

STEVE GALLAGHER

the
WORD
of their
TESTIMONY

IN-DEPTH STORIES OF EIGHT PEOPLE
WHOSE LIVES HAVE BEEN DRAMATICALLY CHANGED



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The Word of Their Testimony

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INTRODUCTION

“And they overcame him... by the word of their testimony.”

(Revelation 12:11 NIV)

Satan has a malevolent plan for every human soul on earth. One of the names Scripture assigns him is “Apollyon.”* The meaning of this word is “destroyer,” or, perhaps a little more accurate would be “one who ruins.” The devil devastates, desolates and destroys people’s lives through the spiritual corruption of their souls.

Such a work must be accomplished through acquiescence: the door to a person’s heart can only be opened from the inside. Therefore, the enemy vigilantly watches for any opportunity to gain entrance. Once a demon is allowed to establish a foothold within a person’s soul, it is often only a matter of time before it solidifies into a stronghold. The “works of the devil” often manifest themselves as fetishes, phobias, hang-ups or addictions; just the kind of nasty slime one would expect a serpent to leave behind.

Moreover, these evil phantoms work tirelessly to enhance

* Revelation 9:11.

a person's faults and to diminish his natural qualities. Their great passion is to corrupt the human being (made in the image of God) into something as ugly, deformed and morally repulsive as themselves.

They accomplish this by building up intricate webs of pride, ambition, lust, selfishness and faulty thinking within the person. The greater the person's compliance with the enemy, the more his soul will be depleted of anything good and meaningful. Many are left with cavernous voids inside which they attempt to fill with the very things that are ruining them.

THE BUILDING OF A TESTIMONY

Every true believer has two halves to his testimony. The first half is the Spirit's work leading up to conversion; the second is the work of sanctification[†] that goes on afterward.

The saving of a human soul begins with the powerful, intricate, hidden work of the Holy Spirit. He often spends years influencing a person's thinking and circumstances to bring him to the point of humbling himself in repentance to God. This is no small victory, but it is still only half the battle. There isn't a solitary saint in heaven that the Lord left in the same condition as He found him.

As I stated earlier, Satan ruins souls by constructing elaborate mazes of deception, warped thinking and spiritual strongholds. But consider the Apostle John's amazing insight into how the Lord reverses the devil's work in a human soul: "The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil." (1 John 3:8)

When a person repents of his rebellion and ongoing sin, the Lord begins an inward work to undo Satan's ruination of his soul. This process is an example of the spiritual phenomenon Solomon referred to when he said there is "a

[†] The Greek term *hagiasmos* literally means "the process of setting apart or making holy."

time to tear down and a time to build up.” (Ecclesiastes 3:3) The Lord tears down and destroys the works of the enemy, while at the same time building up or nurturing the fruit of the Spirit within the believer’s soul. It typically takes the Holy Spirit years to unravel the “spaghetti mess” the enemy has left behind. For some people, great damage has been done and it is no quick fix to undo it.

Thus, a genuine Christian testimony conveys both God’s work leading the person to the salvation experience and the process of conforming him into “the image of Christ” (Romans 8:29) which continues afterward. The enormous value the Lord puts upon a human soul makes every such reclamation story exceedingly important to His kingdom.

A WORD FROM GOD

As I began writing this book, the Lord spoke very clearly to me one morning. He said, “Believers are coming into a time when their testimony is all they will have.”

To grasp the significance of His statement, we must first understand the substance of a person’s testimony. The Greek word “testimony” used in Revelation 12:11 (quoted above) is *marturia*, a sister to the word *martyr*. In the Roman world of the day, *marturia* was often used to describe evidence given in a court setting.

From the concept of evidence, the term also came to be used to describe a person’s inward character—the evidence that the person was actually what he seemed to be. For instance, when Paul was detailing to Timothy the characteristics that should be in the life of a minister he wrote, “And he must have a good reputation (*marturia*) with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.” (I Timothy 3:7) The venerable apostle was telling his protégé that there must be evidence that the man was truly living a godly life before being installed into

such a responsible position.

How opposite this is to the world's thinking! For instance, consider what Joseph Kennedy told his sons John, Robert and Ted as he was preparing them for a future in politics. He said, "You must remember it's not what you are that counts, but what people think you are."¹

That is the sort of disingenuous image-building that is contrary to the Kingdom of God; and, I hate to say, is far too often present in the Evangelical Church. Such Christians will one day discover that their ability to present a respectable image to other people will not help them face the persecution that is surely headed our way. People with nothing more than a hollow image of godliness will not be able to withstand the terrific pressure they will come under to renounce Christ. The power of a believer's testimony is found in the reality of what he has fought through in his life with God. It is that testimony of the Holy Spirit's work within the soul that every believer will need firmly intact in the days ahead.

COMBAT VETERANS

There is one more term that we must consider: "And they *overcame* him..." The Greek term for "overcame" is *nikao*, which, according to Strong's Dictionary means: "to *subdue* (literally or figuratively): - conquer, overcome, prevail, get the victory."² It is used 24 times in the New Testament, but 15 of those occurrences are found in the book of Revelation. Indeed, the word "overcomer" describes someone in great spiritual conflict, the very thing predicted for Earth's final days. Believers will be required—as Christ was—to overcome the temptation to fall into a mindset of self-preservation in the midst of a very hostile world.

