

Nothing But the Blood of Jesus

Jarret Keith grew up with his family in southern California. They moved around a lot. Some of his family's moves were to areas with gang activity.

Jarret became friends with kids who were smoking, drinking, and stealing. He decided to make the same poor choices. "My life was pretty much just a big party," Jarret says about his teenage years. Beginning at age 10, he smoked weed and drank. Then he started dealing ... and things quickly went from bad to worse.

When he was 19, the police arrested and put him in jail. "I was facing 50 years to life, and I was being charged with first-degree murder," Jarret remembers.

Party over.

"It was like a dungeon," Jarret says about his group jail cell. "There [were] no windows. It was all concrete and steel bars. I was in a tank with about 12 other individuals. Most of them were much older than I was."

Jarret, helpless and vulnerable, decided to sit in on the Wednesday night church services at the jail. He remembers two older men coming in to sing hymns with the prisoners. They would sing songs like "At Calvary," "There's Power in the Blood," "The Old Rugged Cross," and "Nothing But the Blood of Jesus."

That last song stuck in Jarret's heart and mind. "I would find myself in the dayroom, walking around trying to put on a tough face and posture, because there was the need for that to survive in that environment. And in my head, I would be humming and whistling 'Nothing But the Blood of Jesus.'"

Jarret went back to church one night. He said to himself, "Man, my life is a disaster. ... I may die in jail or in prison, and I need God for more than just getting out. I need God period." Jarret believed that Jesus died for him and that He rose from the dead. He realized that if he confessed that Jesus is Lord, he would have to give up doing whatever he wanted. But that was a price he was willing to pay.

"I fell on my knees in my cell, on the concrete, and I prayed and accepted the Lord," he says.

Jarret says he was far from perfect when he got to prison. He wasn't the "Apostle Paul preaching the Gospel to everybody," he says. He was a work in progress.

Jarret was in county jail for two years while going through court proceedings. His first trial ended in a mistrial. During his second, he was convicted of a lesser charge and sentenced to 15 years in state prison.

Part of that progress was TUMI.

"It turned out that TUMI was just the biggest blessing," Jarret says. "I was really appreciating the fellowship that happens in TUMI. I was growing in the knowledge that's being passed on through the TUMI curriculum. Really, I was being led and pastored by the men and women who were coming in to lead the TUMI classes in the prison."

Many believers don't experience an overnight transformation. That's why discipleship through in-prison programming like TUMI is so important. These programs provide people the time and space needed to be formed into the image of Christ.

The state of California eventually granted Jarret parole. Once released, he settled into his new life and found a job. But he felt God calling him to the ministry of the Word. Jarret moved to LA to attend Fuller Theological Seminary.

He has been in school for two years now. He says his goal is "to go back inside, serve as a chaplain within the prison system, and just continue to give back the help that God has given to me."

In many ways, Jarret has already begun this work. He teaches rehabilitative programs in prison and is working with men and women coming home after decades of incarceration. He helps them find jobs and educational opportunities and connects them with prosocial activities and support groups. And he's working on setting up a reentry home in San Diego for graduates of the TUMI program.

When he looks back on his life, it doesn't always make sense. But Jarret is learning that that's OK. "God doesn't need to rely on what makes sense. His plans don't require full cooperation by anyone or any entity. He is able to make a way out of no way. He is able to make something out of nothing. He is able to take a little bit and make a whole lot out of it."