaped off my bed and started dancing around my cage, hollering "I'm free, praise God, hallelujah, I'm free!" Since my jubilation occurred around four a.m., the joyful noise was a disturbance to the other sleeping cons.

"Shut up, man!" they screamed, outraged at being awakened. "He's been in the hole too long," one said. "He's gone crazy."

*Insert written by Tom Stephens; www.christsbondservants.org

I didn't care what they thought. The reality that our wonderful Savior had purchased my liberty had become alive in my heart. He had set me free! And I was going to shout it from the highest rooftop. After spending over a year in solitary, I became eligible for parole. Even though I was lonely and longed to be released, my prayer had been, "I want out, but if I can grow to know You better by staying, then I want to stay."

Since the day I received Christ, my number one desire in life has been to grow up in my salvation and love God with all my heart, mind, and soul. The Lord knew my prayer was sincere, and even though the review board denied my parole, God answered my request; I stayed and grew in the Lord.

One evening, not long after receiving the rejection notice concerning my parole, I read Matthew 18:23-35: *"Therefore, the Kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go."*

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded."

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened."

"Then the master called the servant in, 'You wicked servant,' he said. 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

That passage pierced my soul. I suddenly realized that I still felt animosity toward the prison guards. God had just shown me that when we ask Him for mercy, yet harbor unforgiveness in our hearts, we're being just like the wicked servant. I immediately knelt down and prayed. "Lord, please bless and forgive all my enemies. Amen."

I got up wanting to believe that I had fulfilled my Christian obligation, but instinctively, I knew that something wasn't right. The words, "from your heart," were haunting me.

It didn't take long for me to realize that I had fallen short of what the Lord expected. I had mouthed the words "bless and forgive," but in my heart I really wanted them cursed and condemned. Distressed by the revelation of this dark secret, I sat on my bunk to meditate.

At first, I had wanted to just ignore the ugly truth but deep down inside, I knew that it must be confronted. Being a con most of my life made it natural for me to understand that I was being phoney.

I bowed my head and asked God to forgive me. "I've been a fake," I confessed. I then began to honestly relate to the Lord that I really did want to love and forgive, but that it just wasn't in me. I humbly informed my Father that only He can change a person on the inside. "Cleanse me, wash me, and purify me," I pleaded.

When I finished praying, I knew something wonderful had transpired. I felt so clean. Encouraged by this positive effect, I continued to open my heart daily. Each time, I experienced a fresh purging.

Soon my enthusiasm over "tasting the good things of God" had escalated into a furor. The time I spent in prayer increased from minutes to hours. I pleaded for a pure heart like a baby cries for milk. The results were phenomenal. Deep stirrings started erupting within me. I would well up inside to the verge of torrential weeping, and then suddenly, the immense emotional wave would subside.

These near outbursts were occurring several times a day. I didn't know what was taking place until one evening a guard came by my cell, delivering mail. When he walked away I was overcome with compassion. I had seen him as a person that Jesus died for. I desperately wanted God to save and protect him.

Tears filled my eyes when I realized what had happened. The emotional turbulence I had been experiencing was the result of the Holy Spirit taking the bitterness out of my heart. In His pure, sweet way, God had removed the unwanted hate and replaced it with His magnificent love.

The Lord had revealed to me the principle that He uses to sanctify us. Without knowing it I had been applying a great biblical truth. I John 1:8-9 says: "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*"

I had simply searched my heart, recognized my sin, and confessed it. God, being true to His Word, forgave me and cleansed me from the unrighteousness. So often people keep their outside appearance clean, but neglect to deal with the unseen sin that's in their hearts. This is so sad.

For decades, churches flying the banner of Christianity have used God's grace as a license to stay sinful, when in reality the grace of God is the power to become righteous. The Lord's desire for His people is holiness. The work accomplished at Calvary atoned for much more than our justification. The precious blood of our Savior is the means God provided for sinful people to become holy.

The body of Christ has been caught up in strange doctrine for so long that we've lost sight of our first responsibility—to grow in our salvation and become Christ-like.

Overseers have been standing behind the sacred pulpit, coercing people to pay their tithe with promises of material riches, instead of boldly proclaiming the great truth about our need to overcome the world. Others have taught a bizarre positive confession, or "name it-claim it theology," encouraging folks to confess worldly treasures, when actually they should be on their knees at the altar, confessing their sins. The end-time message to a carnal, unholy church is not "peace and prosperity," but rather "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!"

Even though I had to remain in solitary until my release date, the Lord gave me favor with the officials. After a year, the administration took time off my sentence for good behavior. I would be out in a couple of months. After getting the word about my new expiration date, I suddenly felt an urgency to begin praying for a wife and a good job. "Lord, bless me with a woman who loves You the way I do," I prayed. "And a good job."

At first my petition to God had been only a ritual with no real confidence that he was actually going to grant my request. I would have thoughts like "No decent lady is going to want to marry an old rascal like me" and "Nobody in his right mind would hire a man with fourteen felony convictions." Instead of hiding my doubt, I shared it with the Lord. "Sir, please help me. I'm having a hard time believing you're really going to do what I'm asking." After admitting my fault, I persisted in prayer, and soon a

genuine faith rose up from within my heart and began to conquer the unbelief. Before long my trust was unwavering. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that my God would "supply all my needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

The evening before my discharge date, two guards came by my cell to say goodbye. "We've never seen such a change in a person," one offered. "Good luck, Huggins," they both said sincerely.

Finally, after spending almost two years in solitary confinement, I walked out of the Texas Department of Corrections a free man!

Testimony is from:

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