The truth is that, even in peaceful times, walking the Narrow Path of true Christianity is not an easy venture. What could be more difficult than to resist every natural inclination...to learn

to replace self-trust with dependency on an invisible Being... to constantly strive to put the needs of others before one's own...to resist every temptation to exalt or defend oneself... to take great care to find and live the will of God? Let's face it, any coward can live for Self, but it takes great courage to live for God. This is undoubtedly what Jesus was thinking when He said, "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force." (Matthew 11:12) The Christian life is one long battle. How much more so when the spiritual warfare between the Kingdom of Light and the kingdom of darkness is intensified in the Last Days?

How can believers know how they will respond to persecution and threats of martyrdom? They only need to look at the way they are living now to predict how they will respond later. The truth is that it often takes a crisis to prove the mettle of a person's character. Heroes and cowards don't always stand out in everyday life. It often isn't until some calamity occurs that their true character emerges.

The movie, *The Hiding Place* provides a classic example of this truth. Corrie and Betsy Ten Boom would certainly have been considered unlikely heroines, but when terrified Jews began showing up at their doorstep looking for shelter, they threw themselves into meeting the need—in spite of the terrible danger to which it exposed them. They were prepared to respond bravely to the threat of the Nazis because they had already established a long track record of putting the needs of others before their own. Why would anyone expect them to act differently under duress?

A contrast to their bravery was the spineless behavior exhibited by a local minister who showed up at their family business one day to have his watch repaired. Betsy saw him as a perfect candidate to care for a newly arrived Jewish infant, but the man did not have the spiritual wherewithal to look beyond his own interests. "It's illegal!" he exclaimed. "I have

a family to think of.”

What these three individuals experienced during the years of Nazi oppression is a portent of what End Time Christians will face. “But you must realize,” Paul wrote, “that in the last days the times will be full of danger.” (II Timothy 3:1 PHP)

How will you and I react when facing overwhelming pressure to abandon our faith? The example of the Ten Boom family makes it clear that the kind of courage needed in such a time will not come from one’s natural disposition, but from the life in God each of us has maintained prior to the beginning of such tribulation.

THE WORD OF THEIR TESTIMONY

This book contains the “testimonies” of a number of people I know personally and intimately. I know their faults and strengths, their failures and victories, and the challenges through which they have struggled. I have been an eyewitness to the Lord’s work in their lives and therefore can offer “evidence” of the character God has built within them.

It is true that their backgrounds could hardly be more different: a professional musician, an ex-gay activist, a big city police officer, a Fortune 500 executive, a cat burglar, a heroin-dealing gangster, an Amish homosexual and a couple ministering amidst the drug cartels in South America. Yet, there is one prevailing characteristic that each of them holds in common. In spite of great opposition, significant obstacles or even sinful bondages, they never quit fighting. They failed in ways—some failed often—but they kept “pressing on toward the heavenly calling.”

