

follow, each choosing to leave and follow Jesus. And each time God delivered them without harm. I was number five. Throughout that two year period the Lord was at work in me, and He placed people in my life whose examples were a testimony to His power and faithfulness.

One was a man who'd given his heart to Jesus and left the gang soon after Scott. His name was Chris, and he was now working in the West yard Chaplain's office as a chaplain's assistant. In November 2012, the facility moved the two of us into the same cell, much to our mutual displeasure. To me, Chris was just another "drop out" (a pretty bad word in the gang world), and to him I was just an unwanted tie to a life he'd left far behind. But our God had a plan, and after a few months we became good friends. God put us together for a reason. For me, witnessing Chris' changed life and faith in God was a real demonstration of the power of Christ to change a heart and transform a man. I had known Chris for a short time before he met Christ, and this wasn't the man I'd known. His daily life spoke of having met Christ in a way that I didn't yet understand, and that meeting transformed him on the deepest levels. He was a new creature in Christ. What I was seeing in him was the result of the New Birth, and seeing that really affected me.

Another person God put in my path was my friend Micah. The wayward son of an Independent Baptist pastor, Micah and I agreed on very little at first. But somehow he got me slipped into a King James Bible and God handled the rest. Micah was a man that I could relate to. Not in the gang-banger sense – that wasn't his thing – but in that he too had run from God for a long time, and it took a lengthy prison sentence and the loss of everything he held most dear for God to get his attention. Once He did, Micah proved to be a man after God's own heart. I was blessed to be able to watch Christ love people through Micah. He loved people that no one else seemed to care about at all, and that love was to me a contagious thing. It was through Micah that God showed me how to stop running. His faith and trust in Christ, even in the midst of some serious adversity, was something that really made an impact on me.

Finally, God blessed me with my wife. She put so much in perspective. Her servant's heart continues to humble me, and her deep faith and love for God moves me. Her example of patient and unconditional love continues to minister to me. God put these people in my life at exactly the right moments, and that made all the difference. Don't tell me your testimony doesn't matter. God will use your life: your example of surrender, of faith, of love, of service; God will use that if you give it to Him.

In January of 2013 I gave everything to God. I finally placed my trust in Him as Lord and Savior. I knew I could. I prayed, "Father, I am Yours. I want to serve You Lord. I give You all that I am. I am Yours no matter the consequences. And Lord, if it be Your will, please release me from this gang so I may serve

You wholly." The next day I went out and told the fellas that my heart was for Christ. I told them that I was no longer the man I used to be, and that all I wanted to do was serve God. Two days later, on April 11, 2013 they offered me a retirement. Praise God! He delivered me! I accepted and was gone in every sense of the word. That day I lost every friend I had in that world. But, like Paul, I count it as nothing compared to the riches I have gained in Christ Jesus.

That same day I prayed, "Father, You have set me free! I thank You and I praise you Lord. Now please, train me. Prepare me. Raise me up to do Your work. I am clay in Your hands, make me into the vessel You want me to be." Within three months I was enrolled in Patriot Bible University earning a degree in Pastoral Studies. God provided the entire tuition cost and opened every door. Then God answered my prayer to serve. He immediately put me to work, and gave me opportunity after opportunity to share the Gospel and the love of Christ. I have been blessed to see men come to Christ, and we continue to see man after man delivered from gang life, from addiction, from gambling, from pornography, from self, from every sin imaginable, choosing instead a life of service to our God.

I was also blessed to be a member of the Sterling Church worship bands, and in April of 2014 God placed me in the Chaplain's office as a Chaplain's assistant. The Lord continually grants me opportunities to serve, to speak, to share, to love and encourage. People know who I was, what I was, and they know who I am now in Christ Jesus. That testimony has allowed me to talk to people that no one else could. God has used both who I was, and who He has made me, to reach out and touch lives with the Gospel. And all to His glory.

