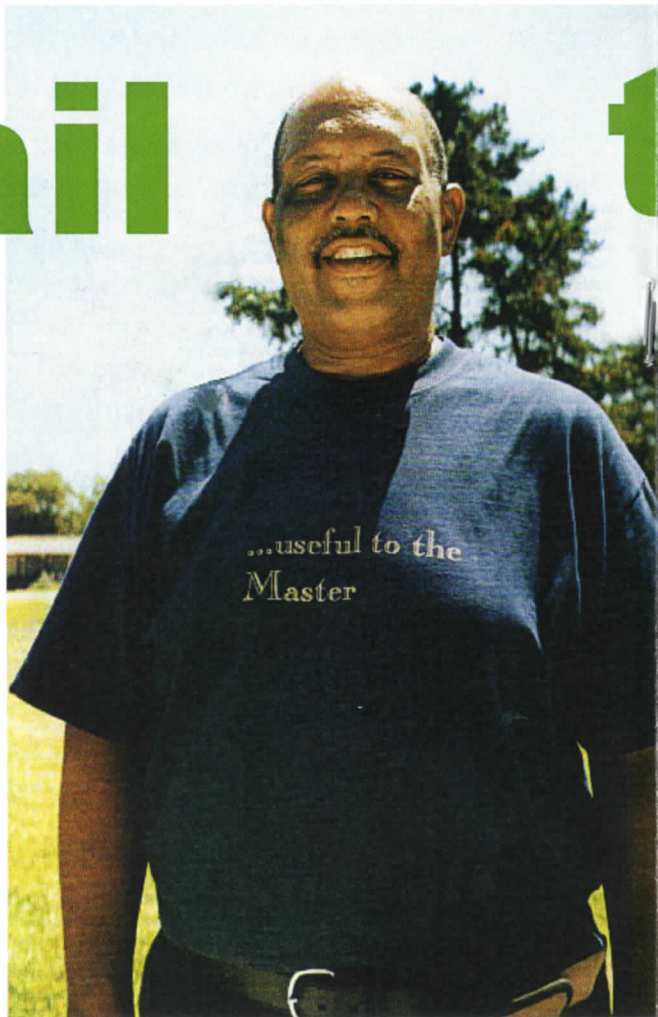


FROM

jail

to Jesus

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The life of a
convicted felon
is transformed



Article by Richard Maffeo
published in *Presbyterian
Today Magazine* Oct 2015

As a young adult, Calvin never expected to find himself in a church. Jail, yes. But church? The thought never crossed his mind. In those early years the 6' 2", 350 pound human tank inspired little else than fear in others. But things would become different for him...much different.

Born in a gang and drug-riddled area of St Louis, Missouri, Nolan learned to live and prosper on the streets. Before his eleventh birthday he'd already earned a nice chunk of change selling drugs. He quit school at sixteen and filled his free time shooting dice, selling crack-cocaine, marijuana, PCP...and anything else he could get his hands on.

It was only a matter of time before big trouble sunk its claws into him. In 1980, he and his buddies were shooting dice in the corner of the local school yard when a neighborhood thug robbed him at gun point.

Calvin swore he'd get even. He did just that, the evening he stepped into a crowded tavern and found him. Both men pulled their guns, but Nolan was faster. When the screaming stopped, the other man lay in an expanding pool of blood oozing from five bullet holes.

"The police didn't have no trouble findin' me," he said. "They found me the next morning smoking crack cocaine on my front stoop. They sent me to prison for three years for manslaughter."

After serving his time, he moved to Los Angeles to get away from the streets of St. Louis. But that only changed one dead-end for another. When he ran out of money he turned to robbery and bought himself a second tour behind bars.

Two years later, he again walked free. But within days, he fell in with his old friends and started the same cycle of drugs, dice and women. It didn't take long for his cash to dry up. Taking stock of his situation, he teetered on the brink of committing another robbery "because crime was the only thing I knew."

At the pleading of his mother, Nolan packed his bags and moved to Wichita to live with an aunt. But within weeks, he met friends he'd known in prison. They set him up in an apartment, gave him drugs, a gun, and a car. He was back to his old lifestyle.

