

I DIDN'T GROW UP IN A CHRISTIAN HOME.

Life was difficult. I remember hearing angry voices and slamming doors in the night. People I thought I could trust came and went. My unstable home and feelings of insignificance gave rise to anger as I became a teenager. I experimented with drugs and broke the law. By nineteen, I'd been arrested several times and served one year in prison for heroin possession. My time in jail didn't make me better. It made me bitter.

Prison and prisoners are cruel, and I had to fight to survive. I witnessed wanton violence which hardened my view of the world. I came out angry and more broken than the youngster who had entered prison—and more dangerous.

I WAS A TIME BOMB DISGUISED AS A TWENTY YEAR-OLD KID.



TICK. TICK. TICK. BOOM!

Four months and seven days after leaving prison, the bomb exploded. I shot and killed a man and seriously wounded another during an armed robbery. I was tried, convicted, and sentenced to die in the electric chair for my crimes.

With my arms and legs shackled in heavy chains, I shuffled down the long row of cells called Death Row. Two stone-faced guards escorted me into a cell and slammed the door behind me. My stomach churned, and my heart bled tears. Some day in the future, there'd be an execution, and I was the one condemned.

I WAS TWENTY YEARS OLD.

The last words of the judge rang in my ears: "May God have mercy upon your soul." I turned from the judge to my father, who stood in the front row of the courtroom. I'd carry the guilt and shame of that day for many years to come. It fueled my rage.

As a youngster I'd learned to channel my pain into anger. The rage I felt when my sentence was handed down drove me to declare war on a world that had rejected me.

ONCE CONDEMNED...



The day after I was imprisoned, a little Japanese man arrived at my Death Row cell door. His duties as librarian included delivering books to Death Row inmates. But he offered me something far more valuable than the stack of books in his hands.

"My name is Frankie San," he said. "I love you, and Jesus loves you. He doesn't care what crimes you committed. He will forgive you if you let Him." I listened politely, but cared nothing about my life, another's life, or a God I couldn't see. I was too blinded by hurt and rage.

I now understand it was God's grace that after spending my twenty-first, twenty-second, and twenty-third birthday on Death Row, the court re-sentenced me to life imprisonment with the possibility of parole. At the time, I wasn't at all grateful for the grace I'd been shown.

I CONTINUED TO BE FILLED WITH RAGE. I REJECTED GOD.

I adopted the prison culture of violence. I used drugs and alcohol to ease my pain. What I had abhorred as a first-time prisoner, I embraced as a lifer. I remained angry and assaultive, especially toward authority figures. At the age of forty, for my violent actions, I was locked away in solitary confinement for the duration of my sentence.

Like that first day on Death Row, I took inventory of my life. I'd spent twenty years in prison and had nothing to show for it but pain and devastation. Hopeless, I wrote to Frankie San, my old friend from Death Row. "I'm tired of my life. I desperately want something different, but I don't know what."

He wrote back and shared the same words he had spoken in my cell twenty years before:



"I love you, and Jesus Christ loves you. He doesn't care what crimes you committed. He will forgive you if you let him. Give all your pain, anger, and brokenness to God, and He will heal you."

Trust was an issue, but I asked God to take what little life I hadn't destroyed and do with it what He would. I prayed, confessed my sins, and asked His forgiveness for all the pain I'd caused.

For the first time since I was a little boy, peace settled over my soul. I knew I'd never be alone again. I began to read the Bible. Over and over the word truth spoke to me.

BUT JESUS SET ME FREE!

The truth that changed my life is this:

JESUS HUNG ON THE CROSS AND ROSE ON THE THIRD DAY SO I AND OTHERS LIKE ME COULD RISE ABOVE OUR MISTAKES AND LIVE ETERNALLY FREE.

I COULD ENTRUST TO JESUS THE PAIN I'D CAUSED MY VICTIMS' FAMILIES AND THE EMOTIONAL HURT I'D IMPOSED ON MY OWN.

EVEN THOUGH I LIVED IN A SOLITARY CELL, I COULD WALK AWAY FROM THE CHAINS OF ANGER, ADDICTION, SELFISHNESS, AND HATE.

Little by little, my thinking began to change. I read, wrote, and studied for hours each day. Life began to make sense as my mind and heart were transformed. Seven years later, after a total of sixteen years in solitary confinement and twenty-five years in prison, God's mighty hand of grace again set me free. I was released to the prison population. I continued to apply for release from prison, but most agreed I'd probably spend the rest of my life behind bars.

In the past twenty years I've become a writer, speaker, teacher, and mentor to troubled younger prisoners and gang members. I've led many men to the Lord as a servant leader in Kairos and JumpStart. In 2017, I was chosen as one of only thirteen inmates to pursue a two-year Bible college education from Columbia International University-Kirkland Prison Initiative. I was trained, thanks to funding from private donors, to be both a missionary and a peacemaker to the most dangerous prison yards in South Carolina. Imagine that – God transformed me, an angry, violent murderer into a peacemaker!

When God saved me, He gave me a purpose. With this purpose came the desire to bring honor and dignity to my life, my victim's life, and my family through my service to God.

The justice system said, "EXECUTE HIM."
The prison system said, "ISOLATE HIM."
The parole system said, "LET HIM DIE IN PRISON."
But once again God extended His mighty, loving, hand.

On March 18, 2020, after forty-five years behind prison walls, He set this captive free. My parole was granted! The JumpStart program where I once mentored young men on the inside is now my residence on the outside, helping me successfully transition back into society.

IF HE DID IT FOR ME, HE CAN DO IT FOR YOU.