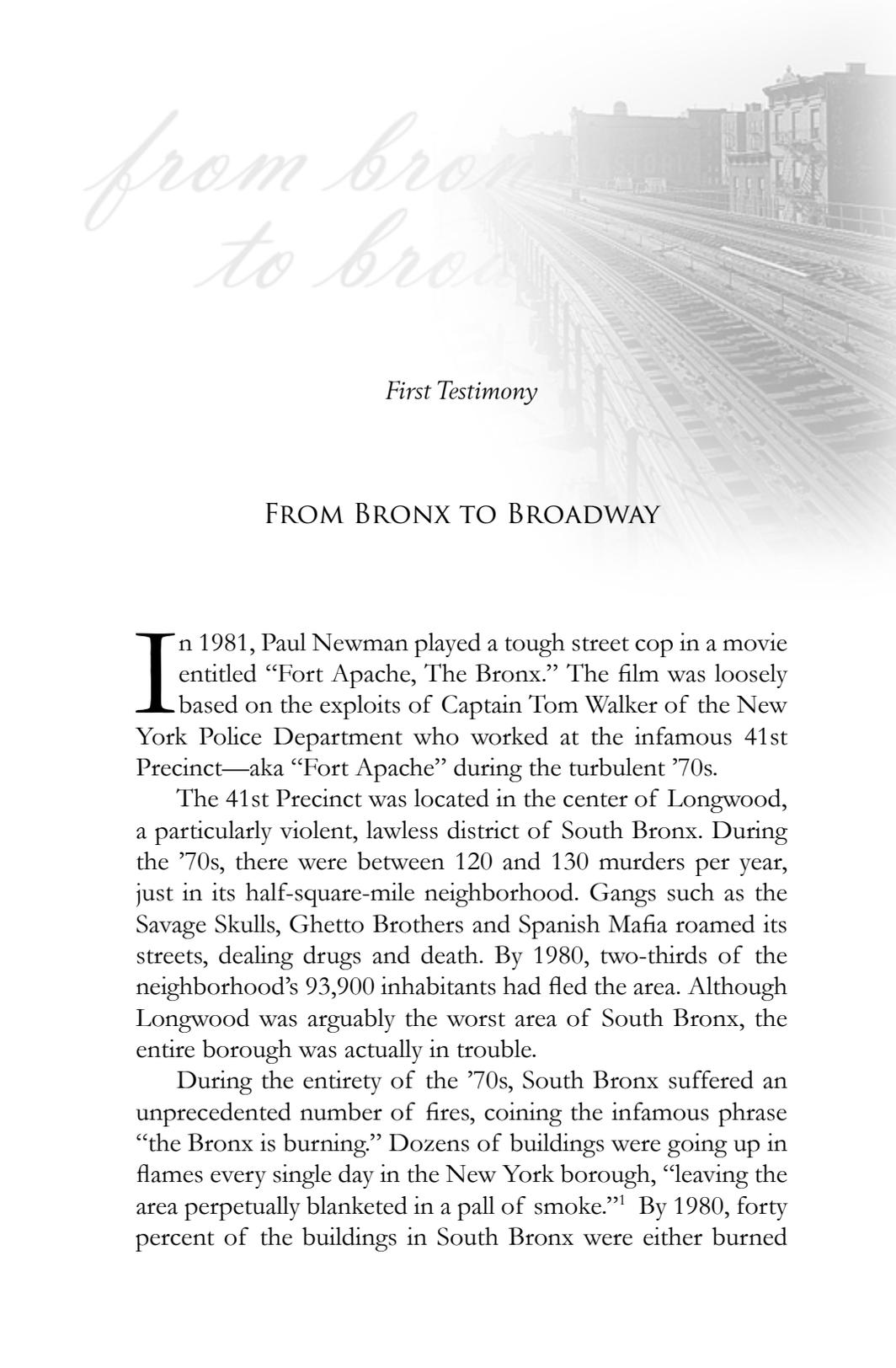
This isn’t a book sharing stories of wicked sinners who simply mended their ways and started attending church. Until there is “evidence” that a person has allowed the Holy Spirit to form godly character within him, he really has no testimony.

No, this is an account of people who have proven

themselves in conflict; people who overcame the temptations and threats of the world to live their lives in such a way as to honor Christ.

Dear reader, we are coming into a time when all we will have to stand on is the testimony we have allowed God to forge within us. Do we have a track record of partial obedience—picking and choosing when we will obey the Lord? Then we will most certainly deny Him when the pressure to do so is overwhelming. Do we have a history of obeying the Lord even when it is difficult? Even when it forces us out of our comfort zones? Even when it goes against our carnal natures? Then we will do the right thing even in the face of danger. The way we live our lives now is determining how we will handle adversity then.

I have presented these eight testimonies in the hope that they will encourage you in your own battles and difficulties. In a sense, they provide a roadmap through the End Times. Failures? Yes. Faults? Most certainly. Setbacks? Not a few. But through all the battles they encountered, these believers continued struggling to win life's great war with the enemy. In the end, I trust that it will be said about all of them, and you as well: *“And they overcame him... by the word of their testimony.”*



*from bronx
to broadway*

First Testimony

FROM BRONX TO BROADWAY

In 1981, Paul Newman played a tough street cop in a movie entitled “Fort Apache, The Bronx.” The film was loosely based on the exploits of Captain Tom Walker of the New York Police Department who worked at the infamous 41st Precinct—aka “Fort Apache” during the turbulent ’70s.

The 41st Precinct was located in the center of Longwood, a particularly violent, lawless district of South Bronx. During the ’70s, there were between 120 and 130 murders per year, just in its half-square-mile neighborhood. Gangs such as the Savage Skulls, Ghetto Brothers and Spanish Mafia roamed its streets, dealing drugs and death. By 1980, two-thirds of the neighborhood’s 93,900 inhabitants had fled the area. Although Longwood was arguably the worst area of South Bronx, the entire borough was actually in trouble.

During the entirety of the ’70s, South Bronx suffered an unprecedented number of fires, coining the infamous phrase “the Bronx is burning.” Dozens of buildings were going up in flames every single day in the New York borough, “leaving the area perpetually blanketed in a pall of smoke.”¹ By 1980, forty percent of the buildings in South Bronx were either burned

down or abandoned,² leaving the blighted area resembling the bombed-out cities of post-War Europe.

It was the squalid, garbage-strewn, burned out neighborhood of Longwood that a black, Puerto Rican kid named Charles Rivera* called home. Hopelessness hovered like a cloud of foreboding darkness over his neighborhood. And there was no escaping the overwhelming sense of fear in which the helpless little boy lived. He never knew when older kids, or perhaps a gang, would attack him or when guns would be drawn and bullets would fly in front of the bar on the corner. South Bronx was the only world this little boy knew. Prosperity, security and peace—concepts most Americans take for granted—were unknown to him.