One evening, his friends left him alone in the house while they went to a gang-fight. "I had nothin' to do, so I smoked their crack. Used up all they had, too."

In his stupor he knew his friends would kill him when they discovered what he'd done. Bone-chilling fear suddenly gripped him...fear so real it nearly sobered him. For the first time in his memory, he prayed.

As a youngster, he had heard about God, but never paid much attention. "I knew God was not someone to play with," he said, "and I didn't have my life right. But I didn't want to change."

But now, with terror wrapped around his gut, he looked toward heaven. "God, if you really exist," Calvin prayed, "help me out of this mess."

He stuffed a few clothes into a paper sack, bolted from the apartment and made his way to the bus depot and bought a ticket on the first bus that came along. It was going to San Diego. He boarded with two zip-lock bags of cocaine, a nine-millimeter handgun and \$3,800 dollars. Once again, he changed his address but he didn't know how to change inside.

Within a month of arriving in San Diego, he'd smoked all his crack, lost all his money and had no place to live. Then walking by a downtown storefront, he saw the sign in the window of a Rescue Mission. It read: "If you need help, come on in." He went in.

At the mission Calvin met the pastor of a local church who, week after week, invited him to Sunday worship. Finally, he agreed to attend, "just so he'd leave me alone" he said. It was then that he heard the gospel in a way that revolutionized his life.

"I never heard someone speak about God with that kind of authority," he said. "The pastor showed me the Scriptures about sin and salvation, and I wrote them all down. A few days later I said one of the pastor's prayers he had given me."

Nolan became a permanent fixture at the Mission, working as their maintenance man and groundskeeper. As he involved himself in the Bible studies at the Mission and attended worship services at his new church, his faith and understanding of Christ grew.

Several months later two area churches joined forces to expand their work among those without a church home in the city. During a time of worship at the Mission, he shared his testimony...the drugs, manslaughter, prison terms. He didn't soften anything.

The men from one of the churches sensed the hand of God on Calvin's life. After meeting with their pastor, they offered him a job as maintenance man at their church.

Part of his new responsibilities involved the upkeep of the church's state-licensed preschool and, to comply with state law, he was fingerprinted.

"I knew I'd be fired once the State got my prints," he said. State law mandated that convicted felons could not work around children. As expected, a few weeks later the church received a call from the licensing bureau. "Do you know you have a twice-convicted felon working for you?"

When Calvin learned of the call, he told the pastor he was quitting. "I didn't have the resources to fight the state," he said.

But the church leaders would not give up so quickly. They appealed the State's decision and requested a hearing. As both parties waited to go to court, the State ordered him to stay away from the preschool.

"It broke my heart," he said, "when the little kids waved at me and I had to keep on walking."

During the hearing the attorneys for the State repeatedly challenged the church, "Don't you know what Mr. Nolan has done?" And each time, the church leaders responded, "Yes, we know all about his past. But Christ has changed him. He's a new man." The pastor added, "If a man, saved and changed by the power of God can't work in a church, where can he work?"

Calvin's support did not come only from the church where he worked. More than sixty parents and community leaders flooded the chambers to defend their friend. A local attorney told the judge, "I would trust that man with my life...and with the lives of my family members."

The hearing lasted seven hours. Then came the waiting. Six weeks later the judge finally rendered his five-page decision. It concluded, in part:

"The list of witnesses who testified on behalf of Calvin Nolan is impressive both in number and in caliber. The court has heard many licensing discipline cases, but has never encountered such an outpouring of support. Therefore, there is substantial and convincing evidence to support a reasonable belief that he is of such good character as to justify an exemption to allow him to retain his position at the church and all its related duties." Calvin and his friends could almost hear heaven rejoice.

Scripture promises, "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things have passed away. Behold all things are new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Calvin started life in the ghettos of St Louis and wended through the darkest corners of drugs, death, and prisons. But God reached from heaven and took a lawless man and gave him much more than a change of address. God gave him a new heart.

Before I concluded my interview, Nolan was quick to add, "If God did that for me, He'll do it for anyone who asks for His help."

