

Testimony
Shon Hopwood Tells His Story

God's Hot Pursuit of an Armed Bank Robber

After I surrendered to the FBI, I surrendered to the Holy Spirit.

SHON HOPWOOD APRIL 23, 2014



It didn't take a moment of genius introspection to realize that doing life my way had led to nothing but disaster and destruction. It was the summer of 2009, and I had just completed an almost 11-year sentence in federal prison for my role in five bank robberies I had committed as a foolish young man. After my release, I moved into an apartment with the love of my life, Annie. Two weeks later I proposed. One week after that, we learned she was pregnant.

At age 35, I was about to become a husband and father. We had no money and no real plan for our future.

It may terrify some CT readers to know that I grew up in a Christian home in rural Nebraska with parents who had started a local church. When my high-school basketball career faded and college and the military fell through, I was left with a complete lack of purpose, susceptible to addiction and depression. When my equally adrift best friend suggested we rob a bank, it struck me as a legitimate idea.

We robbed five banks, with guns, and scared the tellers and patrons half to death. I knew it was wrong. Still, I couldn't stop the easy money and party lifestyle that large sums of unearned money brought me. It didn't stop until the FBI tackled me inside the lobby of a DoubleTree Hotel in Omaha. A year later, I stood with shaky legs and a trembling spirit before a federal judge, who sentenced me to more than 12 years in federal prison. I was 23.

Learning to Love the Law

Prison is not a place for personal growth. But there were small graces. To escape the men around me, I took a job in the prison law library. When I wasn't shelving books, I began learning the law. What I found was that I really enjoyed the process of solving legal puzzles for my friends, and so over the years, I took on fellow prisoners' cases, writing petitions they would then file in federal courts across the country, including the U.S. Supreme Court.

The odds of the Court hearing a case brought by a prisoner is less than 1 percent of 1 percent. And yet, the Court granted two petitions I had prepared for my friends. Fellow prisoners began calling me a "jailhouse lawyer."

Then another grace: Annie, my secret crush all through high school, began sending letters to me, and through hundreds of letters, phone calls, and visits, we became close friends.

I think many parents would have forsaken someone like me. But mine continued to pray for me. And my mom continued to send me Christian books, even after I told her to stop. I'd read those books and then wonder if God had forgotten about me. I wasn't quite ready for God, but I also couldn't rationalize the transformation I'd seen in the lives of my fellow prisoners.

Many mornings I'd walk over to visit my next cell-door neighbor, Robert, who was serving a 20-year sentence for a nonviolent drug offense. We'd chat over a cup of instant coffee, which always seemed to have the consistency of

sawdust and water. Robert would grumble about missing out on the lives of his children and how hard it was on his wife who was trying to hold the family together through two decades without him. Worst of all, he ranted about one of his friends who had turned against him and testified for the government at his trial. He said he wished that guy would die. It was clear to me that the bitterness of life and prison had consumed him.

One day I walked over to Robert's cell and watched as he smiled and danced around while sweeping the floor. My first thought was that he had scored some drugs. But when I asked why he seemed so different, I was unprepared for his response. "Shon, I'm with Jesus now," he said. Within days Robert had forgiven the man who had testified against him. Today Robert is back on his farm with his family, and once a week he treks back into prison to lead a men's Bible study.

Robert was neither the first nor the last prisoner I saw experience a complete and utter life turnaround. These inmates had a great effect on me because I saw how grace can transform everyone, even prisoners—perhaps especially prisoners.

I was finding it harder and harder to rationalize myself away from God.

Wise Counsel

I was released from prison in April of 2009, during the heart of the recession, when no one, let alone a former inmate, could find work. But within months, another grace arrived: I found a position at a leading printer of Supreme Court briefs in Omaha, helping attorneys perfect their briefs.

When Annie and I got engaged, we decided that we wanted my friend, pastor Marty Barnhart, to officiate the ceremony. God bless him, Marty wouldn't agree to do so until we had gone through his premarital counseling.

Our first counseling session was, in a word, memorable. Instead of discussing marriage, Marty asked what we believed about Jesus. When he talked about grace, that free gift of salvation, I listened, especially when he said that I could be forgiven. "Yeah, even you, Shon," he said.

The next day I couldn't escape the feeling that God had been pursuing me for a long time and that if I'd just abandon my stubbornness and selfishness, and hand everything over to him, I would find redemption.

What does it mean to be redeemed? And how do you redeem yourself after robbing five banks?

The answer is, you don't. The answer is that you need some help.

In Ephesians 1:7–8, Paul writes that in Christ "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us." To put it differently, because of our sins, none of us—and surely no former prisoner like me—can be redeemed on our own. We need the gospel of grace, which says that each of us matters and has worth because we're made in the image of God. Grace says we are not defined by our failures and our faults, but by a love without merit or condition.

God's grace was enough to redeem me.

Surrender

Nearly five years have passed since I made the most important decision of my life: to surrender to this grace. Annie and I got married, and she too became a believer. We were baptized together at Christ Community Church in Omaha. We had a son whom we named Mark, after my father, a man of faith who passed away after a long battle with cancer while I was still incarcerated. And a few years later we had a baby girl, whom we named Grace.

We moved from Nebraska to Seattle so I could attend the University of Washington Law School on a full-ride scholarship from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. During this time, I've volunteered and served toward a goal of ending mass incarceration in the United States. I'm motivated by the belief that prisoners are not beyond the grasp of God's redemption. And we've been nourished by our church, Mars Hill in Seattle, where we have met Christians who live out their beliefs with grace and compassion.

After I graduate this spring, we will move to Washington, D.C., and I will begin clerking for a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit.

To say we have been blessed doesn't begin to cover it.

Through it all, from the amazing to the mundane, God loved us. Through it all, God has given us a purpose. For me that purpose revolves around repentance, loving my wife and children, sharing the grace I've been given, and using my legal knowledge to assist those who cannot afford a decent attorney.

Looking back over the course of my life, I can see that although I rarely returned the favor, God hotly pursued me.

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