Charles lived with his Puerto Rican grandmother, her husband and his two “sisters” in a two-bedroom apartment a few blocks away from Fort Apache. One would like to think that a little kid forced to live in such an environment would be sheltered from the harshness of it in a loving, nurturing home, where his parents would know the value of establishing an atmosphere which fostered stability and security in a youngster’s life. But such was not the case for little Charles.

His chaotic home was dominated by the strong presence of his grandmother, whom he was raised to believe was his mother. A controlling, schizophrenic woman, she set the tone which fostered a lot of bickering, backbiting and even violence in the crowded apartment.

Her self-centeredness knew no bounds. For instance, there were times she would send her little grandson into stores with instructions to steal specific items. This usually went unnoticed, but one time he got caught red-handed by a clerk. The quick thinking grandmother walked up and gave the boy a good whipping in front of the man, lest he correctly guess that she had put Charles up to it.

* Throughout the book, I will use an asterisk behind all pseudonyms. While some identities must be protected for various reasons, the stories are factual.

His grandmother's husband, who had become mentally unstable years earlier after killing a man, was a heavy alcoholic who could no longer control himself, often shaking and wetting himself. He did contribute some money to the household—when he could hold it together enough to work—but the dysfunctional family was exceedingly poor nonetheless. There were times Charles was happy to be able to eat a mayonnaise sandwich. Other times he stood in line at the Relief office to get a can of peanut butter or a box of powdered milk for the family.

Both of his “sisters” were heroin addicts who paid for their drugs through prostitution. He watched horrified one time when the younger sister was stabbed in the stomach in front of him. She survived but would later die from a heroin overdose. More than once he walked into the bathroom to find one of his sisters nodding out on the toilet, with a needle hanging out of her arm.

His oldest sister was dubbed “Big Aleta” because she was... well, big. She was a heavyset 5' 9” and not the kind of woman anyone would want to provoke. For instance, she was walking down a Harlem street with a male friend one evening when two men suddenly appeared in front of them—one of them wielding a baseball bat—demanding their money. When she started yelling at them, the guy she was with took off running. The mugger with the bat hit her in the head, probably thinking it would shut her up. Bad decision. It only infuriated her and, in an instant, she stabbed both of them.

One day, when Charles was 11-years-old, Big Aleta told him she wanted to talk to him. She seemed uncharacteristically serious that day. The two of them slipped out of the apartment and sat on the concrete steps leading down to the street.

“Charles,” she began. “I gotta tell you somethin’.” She did not have the Hispanic accent which characterized his grandmother's speech. She looked and spoke like a black woman.

“What’s that, sis?”

“That woman in there? She ain’t yo’ motha’,” Big Aleta stated matter-of-factly.

This sent the adolescent’s mind reeling. She was the only mother he’d ever known. Charles needed to consider this troubling news. When he regained his composure, he asked, “Well, who is my mother?”

“I’m yo’ motha’, Charles.” The shocked boy didn’t say much at the time, but later, when he was alone with his grandmother he asked if it was true.

“Yes, Charles, Big Aleta is your mother,” she admitted.

“Why did you lie to me?” he demanded. “Why didn’t you ever tell me that she was my mother?”

An ugly look came across his grandmother’s face—a look that he well knew could mean trouble. “Let me tell you somethin’ young man!” she huffed. “Your mama was ready to flush you down the toilet. The only reason you’re alive today is that I promised her I would raise you myself!”

The whole conversation was devastating to him. What little security he had in life had just been yanked out from under him. From then on, life seemed more and more confusing and unpredictable.

LIFE ON THE STREETS

Charles didn’t find much more affirmation at PS (public school) 134 either. Teaching in South Bronx was the bottom of the scale for the instructors of the New York City Department of Education. Most of the kids they dealt with were from dysfunctional homes and were often wild and unruly. It was unquestionably a difficult assignment for teachers sent there, but, tragically, it was often the children who took the brunt of their frustrations.

For instance, Charles was talking to another kid in his fifth grade class one day when the teacher came up behind him

and thumped him in the head with his knuckles. Flush with anger over this unprovoked attack, Charles threw his book and hit him squarely in the face, sending the older man stumbling backward. Of course, all the blame was assigned to him and he was subsequently suspended from school. The boy was so chagrined by the unfairness of it all that he rarely returned to school after that.

Being truant from school, Charles spent a lot more time out on the streets now. The group of kids he had grown up with on his block had recently formed a gang and he became a member by default. They called themselves the Royal Knights. These boys would do anything to break the dreadful boredom and monotony of life on the streets: smoke marijuana, have sex with girls or even rob people.

One time, a few of them traveled north into the better neighborhoods of North Bronx and robbed a white guy. The police captured them before they made their escape southward and arrested all three of them. This was the first time Charles encountered racism, hearing himself referred to in unfamiliar terms like “nigger” and “Sambo.” The police officers threatened to send him upstate to the maximum-security juvenile detention facility known on the streets as “the gladiator school.”

“You know what they’re going to do to you there, nigger? They’re going to make you into a woman! Ha, ha, ha!” As it turned out, it was only a scare tactic and they allowed his irritated grandmother to pick him up and take him home.