Our God is a God who transforms. He takes the broken, the lost, the despised, the worst, and He recreates them. He turns them into sons and daughters, heirs to the kingdom with Christ. Friend, there is nothing that you have done that God won't forgive. Christ has already paid the penalty, which is death (Romans 6:23), for every sin you have ever committed or will ever commit. He paid for it with His own life's blood, and now He offers you the gift of eternal life through faith in that sacrifice. Give your heart to Him and He will recreate it; He can transform anyone if they will but give Him their heart.

"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

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"The word of God is not imprisoned." – 2 Timothy 2:9

CAUGHT

After a life of running away from God through drugs, crime, and gangs, his heart was finally captured by Jesus Christ



My name is Nathan Cothern, and this is my story. Rather, it's a story. Just one of the many stories that tie together to tell His story. The story of our God and how He loves, how He saves, how He transforms the lost and the hopeless, how He gives life and peace and joy. This is definitely His story, but He gave me a part in it.

I grew up regular - a regular kid in a regular family in a regular town. The good times were good and the bad times were bad. But that's a story you've heard. You've seen that kid; you know that family. So that's not where this story

starts. It begins a few years later...I was a 20 year old drug addict, lost and full of nothing good. I'd spent a few years in my late teens learning how to be a dirtbag from a junkie dirtbag uncle, and while I don't blame him for any of my actions, I don't think his tutelage in scumbaggery helped much either. But, no matter my influences, they didn't make me who I was. I had become the person I was by making bad choices, and those choices had finally brought me to the place where everything was ripe to go bad.

I caught my case in August of 1994. Late one night a drug addict friend sent someone to tell me that he needed a ride out of town. He said my friend was in some kind of trouble and wouldn't leave their friend's trailer with anyone but me. I knew from past experience that what he called "trouble" usually turned out to be little more than paranoid, methamphetamine-fueled imagination, so I wasn't in a big hurry. But he was the man with the drugs, so early the next morning I went to pick him up. As fantastic as this sounds, at the moment he was about to climb in the back of the car, the radio station I was listening to broadcast an alert looking for him. They said that he was wanted by police for shooting and wounding a sheriff's deputy the night before. I can remember that moment like it was yesterday. A second later he was laying in the back hiding under a blanket. I know I should've gotten out of the car right there, but I didn't. Instead, when he said "Drive!" I put the pedal down and drove. When I did, it was only a minute before the police were on us. Even then, I could have pulled over. I know I should have, but I didn't. Instead, I jammed the gas down even harder, and a few minutes later the chase ended at a police roadblock where I tried to turn around and go back the way I'd come. The officers who'd been chasing us opened fire as I tried to get past them and back onto the road. A few seconds later the chase was over. I lay slumped in the front seat, shot up, unable to move, thinking I was going to die.

I didn't. Instead, I received a 58 year prison sentence for pointing a handgun at the three officers that I tried to drive past. I deserved it. But something else happened that day. There was a moment, a split second, where I had to make another choice. This became, for me, a defining moment in my life. I finally made a right choice. Even as the scumbag kid that I was, high and scared, with a gun in my hand and the choice to pull the trigger, or not...I didn't. That was the best choice I'd ever made up to that point in my life. But even without pulling the trigger I still received 58 years. I had it coming. Pointing a gun at a peace officer is serious business, and in Colorado it's considered both assault and attempted murder. I was also charged with, and convicted of, eluding and accessory to attempted murder. It all added up to the full 58. This is where my choices had led me. So, sitting in county jail, about to go to prison for who knew how long, I cried out to God. I sure felt sorry. But I realize now that I was really only

sorry about the consequences I'd received. I deserved the time, but what I needed was a heart change.

I arrived at Limon Correctional Facility in 1995 at 21 years old. Looking back it seems like I'd learned very little, and I continued my scumbag ways throughout the rest of my 20s. I was a convict now, one of the "fellas," and I wanted everyone else to look at me as someone that could be counted on in a pinch. I followed the "convict code," and really cared about what other convicts thought about me. Reputation was everything. I couldn't be seen as weak, or different. In fact, as far as I was concerned, different was weak. So I put on that liar's mask – the one everyone puts on to some degree when they step inside the fence – and I became just another tattooed tough guy. I was a cheap copy of some "convict ideal" thought up long before I was born. Some years later, I joined a prison gang and spent the next 10 years climbing the ranks.

