

WHERE I MAKE MY BED



Behind the Wire

TERROR IN THE EYES OF MY EIGHTEEN-MONTH-OLD

son seared its stark image into my brain. My drug-clouded mind registered the degeneracy of the moment, the desperation of addiction. How could I have dragged a toddler along on a drug buy?

My son arrived in this world while I served a prison sentence. By the time I got out, his mother didn't want the fairytale family I dreamt about during my incarceration. In hindsight, I don't fault her. After we parted ways, and I didn't see my son very often because of my messed-up life. I finally talked her into trusting me with one night of visitation. My son. Innocent and new to the world. A gift to hold close. I wish I could say I understood the true value of having a child back then, but I didn't. Drinking, drugging, and getting into criminal trouble occupied my time and controlled most of my choices. I picked up a 12-pack and six or seven beers later, got buzzed up and craved cocaine. My need for drugs overcame parental wisdom. Late that night, I loaded up my son and headed to the projects in Gary, Indiana, for a fix.

We drove to the crack house, and I parked the car and locked my son inside while I went to buy my drugs. I know, it's crazy. I can't even believe this stuff when I look back at my younger life. With my only child locked in a parked car, I went inside, bought what I needed, and slipped into my high. When I got back to the car, there he stood. My boy had crawled into the front seat and stood with his

hands splayed on the driver side window. He just stared at me, howling, his face red and wet with tears. I had left him alone and terrified in the dark. When I saw his eyes and glimpsed the raw anguish of an innocent caught in my web of misdoings, I knew I'd found the bottom. Disgust, shame, and revulsion for the life I lived flooded my heart. I drove home holding my son in my arms because he wouldn't stop crying. And yet, the drugs still had their iron grip on me. I continued smoking crack on the way home.

God, in His wisdom, didn't let my behavior go unnoticed. Neighbors saw me messed up on drugs while my son was with me. I forgot my phone at the crack house, and my ex-girlfriend called to check on our son. The voice of a stranger answering set off alarms in my ex's mind, and she quizzed the woman. When my ex got to my apartment in the morning, she questioned the neighbors, too. Although I denied it vehemently, she figured out I was doing drugs while caring for our son. After she had whisked him back to safety, she said, "No more." I would not be allowed to see him again. My family couldn't see him. We were done. My name wasn't on the birth certificate, and my rights were limited.

Darkness surrounded me.

◆LIFE PRINCIPLE

You reap what you sow. *Parable of the Sower – Matthew 13*

Break It Down

Psalm 40:2 says, "He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps." The day I lost my son marked my arrival at the bottom of my pit. The next two days passed in pain-filled recollections of how bad choices, broken relationships, and destruction trailed behind me. Could it get any worse than this? Everyone was sick of my behavior. I had used up every family member and every friend with my antics. They were done with me. I had dozens of arrests

behind me. Felony criminal charges were pending. Anger issues and dysfunction marred my relationships. Shame stalked me. And truthfully, I was angry, broken, and done with me, too. I couldn't bear the pain of losing my child. I decided, for the second time, to end my life. I'll tell you about the first time in Chapter Five, but for now, know that when I finally made this decision, it wasn't wildly emotional. It wasn't a plea for help. It wasn't to get attention. I simply judged it time to end my life and end the cycle of misery. At the time, it seemed like the logical next step.

I bought a case of beer and a couple hundred sleeping pills. In an effort to leave the world with a somewhat clear conscience, I gave my ex a call. "It's me."

"Yeah," she replied.

"I wanted to call and apologize for all the trouble I've caused."

Silence.

"I'm really sorry for leaving you alone and pregnant and for going to jail." My drink clouded brain struggled to find the right words. "It's my fault the way we split up. I should have been more responsible. I'm sorry I hurt you. I really am." She was unresponsive and didn't engage in conversation with me. No absolution here. I hung up.