A couple years later he and his buddies happened across a member of another gang. There were words, threats, an altercation and one of his friends stabbed the guy. It was then that Charles realized he and his friends were going in two different directions. He simply didn’t have the taste for blood they possessed. Not long after that incident he approached the leader—a young man who would be shot dead within a few months—and announced he wanted to quit the gang.

“Oh, you want to desert your brothers, huh?”

“It’s not that, man,” reasoned Charles. “I just ain’t into all this gangbangin’ stuff. That just ain’t me.”

“That’s no problem, man.” With that, he motioned to the other guys, who encircled Charles with menacing looks on their faces. Before he knew what was happening, the fists and boots of fifteen kids were mercilessly raining down on him. The bruised and bloodied victim woke up on the sidewalk a few minutes later seeing “stars,” but, to his relief, his tormentors were gone. He was, as they say on the streets, “beaten out of the gang.”

And so it was that at thirteen years of age, Charles had already settled an important question every ghetto kid must come to grips with at some point: whether or not he would participate in the violence of gang life.

About that time, his grandmother’s husband died of liver failure, leading her to make the decision to move back to Puerto Rico. Charles considered himself a black American and had no interest in his Hispanic roots. He refused to go with her and was left to fend for himself on the streets. Many nights he would sleep on the subway which made the 54-mile roundtrip to Coney Island and back through Queens and Brooklyn. Sometimes he would wake up to a car full of early-morning commuters staring at him. Most of the time, however, he slept in the basement of a tenement building located nearby. As difficult as life was on the streets, anything was a welcome relief to the turbulent home in which he had grown up.

THE MUSIC WORLD

In one of those strokes of fate, Charles soon discovered what would become the love of his life and would provide his escape from the ghetto. It happened one day when a friend

suggested he learn how to play the drums. He liked the idea but wasn't sure how good he would be at it. His pal brought him over to his house and gave him a quick lesson.

After turning the dial to a local "soul" station, the boy said, "Go ahead, Charles. Act like you're the drummer for the band!"

So Charles tuned into the rhythm of the music and beat those drums with the confidence of a professional. To his friend's amazement, he was a natural. From that day on, playing the drums became the great passion of his life. He could play for hours, escaping into his own little world where there was no fear and no rejection. He could not be hurt there; he was safe and in control.

Before long, he joined a band of musicians who played the soul music of the day and billed themselves as "Sound Incorporated." At first they just spent a lot of time rehearsing in the leader's basement, sometimes spending hours jamming. Before long word got around that they were pretty good and doors began opening up for them to play in bars, clubs, dance halls and block parties. By the time Charles was fourteen years of age, he had already played in the Celebrity Club, one of the most prestigious black nightclubs in the country. Performing in the band gave him purpose in life—a sense of belonging.

Charles instinctively knew that his success would be limited without a more formal music education so he was thrilled when a music teacher befriended him. He wanted to learn how to read music and make the most of his abilities. What meant even more than this was the simple fact that an adult was actually taking a real interest in him as a person—something he had never experienced before. It wasn't long before the naïve boy came to realize that such affection had a price tag attached to it. The teacher was a homosexual pedophile who took advantage of the vulnerable 15-year-old by seducing him into a sexual relationship. The troubled teenager was not homosexually inclined, but was willing to be involved in return for food, a warm bed, and the musical instruction he received. It was also in the

molester's home that Charles was first exposed to the dark, seedy world of pornography.

One evening, while his band was rehearsing, three young black men showed up to watch Charles and his buddies play. It was a well-known group called the Delfonics, who had several hits on the music charts to their credit. William and Wilbert Hart and Major Harris had been playing soul music for a number of years by this point. The teenagers were astounded to see accomplished musicians of this caliber show up to listen to them. The Harts and Harris liked what they heard and invited them to travel with them as an opening act. The boys couldn't believe that they were in the big leagues now!

Over the next couple of years, they played in the hottest clubs around the country, accompanying the Delfonics from city to city in a motor home. The living conditions were challenging and the teenagers weren't paid much, but they were thrilled to be part of such an exciting life. It wasn't uncommon for them to share the stage with singers like Al Green and groups like the Temptations or Kool & the Gang. Charles was regularly backstage with the stars of the black music industry. He even met Muhammad Ali and his mentor, Elijah Muhammad one night! This arrangement continued for two years and helped Charles to begin establishing a reputation as a good drummer in the world of black music.

TRAGEDY STRIKES

Life was beginning to deal this young man a decent hand for a change. It wasn't long before he got a small apartment, all to himself, near the Rockefeller Center in Manhattan. He was having the time of his life, dating beautiful girls, snorting cocaine and partying with popular entertainers.

One night in 1975, Charles stopped by to see Big Aleta who was staying in a dumpy hotel a few blocks from his place in Manhattan. She had abandoned her life of prostitution by this time but was still using heroin. He would actually smoke

marijuana with her on occasion, maintaining some semblance of a relationship with the woman who had given him physical life, but so little else. This particular evening, she was so high that she couldn't even feel the lit cigarette burning into the flesh of her chest where it had fallen. He put the cigarette out and went home as she slept. He was a little concerned about her the next morning so he called the hotel to check up on her, asking for her room number.

