

Real Life Stories
The Life and Ministry of Jerry McAuley



Early Years

Born in Ireland in 1839, Jerry McAuley never knew his father. Since his mother was unable or unwilling to care for him, he went to live with his grandmother at an early age. One of his earliest recollections was of his grandmother on her knees praying the rosary. He would throw things at her, and she would get up and curse at him.

Growing up with no supervision, he roamed around stealing and causing trouble wherever he went. At 13, Jerry was packed up and sent off to New York to live with his sister and brother-in-law. This arrangement didn't last very long; he soon moved out and lived with a family on Water Street in the slums of Lower East Side New York. Thievery was his main "occupation"; he stole to buy clothes and drink.

During the next five to six years, Jerry became one of the most hated ruffians in the neighborhood. Later he said of himself, "Stealing came natural and easy. A bigger nuisance and loafer never stepped above ground."

His lifestyle resulted in many stays in the local jailhouse. Sometimes he was held only a few days and at other times he was imprisoned up to six months.

By his late teens, Jerry could strike fear into the heart of anyone he fixed his gaze upon. He was such a nuisance that even the rum sellers wanted to get rid of him. Looking at him, one would have had to wonder if he wasn't born to be bad. He had a retreating forehead and small, deep-set eyes with a wide mouth and heavy, projecting nose. He was strong, with a tall, well-built frame, long arms and large hands.

Prison Experience

At age 19, Jerry was falsely accused of highway robbery, convicted on trumped-up charges, and sent to Sing Sing prison for 15 years. It was January 1857.

At the end of the 30-mile train ride from New York City to Sing Sing, Jerry read the sign over the prison's entrance: "The way of the transgressor is hard." He knew this proverb well and had heard it many times.

In his book *Transformed*, Jerry wrote, "All thieves and wicked people know it well, and they know, too, that it is out of the Bible. It is a well-worn proverb in all the haunts of vice and one confirmed by daily experience. And how strange it is knowing so well that the way is hard, the transgressor will still go on it."

During this train ride was the first time in his life he had felt sorrow to the degree that he was willing to do something he had never done before: Obey rules. Jerry concluded that the only way he could get someone to listen to his story of innocence and help him was to follow the prison rules. Even though he knew he had done enough wrong in the past to deserve his sentence, he did not want to accept his loss of freedom without trying to do something about it. Born out of hopelessness and indignation, this feeling was nevertheless the first step to his later conversion.

Designed at the end of the 18th century, Sing Sing was a dark and damp maximum-security prison where talking was not permitted and torture was rampant. The coffin-like cells were 3 feet by 3 inches wide, 6 feet by 7 inches high, and 7 feet deep. There were no windows in the cells and merely a bucket for plumbing. The odor was so rank it was hard to breath at times and the mice, cockroaches, lice, fleas, and bedbugs were everywhere.

Jerry, assigned to hard labor in the carpet weaving shop, was a model prisoner for the first two years. He learned to read and write and he was allowed to use the library, which contained some religious material. But he opted to

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read cheap novels that were illegally sneaked into the prison. Eventually, like most prisoners of that era, his health began to fail. His restlessness and sullenness led to punishment, which worsened his health and made him even more bitter and hard-hearted.

Set Free

After five years in prison, Jerry experienced the first of three significant events that would lead to a real life change. At a Sunday chapel service, he heard Orville Gardner testify of his Christian conversion. Jerry was moved to tears by this testimony. He knew Orville was sincere because he had been his associate in many corrupt deeds.

The powerful testimony started Jerry's search through the Bible for answers. Night after night he read, which led to a burning desire to experience the same change he had seen in Orville's life. Some still small voice within him said, "Pray." He didn't know how to pray. The inner voice again said, "Don't you remember the prayer of the publican, 'God be merciful to me a sinner?'" The struggle went on and on.

"It was as if God were fighting the devil for me," Jerry later recalled. "To every thought that came up there came a verse of Scripture."

For three or four weeks, the mental struggle continued. Numerous times, he would get on his knees, but just as quickly jump up, unable to pray. One day a female missionary came to the prison and talked and prayed with him. When he saw and heard her literally crying out to the Lord in prayer, it moved him beyond words and intensified his struggle. That night, he resolved to stay on his knees until he found forgiveness.

