

**B**RUNO (not his real name) remembers exactly what he was doing when his life swerved off course in 2002 and exploded in ways he never imagined.

After many years of hard work, Bruno had finally reached the pinnacle of success. A confident entrepreneur, he owned his own business and a nice home near Baltimore, Maryland. He had a beautiful wife and drove a BMW.

But problems began to surface. Among other things, his marriage fell apart. Before long, he would do something he would live to regret.

I met Bruno in April 2002 at the medical unit of a Maryland detention center, where I served as chaplain. Bruno was a hulking figure with sad eyes—an expression that told you something was wrong. He was quiet and spoke in a deep baritone.

“I’ve been trying to reach you for a long time,” Bruno said, rising from a chair near his bed. He greeted me with a handshake and then offered me a seat.

The 30-year-old man rarely smiled and was often ignored by those around him. He felt that people shunned him because of his crime.

Bruno sat on his bed, and without any prompting from me, he began to tell me his story. As he did, his eyes became misty.

“I can’t believe I’ve ended up this way,” he said. “I’d never been in trouble with the law. I can’t believe this is happening.”

#### “WILL GOD FORGIVE ME?”

He paused as he tried to fight back the tears. His lips trembled.

He told me he was at the end of his rope, and all he could see was despair. He said he thought about taking his own life.

As he sat in front of me, with his elbows resting on his knees, he said he’d done the most horrible thing imaginable—he had killed another human being and was being held on a charge of first-degree murder.

“I’ve taken a man’s life . . . and I deserve whatever happens to me,” he said. He wiped his face and paused. Then he looked me in the eyes and asked, “But do you think God can forgive me?”

That question hit me with a wave of emotion as I thought about the good news of Jesus Christ and how He can forgive anything. I eagerly shared the message of God’s grace with Bruno. He listened intently as I told how Christ came to save us from our sins. I shared a number of scriptures, including Isaiah 1:18: “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “Though your sins are like scarlet,

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# Finding GRACE Behind Bars

they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (NKJV).

Bruno nodded as I spoke. “Christ came to save people just like you and me,” I said. “He died for your sins and the sins of the world. It doesn’t matter how far you’ve fallen or what you have done. His grace is available to save you and to bring you into the family of God.”

After quoting John 3:16—“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (NKJV)—I asked Bruno a simple question: “Have you trusted Christ as your Savior?”

Shaking his head, he said, “No,” and started sobbing profusely. When I asked if he would like to, he immediately said, “Yes.” He then bowed his head.

As I led Bruno in prayer, he acknowledged his sins and asked God to forgive him and to give him the gift of eternal life. When he lifted his head, he was beaming with a bright smile, and the sad eyes were no longer there.

## A NEW LIFE

Bruno’s life changed so drastically that he made an incredible impression on other inmates, correctional officers, and the entire medical staff. He led more than 30 people to Christ within a couple of months, and played a vital role in the religious programs at the facility.

A correctional officer once stopped me in the hallway. “Chaplain,” he said. “I have something I wanna tell you.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s about Bruno—he’s the real deal. I’ve been in this business almost 20 years. I know about inmates who get so-called ‘jailhouse religion.’ I’ve seen ‘em come and go. But Bruno? He’s the real deal.”

I smiled and thanked him. Later that day, the head of the nursing staff called me and gave a similar report. “Bruno’s been such a blessing to everyone here,” she said.

Having been a businessman for many years, Bruno liked having projects and keeping busy. Whenever he’d finish one

task, be it sweeping a floor or cleaning a toilet, he looked for something else to do. He seemed to enjoy helping people.

Whenever I’d go to visit him, I often found him sitting on his bed reading his Bible or sharing the Gospel with another inmate. Although many staff members believed his experience was genuine, there were a few who remained skeptical.

## TOUGH QUESTIONS

During the early months of his conversion, Bruno was ecstatic about his faith. He bore a bright smile, and he saw answers to his prayers. One day he asked me about prayer and his prison sentence.

**“I’ve taken a man’s life, and I DESERVE WHATEVER HAPPENS TO ME,” Bruno said. “But do you think God can forgive me?”**

“I’ve been wondering,” he said. “The Lord has been using me to do His will here. Since I’ve been faithful in serving Him these few months, and have led people to Christ, I want to continue serving Him right here at this facility.”

He said he also had been asking God to shorten his sentence so he could go out and serve Him in the free world.

While I encouraged him to pray about all things, I also cautioned him about getting out of his prison sentence. I advised him to pray, “If it be Your will.” At the same time, I said he must be willing to accept the punishment for his crime, as there are consequences for our actions.

“God will give you the grace and strength to do your time,” I said. “He can help you bloom wherever you are planted.”

Bruno later asked about the family and friends of the man he had killed. He

wanted to know if God would “fix it so they would forgive” him.

“It’s possible,” I said. “But some things take time. Whether they forgive you or not, you must remain faithful.”

## RUNNING OUT OF TIME

When I left him that day, he seemed a bit sad. I wondered if he would fall into depression and push his faith aside. When a few days passed without hearing from him, I became concerned, thinking something was wrong. Then, unexpectedly, I received an urgent call from the medical section where he was staying. The medical staff asked me to hurry.

I ran to the unit, praying along the way. When I reached the area where he was housed, I saw him weeping and holding the hand of someone lying on a stretcher and partially covered in a white blanket. “What’s going on?” I asked a nurse.

“Go on in,” she said. “Bruno wants to see you.”

I stepped inside the room and saw a male inmate on the stretcher; he appeared to be a rack of bones. He was pale and unshaven, and his eyes were half shut. He was barely breathing, and he coughed between breaths.

“Chaplain,” said Bruno. “He’s dying of AIDS. He don’t have much time. Help me pray for him. He needs to be saved . . . and we’re running out of time.”

Together, Bruno and I prayed for that man. We shared the Gospel with him and led him in the sinner’s prayer, pleading with him to trust in Christ as his Lord and Savior. The man made a profession of faith, and Bruno and I began rejoicing.

The nurse came and wheeled the man to another room. Bruno walked over to me and shook my hand. “Chaplain,” he said. “I would love to have a short sentence, but if I can keep doing this with the Lord’s help, I don’t care how long I serve.”

I looked at him with a big smile and said, “Amen, my brother. Amen.” ☩

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