"The body is in the room," came the monotone answer from the front desk clerk who had long since grown accustomed to such events.

Staggered at the words, Charles yelled back, "What are you talking about?!"

"The woman in that room died last night," came the slightly irritated response. "I hear she overdosed."

Later that day, Charles was summoned to Bellevue Hospital. An orderly led him down a sterilized hallway, into a cramped room and up to a small viewing window. Charles noted the same calloused attitude from the medical aide he had seen in the hotel clerk; the same emotionless hardness he had grown so accustomed to in New York life. "Please step up to the window and tell me if you recognize the person," the man droned. With a pounding heart, he stepped forward hesitantly, afraid of what he would see. The body was wrapped in a heavy black bag with only the woman's head protruding uncovered from the end. The head was swollen—a mere caricature of his mother. But there was no mistaking the face he had once known as only his sister's. "It's my mother," he said with resignation, all his energy seeming to drain from his body as he stood there.

Charles handled this blow as he handled all disappointments in life: by throwing himself into his music and into his increasing obsession with sex. By this point, he had left Sound Incorporated and was working as a freelance drummer for different groups and venues. He would typically make a couple

hundred dollars a night working as an independent contractor. He liked the freedom of this arrangement: not having to deal with the growing frictions with other band members that are so typical in the music world. In other words, this tactic meant he had no hassles and no strings. His reputation in the black music world of New York had become so solid by now that he could land a job practically anywhere.

Charles played on the road with bands, he played in New York nightclubs, he even started picking up work playing with ensembles and small orchestras in off-Broadway productions. It was through his connections in those circles that he landed another big break. He was invited to be the drummer in Cab Calloway's band that took the Broadway musical, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* on the road.

Not long after that tour ended, he became a member of the band playing in *Timbuktu!*, a 1978 musical that lasted for 221 performances at the famous Mark Hellinger Theatre on Broadway.

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Charles' biggest job to date occurred in 1981 when he was hired to play in Roberta Flack's band. The group traveled all over America, Canada and even to the Middle East. This was really the big time, staying in the finest hotels and arriving at concerts in chauffeured limousines. He didn't even have to set up his own drums; a road crew did everything for them!

No sooner did this gig come to an end than he was picked up by Ornette Coleman's jazz band. One of the events they played in 1982 was the Playboy Jazz Festival in Southern California. After the show, he and a couple guys attended a party in Los Angeles. Everyone was smoking pot and snorting cocaine—both of which had been part of his life for several years now. As he was talking to another musician, he noticed people disappearing into a back room.

“What’s that room back there?” he asked innocently.

“That’s the Base room, bro,” came the reply.

“Base room?”

“Yeah, man, they’re basin’ back there. Go on in and check it out.”

Walking into that room was one of the worst mistakes Charles ever made. There were pretty girls in the room encouraging visitors to smoke cocaine—and to keep smoking it. By the time he left the party that night, he had spent \$2,000!

That turned out to be a precursor of worse things to come. In the following months, Charles threw himself into freebasing cocaine, which opened a whole new world to him. Yes, he had snorted cocaine pretty regularly before this, but that was mostly just to keep himself going as he played in afterhours clubs around New York City. He enjoyed snorting cocaine, but it wasn’t something that controlled him. However, the euphoria he experienced freebasing took the cocaine high to a completely different level.

Charles became heavily addicted, to the point that he actually spent \$15,000 one night! He was making good money, but now he needed every bit of it to pay for his new addiction. He began borrowing money from other musicians, running up huge debts with his friends. As the addiction mounted, he also started ducking out of concerts during the breaks to get high, many times leaving the bewildered band to finish the set without a drummer. He simply failed to appear altogether at numerous other shows.

Charles Rivera was in deep trouble. During the following years he tried therapy, self-help books, even New Age teachings, but he couldn’t find freedom from his addiction, let alone the kind of fulfillment in life for which he longed.

HOPE FROM AN UNLIKELY SOURCE

Over the years, Charles would occasionally run into a girl he had known from his schoolyard days named Julie, who had

become a Christian. He would tolerate her “witnessing” to him, but it wasn’t Christianity that he had on his mind; it was sex. She, of course, was not interested.

On Halloween night in 1987, he stopped by a friend’s house and Julie was there. She could see he was in real trouble and started weeping over how ragged he had become. Feeling inspired, she walked over to his chair, laid hands on him and started praying in tongues. That freaked him out. “This girl’s crazy!” he thought to himself. Julie was not going to be deterred by his unresponsiveness, though. She passionately told him that the Lord could help him get free of drugs through a ministry in Brooklyn called Teen Challenge. She explained that David Wilkerson had started the work back in the early ’60s to help drug addicts get delivered through the power of the Holy Spirit. “Haven’t you ever heard of *The Cross and the Switchblade*?” she asked as she scrawled out the number of the facility on a scrap of paper.