"All at once it seemed as if something supernatural was in my room," he wrote in *Transformed*. "I was afraid to open my eyes. I was in an agony and the tears rolled off my face in great drops. How I longed for God's mercy! Just then, in the very height of my distress, it seemed as if a hand was laid upon my head and these words came to me: 'My son, thy sins which are many are forgiven.' I do not know if I heard a voice, yet the words were distinctly spoken in my soul. I jumped from my knees. I paced up and down my cell. A heavenly light seemed to fill it. A softness and a perfume like the fragrance of flowers. I did not know if I was living or not. I clapped my hands and shouted, 'Praise God! Praise God!'"

Even though there were to be many more years of drinking, fighting, and crime, Jerry always pointed to that night as his conversion to Christ.

On March 8, 1864, Jerry was pardoned and set free. The 26-year-old set out to associate with Christians, but their "wavering, unstable, half-and-half faith staggered me." The lessons he learned during this time later helped shape his style of operating the first rescue mission in North America.

A Life Reclaimed

Near the end of the 1860s, a sort of revival, known as the John Allen Excitement, broke out in the Water Street district of New York. Henry Little befriended Jerry and was instrumental in getting Jerry and his girlfriend, Maria, to a Bible study and prayer meeting at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Franklin Smith.

During the prayer time, Mrs. Smith fervently interceded on Jerry's behalf, crying out loudly and weeping great tears. When Jerry saw how much the woman loved his soul, it broke the hardness of his heart that had crept back in over years of willful sin. He began to weep, and, with the urging of the other Christians, he cried out, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." He repeated this over and over adding, "in Jesus' name" until he felt a calm joy and cleansing.

Franklin Smith described this life-changing event many years later: "There was a shock which came into the room, something similar to a flash of lightning, which everyone present saw and felt. Jerry fell down on his side prone on the floor with tears streaming from his eyes. 'Oh Jesus, you did come back, you did come back,' he cried, 'Bless your name.'" Henry and the Smiths became frightened; they jumped from their knees and ran outside.

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A Rescue Mission Vision

Soon after this second life-changing event, God sent a very important person into Jerry's life. Frederick Hatch was a self-made man whose shrewd business sense and tendency to be in the right place at the right time had led him to great wealth. His Park Avenue Victorian home was the epitome of respectability.

Hatch became Jerry's confidant, and, with unconditional acceptance, encouraged Jerry through some rough times in the next couple of years. From 1870 to 1872, Jerry worked at many jobs and lost most because of his bold testimony about Jesus as God prepared him for his future ministry.

About the same time, Maria began living her life for the Lord. After living in New Jersey and New England, early in 1872 she returned to New York where she and Jerry were married.

That same year, Jerry began to consider how he might serve God. One day while singing and praising God while working in a basement as a porter, Jerry had a vision of what he felt God wanted him to do: Jerry washed and cleaned people on the outside as they came into his house, and the Lord cleansed them from the inside. The tender moment of being in the presence of the Lord brought streams of tears as Jerry vowed to go and serve if the Lord opened the way.

This third significant life event led Jerry to raise money for a mission. With the help of Fredrick Hatch, in October 1872 he took possession of 316 Water Street. He used the money he had raised to repair the building and then opened Helping Hand for Men.

A Lasting Legacy

For the next 12 years, Jerry was instrumental in countless thousands' conversions to Christ. The tender love and acceptance he showed to the down-and-out won over many souls. Hundreds of missions have launched and millions of lives have been transformed as a direct and indirect result of Jerry's ministry.

On a September afternoon in 1884, Jerry went to be with his Lord. His death was the result of tuberculosis he had contracted while in Sing Sing's deplorable conditions. It seemed that all of New York came to his open-casket funeral to see this unique man who had the vision to open the first rescue mission for the people of the slums.

The rescue missions that are now in almost every major city of the United States and in many foreign cities are a testament to how God rescued Jerry from darkness and set him free to help rescue thousands more.

. . . Gleaned from Association of Gospel Rescue Mission