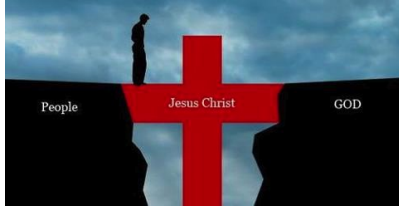


From Death Row to Abundant Life

by Jimmy MacPhee

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10 ESV)



I was just twenty years old. With arms and legs shackled by heavy chains, two stone-faced guards escorted me down the long row of cells called Death Row. As I shuffled into the cell, the barred door slammed behind me, and the guards began to remove the chains from my hands and feet. I surveyed my new surroundings: a tiny sink and toilet in the corner, a bed, and a single yellow light bulb revealed dingy, graffiti covered walls. I shivered at the reality. There was to be an execution and I was The Condemned. The last words of the sentencing judge still rang in my ear: "And may God have mercy upon your soul."

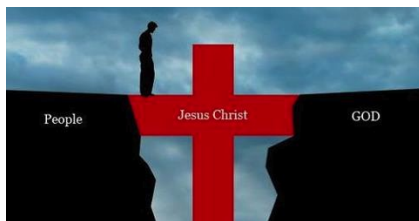
I turned from the judge and my father stood in the front row of the courtroom. He seemed to age twenty years in that moment as he saw his only son escorted away to a Death Row cell. I would carry the guilt and shame of that day for many years to come, using it to fuel my rage. I had learned to channel my pain into anger as a youngster, and the rage I felt at that moment was beyond description. The next day a little Japanese man arrived at my Death Row cell door. He said simply, "My name is Frankie San, 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 I cared neither about my life, another's life, or a God I could not see. I was not raised in a Christian home. My upbringing was difficult. My alcoholic father attempted to raise me after my mother left when I was fifteen months old. He married and divorced three more times by the time I was twelve. The lack of stability in the home and feeling I didn't matter much manifested in anger as a teenager. By the age of sixteen I'd gone from being an honor student and two-sport athlete to being expelled from school. I began to break the law and use drugs. My life revolved around moving from one party to another, from one crime to another, one drug deal to another, with less and less concern for others' lives. Arrested several times, at nineteen I served one year for heroin possession.

The prison sentence did not make me better, only more bitter. Four months and seven days after being released from prison. 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. I now understand it was by the grace of God that I was re-sentenced to life imprisonment with the possibility of parole. Upon release from Death Row I was not at all grateful for the grace I'd been shown. I was still very angry and rejected God. Prison culture became very comfortable to me. My anger and violence, especially towards authority figures, would continue until I was locked away in solitary confinement "SuperMax" at the age of forty. Told I was sentenced to SuperMax for the duration of my prison time, I was basically sentenced to life in solitary confinement. Alone in that cell, pacing the floor as I'd done on Death Row, I took inventory of my life: 40 years old, I had spent 20 years in prison with nothing to show for it but pain and devastation. It was from there that I wrote Frankie San, my old friend from Death Row. In my letter I shared how tired I was of the life that I lived, that I wanted something different, but I didn't know what. He wrote me back and told me the same words he'd shared in the Death Row cell 20 years before: "I love you and Jesus Christ loves you."

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He doesn't care what crime you committed, he will forgive you if you let him." He told me to give all my pain, my anger, and my brokenness to God and He would begin the healing. I gave my life to Jesus Christ in that solitary cell 25 years ago. I asked him to take the little life that I had not destroyed and do with it what he would. I began to read my Bible in earnest. I remember reading the gospels, how much I enjoyed the Gospel of John. Over and over the word 'truth' kept speaking to me. I remember when Jesus told Pontius Pilate in John 18:37 that He came into the world to witness to the truth and any one who is of the truth listens to His voice. Pontius Pilate then asked, "What is truth?" The very same question that I asked. At last Jesus would reveal to me in scripture those who abide in His word are truly His disciples and you will know the truth and the truth would set you free (John 8:31-32). The truth is that he hung on that cross and rose on the third day so that we too may rise from our mistakes and live eternally free. I no longer had to carry the burden of all my sins, the shackles of my shame and regret for the life I had taken, for the pain I had caused my victim's families, or the hurt I had imposed on my own family, especially my father and older sister. I could now walk free of the chains of anger, addiction, selfishness, and hate, even though I was still pacing a solitary confinement cell.

I had found freedom in a situation which allowed me to know I could be free anywhere. I began to educate myself and continue to read scripture. My thinking slowly began to change, as I began to read, write, and study many hours each day. God's mighty hand of Grace again reached down and set me free. After seven years, and a total of sixteen years served in solitary confinement of my first 25 years in prison, I was again released to the prison population. During that time the parole board had rejected my request for release over and over again and most agreed I would spend the rest of my life behind bars.

Over the last 20 years I became a writer, speaker, teacher and mentor to troubled younger prisoners and gang members, helping them earn their GEDs. I taught public speaking classes and many rehabilitation programs in the South Carolina Department of Corrections. I also brought many to the Lord, serving in Kairos, JumpStart, and In 2017, I was chosen as one of only a few for a bible college education from Columbia International University-Prison Initiative. There I was trained to be both a missionary and a peacemaker to the most dangerous prison yards in South Carolina. Upon graduation in December 2019, both my sister and my lifelong mentor, Frankie San, were in attendance.

God has given purpose for my life. In that purpose I found the daily desire to bring honor to my life, the life of my victim, and my family, through my service to God. He has shown me He had a plan and purpose for my life and the joy it has brought is immeasurable. The justice system said "execute him." The prison system said "isolate him." The parole system said "let him die in prison." But God extended His mighty, loving, hand once again. On March 18, 2020 after 45 years behind prison walls, He set the captive free. My parole was granted. I am free, healthy, strong, and so in love with Jesus Christ. I want to continue to share this redemption story with the world; the story of His love, grace, and the mercy the judge pleaded for 45 years ago.

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For years I was a disciple of the thief. Today I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. The victory is His, and the Abundant Life Is mine in loving service to our Father. God bless you and please know the abundant life is available to you!

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