Charles had never heard of the book and wanted nothing to do with Christianity. He had been around a number of gospel singers who would praise the Lord in front of a multitude of fans and then, after the show, would get high or engage in fornication or even homosexuality. Nevertheless, he stuffed the piece of paper into his pocket and headed back to his apartment.

By now, the agitation to get high was intensifying, and he knew he needed to find some crack. The problem was that he didn’t have any cash on hand. So he returned to his apartment, gathered his most valuable possessions—including his stereo and an expensive bicycle—and headed to a local pawn shop where he was given a paltry \$200 for all of it.

Charles immediately drove straight to his connection’s apartment in Harlem and handed the grizzled black man his cash. To his shock, the pusher took the cash, pulled a gun and told him to get lost! Charles was furious and tried to grab the money back from him. The dealer took a step back, cocked

the gun, put it in Charles' face and yelled, "Leave!"

Now Charles was frantic. Angry about getting ripped off, still feeling the intense, driving anxiety to get high burning in his body, he got in his van and headed north toward The Bronx. To add to his utter exacerbation, he drove several blocks and his van ran out of gas! By now it was nearly four o'clock in the morning. Charles was at such a low point in life that he couldn't even afford to buy a pack of cigarettes. He started walking northward toward The Bronx, picking up butts lying in the street.

By this point he had become so desperate that he actually started eyeing a woman standing at a bus stop, scheming as to how he could grab her purse. He gave up the thought almost as quickly as it came. "There's no way!" he said to himself, with the kind of deep sigh that comes from someone who is collapsing inside. "I can't do this anymore," he continued. "I should just kill myself and put myself out of this misery!"

It was then that he remembered the phone number in his pocket. "What was that place called Julie told me about?" he asked himself. "Teen Challenge?" He called the number and told the guy on the other end of the telephone that he needed help. "Sorry man, you have to go through the application process," the guy retorted.

Charles hung up the phone, but he was desperate. He went to the nearest subway station, hopped the turnstile and took the train into the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. He finally found the ministry and started banging on the door.

Eventually a sleepy-faced guy opened the door and told Charles he couldn't enter the program that way. But he was having none of it. The exacerbated musician just pushed past the man and said he wasn't leaving until he got help. The guy just shrugged his shoulders and found him a bed.

For the next 18 months, Teen Challenge became his

home. The first few months were spent there in Brooklyn, but later he was promoted into the second phase of training located in Brockton, Massachusetts.

One Sunday evening, as he was preparing to graduate, I came to the Brockton Assembly of God church to preach.[†] This was the church the men in the program attended for services. As was typical for me in those days, I gave my testimony and a strong call to repentance. People gathered around the altar at the end of the service, crying out to God to forgive them of their sins.

Charles was fascinated with my testimony of being set free of *sexual* addiction. He had been freed from drug addiction for nearly two years now but continued to struggle privately with masturbation and sexual fantasy. He approached me at the end of the service to talk to me about this remarkable new concept.

I told him about Pure Life Ministries, but he had spent the last two years in Teen Challenge and wasn't interested in entering another program. Nevertheless, as he tried to live the Christian life during the next few years, he kept coming back to the need to get free of his issues with sexual sin. Tired of feeling like a defeated Christian, he enrolled in the Pure Life Ministries Live-In Program in 1994.

Although Teen Challenge had provided a great deal of help to him—establishing God's authority in his life and teaching him self-discipline—the deeper issues of his heart had not yet been dealt with. Charles recounts his early days at Pure Life Ministries.

One of the first things the Lord began to deal with me about at Pure Life was a deep-seated attitude that I was a victim in life and, therefore, was not to be held responsible for my behavior. Somewhere

[†] I have been involved in the lives of every person in this book, so I have mentioned my involvement if it has played a significant role in the person's story.

along the line, I had come to understand what a poor upbringing I had had. Self-pity became an excuse for anything I wanted to do. It kept me from accepting responsibility for my actions. While I was at Pure Life, God made it very real to me that I was no longer a victim, but had, in fact, become a victimizer. I was destroying lives, just as others had once done to me. I used other people without any concern for them whatsoever. The only person I cared about was myself. The picture of Charles Rivera revealed to me by the Lord was horrible. I knew I needed to change.

God also began to show me how I had created a false image of Him. I seemed to vacillate between one extreme and the other. When I focused on God's love and goodness, I often used it to justify giving over to my sin. "If He's so full of grace, surely He understands my struggles." Then, the next day, after I had plunged myself into sin once again, I would make Him out to be an angry, vengeful tyrant who was looking to pour out His wrath on me. I could never seem to find the right balance.

I could see that the leaders at Pure Life Ministries had a fresh and real experience with God. It showed in their lives. I started to realize that the Lord was not the angry despot I had made Him out to be. He was not sick and tired of me and my failures. He really did love me and desperately wanted to help me. I saw the gravity and ugliness of my sin and how flippant I had been about it in the past. Yes, God loved me greatly, that I came to understand, but what also became very real to me at Pure Life Ministries was that "God is not mocked..."