I made the call because this was certain to be my last night of life. Certainty about the end gave me courage and humility to pick up the phone for the last time. I didn't tell her my plans. I just wanted to go into death having tried to make it right with her. The call complete, I downed the beer and sleeping pills with a sense of relief. It didn't take long for the effects to kick in, and I closed my eyes. What happened next stands as one of the greatest shocks of my life.

I woke up.

About four or five hours after passing out, I awakened with no hangover, no drowsiness, no aftereffects of the drugs or alcohol. I couldn't believe it. It freaked me out. How could I still be living? Crazy! In truth, it scared me. I had no way to process this turn of events. No earthly explanation gave me peace. What do you do with an experience like this? I talked to God about being shocked to be alive. I might have even railed a bit about the uncertainty of what to do now that I had to face living and being accountable for my actions.

In my confusion and fright, I heard a heavenly whisper echo in my heart. "It's not over till I say it's over."

The God-moment and glimmer of hope helped, but I panicked. Now what? Indiana held broken dreams and relationships, outstanding felony charges, and two failed attempts to escape life's difficulties by escaping life. I wanted, needed, yearned to get away. Some part of me wanted to change and pursue a different life, but the overwhelming urge to escape still gripped me. If suicide didn't work, I'd leave the state. I didn't want to face the reality of the life I'd created, and I didn't want to face the criminal system bearing down on me. I was desperate for a new plan. Scheming and manipulating controlled my mind to the point where I needed a safe place to think.

I called my dad who lived in Florida. "I'm sick of the cold weather, and I just need a change. Could I come stay with you for a while?"

"Uhm, well"

His hesitation spoke volumes to me. And he didn't even know about the pending felony charges. "Listen, I want to try and get my life together. I'm begging you."

"OK, I guess you can stay with me for a few weeks—under one condition. No drinking or drugs."

“Of course. I understand. No drinking. No drugs. I promise.”

I hastily left the state. I ran from myself. I ran from the law. I ran from God. I ran hoping to find a way to cope with life. I didn't give myself a decent chance of success.

Within a day or two, I got drunk. My father called the police and had me escorted off his property. I had a history of violence, and he didn't want to risk me turning on him. The police dropped me off at a gas station. Remember the horrible pit described in Psalm 40? I hit the bottom of my pit when I lost my son. With the decision to dishonor my father's one condition, I made a bad decision to wallow around in that dark pit a little longer. I ended up on the street with a few clothes, no place to live, no one to call, and no prospects for the future.

Homeless shelters, panhandling, and drunken stupors became a way of life. When drunk, the homeless shelters wouldn't house me so I learned to sleep outside. Day-labor jobs helped sustain my drinking and drugging. I earned enough money to keep me in a fog. I came to know the Florida police through a couple of arrests—one for loitering when I walked through private backyards one night while drunk. I gave them my brother's name so they wouldn't find my felony warrants from Indiana. Another time I walked into a stranger's house while drunk and high. I took off my shirt and shoes and fell asleep on their couch. Thank God, they didn't shoot me. I woke up in jail with no clue how I got there and unaware I'd entered a stranger's home. I got my information about the episode by reading the police report. I tried using my brother's name again, but the police found me out. The Panama City Police Department charged me with two felony counts of giving a false name. I spent a couple months in jail.

When released on probation, I went right back at it. I couldn't shake the addictions. I continued to stay drunk and high so I didn't have to be with me. I hated me. I went back to panhandling for

change to keep me numb with drugs and drink.

When we're kids and we take our first drink or smoke our first joint, we don't imagine where it can lead in twenty years. Getting drunk or high seems like fun, but all the while chains form and tighten around us. We become prisoners and step behind the razor wire without knowing it. Until finally one day, sleeping in bushes, taking shelter from the rain in a porta-potty, or peeing yourself in a storm drain under a bridge becomes the norm. Blackouts and memory lapses become commonplace. The darkness and lost chunks of time become a nightmare reality.