Over the years my relationship with God was spotty at best. There were times when He seemed very near, and others when I did whatever I could to push Him away. Whenever that Bible of mine would start to convict me, I would shelve it. I was a runner. I didn't like the way God's Word shined light on my sin. To paraphrase A. W. Tozer, my heart couldn't bear to give up its toys. I told myself that the life I was living was the life I had to live in here. It was a lie that I convinced myself was the truth. I told my family – I even told God – that I had to do the things I did in here just to survive. Since I couldn't reconcile what I was reading with how I was living, I'd bury my Bible in the bottom of my locker box and go on living like the devil. For me, that was life; and in 2008 I was sent to C.S.P. (Colorado State Penitentiary, maximum security administrative segregation, 23 hour a day lockdown) for an assault. My choices had finally landed me in Colorado's highest security state prison; and, friends, that was exactly where I needed to be. What I had now was time to think, time to read, time to listen and reflect. I spent those three years digging into God's Word, and I came to know about a Jesus that I'd never really known. I thought that I'd met Him years before, but nothing in my life spoke of that meeting. My "faith" had never been a believing faith. In fact, it wasn't faith at all. It was just an acknowledgement of the reality of Christ. I knew He was real. I knew that He died on a cross 2000 years ago. I knew that He died for me. I knew that He was God in the flesh. I could talk about Him; I could even write about Him. I knew all about Him. But that was my problem: knowing about Him isn't the same as knowing Him. Sure, He was in my head – but He wasn't in my heart. What I had was religion. What I needed was a relationship.

By the time I was on my way back out to population I definitely felt the call to serve. I also knew that to do that with any kind of sincerity I needed to get out of the gang. But I didn't know how

to accomplish either one. So, as much as I wanted to, I didn't. Instead, I let fear take over, and the Bible went back in the box. I was still running.

From C.S.P. I went to the West Side (medium/close custody) of Sterling Correctional Facility for the new "Thinking for a Change" program. I was thrown straight back out into population, and I wasn't alone. During this time Colorado was opening up its ad-seg and giving a lot of men who had been in ad-seg for years a chance out in population. With Sterling classified as one of Colorado's highest security general population facilities, that's where a number of the more high-profile gang members went. That fact made the thought of getting out of the gang seem farther away than ever, and that thought grew into what was for me an impossible obstacle. I was stuck. The result: I ended up in even deeper. But something was about to happen that would change everything.

I ended up sharing a cell with a guy named Scott; we'd both been released from ad-seg on the same day. That was fine by me; I knew Scott. We'd done a little time together years before, and he was a fellow member of the gang. But it wasn't long before I realized that there was something up with him. He wasn't the same guy that I remembered – he was different. Why? I didn't have to wonder because he was eager to share it. He said he'd come to know the saving power of Jesus Christ while he was in ad-seg, and now he'd come back out to population determined to live for Jesus. What? I'd heard that he'd become a "Christian," but so was I and a few of the other guys – or so we thought. But we didn't act like he was acting. Honestly, it seemed like a little much. Scott's old nickname was "Nasty," but we started to make fun of him and call him "Nicety" because now he was just so nice to people – even people that you're just not supposed to be nice to in here. Where was the big, mean brawler that we'd once respected? Where was the gangster that we expected? The fellas didn't know what to do with that. I didn't know what to do with that. The problem was that "Nasty" didn't exist anymore. What we were left with was "Scotty Church," and that just wouldn't do. So the guys ended up doing something that they had never done before: they offered him a way out with no negative consequences. They gave him a retirement. Let me tell you, even living the life I was living, I could see what really happened. Scott came out of ad-seg submitted to God, and the Lord delivered him from the shackles of gang life to be His servant. Scott has served without reserve or apology ever since. God put him to work, has used him in mighty ways, and through Scott's obedience God changed the entire facility in some way.

The Lord used Scott to open a door where there had not been one before, and Scott would only be the first man to walk through it. Over the next two years, five more men would