I came to a crossroads where I had to decide if I was going to repent of my selfish lifestyle and

live out the mercy to others that God had shown me, or would I retreat back into my self-pity and refuse to face what I was like. That six months at Pure Life Ministries was the hardest period of my life. There were times the pain seemed unbearable, but I couldn't go on being a hypocrite. In the end, I knew what I saw there was real and I had to face the music. If I didn't respond to God I would end up dying.

Charles graduated the program in the spring of 1995 and went to work for the ministry in the office, continuing to live there for another eighteen months as God cemented into him the truths he had learned.

HELPING KIDS IN NEED

In late 1996, Charles began sensing that it was time to move on. He was hired as a counselor in a state-funded home for troubled children in the Cincinnati area. It was a wonderful opportunity for him to pour into others the love which the Lord had lavished on him. Unquestionably, it was a difficult situation he came into there. The kids had little supervision and had gotten so out of control that they were actually terrorizing the staff. Charles had enough experience on the streets to know how to bring order into the place. Although he moved back to Brockton, Massachusetts a few months later, he left that orphanage a better place than he had found it.

He was hired into a similar situation in Brockton at a maximum-security detention center for girls. This was a much more intense program than the one he worked at in Cincinnati. Although these girls were but children—between the ages of eleven and seventeen—they were incarcerated there for high-end crimes, including murder.

The center was actually located in the top floor of a

three-story community center, housing up to twenty-one girls at a time, two girls to a room. One of the first painful lessons he learned was to be careful about what he shared with these street-wise teens. There was a 15-year-old girl confined there who had been addicted to crack for some time. Charles passionately shared his testimony with her, telling her how God had set him free of the same addiction. The girl seemed to appreciate his sincere concern, but went straight to the other girls in the dorm and shared his story. When he showed up in the dorm later that evening, girls were calling him a crack-head!

Charles quickly learned from his mistakes and settled into his new occupation. In the meantime, he met a Christian Hispanic woman named Helen who had three teenage sons. She and Charles fell in love and married a few months later. It was a challenge raising those three boys who resented his presence in the home, but Charles did his best to maintain loving relationships with them.

If he had challenges at home, they were as nothing compared to what he often faced at work every night. The Center had recently hired a very humanistic director who was certain that the girls needed more freedom; needed to be shown trust, whether they deserved it or not; needed to feel like the staff was fully behind them. She had the locks removed from all their bedroom doors, giving them free run of the floor. Her idealistic notions probably sounded good in the halls of higher education, but they were hopelessly ineffective with street-hardened teenagers.

One night Charles showed up for his shift at the detention center to find that there was only one other staff-person on duty—and she was brand new. When he found out that the girls had asked her who was going to be on duty that evening—and that the naïve girl had actually told her that it would only be the two of them—Charles braced himself for trouble. “Tracy, don’t ever give up that kind of information to them again,” he scolded her.

He walked down the corridor where the girls' rooms were to discover that five girls were wide awake. That was unusual because they were usually asleep by then. Charles sensed that something was wrong. "Lord, help me," he prayed, as he speculated about what the girls were up to.

As he made his way down the hallway, one of the girls said she needed help with her shoes. That was another red flag, as the girls didn't possess street shoes. He started to enter her bedroom when three other girls bum-rushed him, trying to tie him up with string. As he attempted to break free from them (while being careful not to hurt them), Tracy froze up, not knowing what to do. She stood by helplessly as five girls rushed past her and headed right out the unlocked front door.

Charles finally managed to break loose from the teens holding him down and locked the door before any more could escape. As he was doing that, he heard the sound of breaking glass in one of the back rooms. A girl had removed the air conditioning unit from her window and was trying to escape down the side of the three-story building. She fell from the window, severely breaking her ankle as she landed. Charles eventually called for assistance. The escaping girls were quickly rounded up, but the incident left him so shaken that he actually smoked his first cigarette in years!

As difficult as it was for him to work there, he did his utmost to show the girls that he cared about them. He knew only too well what it was like to be an unloved, troubled teenager.

Meanwhile, Charles had been becoming increasingly involved in working with other young people outside of the facility. One thing he immensely enjoyed was putting on percussion demonstrations at high schools and other similar venues, teaching the kids basic fundamentals about drumming. And, of course, he took advantage of every situation to share his testimony about how God had rescued

him from a life of sex and drugs. One letter he received from a local YMCA director said the following:

On July 11, 2000 the Old Colony Y hosted a drummer, Charles Rivera, to conduct a workshop for our Youth Development Program's participants. The group in attendance were primarily teenagers, who responded very well to his performance. He presented his audience with samples of various drum techniques and demonstrated his own style, while sharing his personal history. This motivational and honest talk allowed the group to trust and relax with him... His impressive experience had a great impact on the teens when they heard of the great performers that he had played with, after hearing of the childhood he lived. He is a true success story...

The life of Charles Rivera truly is a success story, but he would be the first to say that whatever success he has enjoyed in life came from the hands of a merciful God. Yes, he had gone from the Bronx to Broadway, but much more importantly, he went from the "broad way" to the narrow path which leads to eternal life!