Because I loathed this reality, I searched scripture for answers. Another interesting Bible verse jumped out at me— one that resonated through my 34-year skid to the bottom. The psalmist says this in 139:8, “If I ascend into heaven, You *are* there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You *are there*.” After I lost my son and bottomed out, I spent two more years being stripped of all pride. Humiliated by my homeless existence, I lived in a hell of my own creation. God didn't abandon me, though. He met me where I made my bed, hung with me, and waited.

I went to a liquor store one day and did the classic booze- in-a-paper bag routine. Since I didn't want to get arrested for loitering, I warmed up with my bottle under a bridge. After draining it, I walked down the road and passed a homeless shelter. Another homeless guy loitered around the place, and we struck up a conversation. We stood on the sidewalk in front of the shelter and ended up talking about Jesus, he insisted I listen to a preaching CD he liked. He ran into the shelter and borrowed a CD player and headset. There was a recreation area with picnic tables and basketball hoops on one side of the building so we found a spot to sit for a while. I climbed on top of a picnic table and popped the headphones over my ears.

The preacher spoke of wasted potential, and my heart cringed.

Tears started rolling down my cheeks as I heard God speaking directly to my soul through the preacher's words. He talked about the millions of people all around the earth with great abilities and high callings. He grieved about the cluelessness keeping so many from reaching their potential. Then he spoke a prophetic word that cut away some of the shell around my heart. "I tell you the truth. There's a homeless man drinking out of a paper bag under a bridge right now who can out-preach anybody in this church."

The preacher's words rang through my brain and spirit. God encouraged me and suddenly became very personal. He had seen me under the bridge that day and lined up another homeless guy with a CD message for my heart in that exact moment. I cried out years of frustration and hurt. God was right there with me.

My journey toward God got a nudge that day from a preacher I may never know till I reach heaven. His words encouraged me to carry on. In the following pages, I'll share more of my struggles and so many testimonies of how God works to draw us into His family. Remember, I said I wallowed in the clay at the bottom of my pit for a couple more years. Even though the CD message got my attention, it took God some time to break through my stubborn fear of facing my actions and changing course. He suffered right alongside me for two more hellish years. He waited while I floundered in self-pity and hatred. Till I was ready to listen.

I'm thankful for His patience. Today, He's still working with me daily to refine, grow, and change me into the man He envisioned from my conception. Many of my mistakes now stand as a shining light and testimony to His sovereign power and authority. I can claim no glory for myself in this tale. He allowed me the freedom to suffer as a wandering hobo. The freedom to discover I was a prisoner even when not physically behind the wire. Though God has healed many of my relationships, others remain estranged. My son remains beyond my reach, for now. I pray for forgiveness and reconciliation. One day, God will make a way for restoration of my

relationship with the little one I left alone while I made a drug deal in a crack house. Until then, I reach out to others with a message of hope. When we come to our end, when we belly flop to the bottom of our personal pits, He's right there with us and ready to help as we seek to discover new ways to do life.

If You're Like Me

Some of your stories sound a lot like what you just read. Are you ready for change? This book is written to you. I've been in your shoes—not just once, but five times. Five times in prison and counting various trips to the county jail, I've been locked up 35 times for my crimes. My friend, you may be living your version of my story, but you can also live your version of a victorious new life. Know there's hope. I am free now, from prison and from the chains around my heart. God found me, picked me up, and gave me purpose. I now work as a minister to prisoners. In the following chapters, I'm going to explore my key struggles and the battles I see other prisoners fighting. Pay attention. This book is God reaching for you. I pray you find your way to a new life just as I did. You will never regret embarking on this journey. Embrace courage and walk boldly toward what God can and will do for you—if you'll let Him.

■CHALLENGES FOR CHANGE

Every chapter will end with one or more challenges to help you on your journey. The challenge for this chapter is simple.

Dare to keep reading.

THOUGHTS FROM A FELLOW PRISONER

“I finally see the opportunity to forgive myself and feel the light and love of Jesus Christ.”

Anonymous Prisoner Westville Correctional Facility, Indiana

