

“Christ, the Cross and the Concrete Jungle is a story that throbs with the grace of God thriving in the most unlikely circumstances. It is an eye-opener. And more importantly a hope-builder.”

James Glass, Scotland and North-West England Regional Leader, Elim

“A unique narrative, backed up with God’s narrative, that takes you on a learning journey. Read it and enjoy the journey!”

Barry Woodward, author, *Once an Addict*; CEO, Proclaim Trust

“John’s story is a wonderful testimony of God’s grace in drawing him from the destructive jungle to a new life as a follower of Jesus Christ – and then equipping him to serve God both in the church and in the prison service.”

John Phillips, Beacon Light Trust

“Raw, at times heart-wrenching, but most importantly, loaded with hope! Hope that Jesus still transforms lives today. No matter your background, God can pluck you from the fire, and use you for His glory. John’s story proves this. This book is an exhilarating read that will challenge you to the core.”

Ricky McAddock, Co-Founder & Chief Executive, Street Connect

“John’s story is a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ. Not only does he have a story to tell, he is gifted in telling his story to others who have experienced this chaos firsthand. Here at HMP Edinburgh, we have distributed many copies of Christ, the Cross and the Concrete Jungle. John warmly points his readers to Jesus – I can think of no better commendation.”

Bob Akroyd, Chaplain, HMP Edinburgh; Lecturer and Postgraduate Supervisor, Edinburgh Theological Seminary

“Christ, the Cross and the Concrete Jungle is a story of grace. A true story of how God had his hand on John’s life working through different people not only to help him escape from a harsh and troubled beginning, but to bring him to the place where he helps bring hope to many.”

John Nonhebel, Executive Director, Prison Fellowship Scotland

CHRIST,
THE CROSS
AND THE
**CONCRETE
JUNGLE**

JOHN CALDWELL



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INTRODUCTION TO NEW EDITION

BACK TO THE JUNGLE

THE pint of lager flew through the air and smashed into hundreds of tiny pieces as it made impact with the guy's skull. The target was a big lad who only seconds before had postured himself, pool cue in hand while staring right at me, ready for a fight.

Invitation accepted.

The pub erupted into a warzone. Bar stools became missiles. Bottles were broken over heads. Both men and women were rolling around the floor punching, kicking and head-butting. Above the racket, a barmaid could be heard shouting: 'The polis are on their way!'

Message received.

Everyone scampered. Fifteen minutes later the police stopped me outside my flat and questioned me about where I had been. 'In the house all night, Officer.' Those with me confirmed the story. No more questions. Off we went.

What I've just described wasn't an unusual event for me. For a number of years it was my life. I had a problem: I loved to drink, and drinking led to violence. Our prisons are full of people with a similar problem. In many cases

the consequences are much worse than a few cuts and bruises. People are doing life sentences for a crime they can't, or can barely, remember. A life taken over nothing. A life that could have been spared had drugs or alcohol not been part of the picture.

Despite not being what you would call a 'hard man', I was developing a reputation for being dangerous and unpredictable. After a series of fights with some other lads, word began to spread that I had stabbed one of their guys in the head. I was making enemies. I was living a life that was out of control and substance abuse and excessive drunkenness fuelled my aggressive behaviour. I was caught in addiction and a chaotic lifestyle for a five-year period.

I had started drinking at fifteen. That's actually late for a lad in the scheme where many of my peers began around the age of thirteen. At fifteen, I was just a teenager getting drunk at weekends but from the age of sixteen to nineteen I was drinking daily. Morning. Noon. Night. I couldn't hold down a job. Since drinking inevitably led to fighting, my social circle was getting smaller and smaller.

Around the age of seventeen I found myself homeless. I had been looking after a relative's flat, but got kicked out due to the antisocial and drug-related activities. I then moved into a mate of a mate's gaff with several other guys who were also homeless. In the early days, there was nothing better than a fresh haircut, nice new clothes, money in your pocket, and some drugs and alcohol, but by this stage, my self-respect was disappearing. Clothes

and food were not priorities. Scoring was the only thing that mattered. A few months later I was pan-handling on the street to get money for drink. I lived for one purpose and one purpose alone, and that was to get off my face. I couldn't cope with life sober. If I ran out of alcohol I'd buzz aerosol until I passed out in a slumber.

A constant cocktail of speed, hash and alcohol began to take its toll. This triggered a period of narcotics-induced psychosis, anxiety and depression. It got to the stage where a simple puff of a joint could trigger an episode. This was a dark place. From this point on, I just stuck to alcohol, but this led to full-blown alcoholism.

Alcohol and violence just went hand in hand. Sometimes it would just be a simple scrap, a few punches here and there. At other times, it was more serious and weapons were involved. I still have a couple of scars from those days, reminders of the past.

One of the challenges that comes with a life of addiction is feeding that addiction. Addiction never comes alone. Money has to be made to feed your habit of choice. The lower you go, the less you care, even if it means stealing, robbing or mugging people for money.

Enemies are another thing that come with the territory. When you have enemies, you feel the need to do what you can to protect yourself. After one fight, I heard that the guy I'd been fighting with was planning to stab me. I asked a family member, 'What should I do?'

'Make sure you carry a bigger knife than the one he has,' he said, in a matter-of-fact way. So, at times, I'd

carry weapons: a knife or a hammer, or whatever I could get my hands on.

Looking back, I sometimes tremble at what was once normal life and I thank God that he intervened. The purpose of these stories is not to glorify the past, but to demonstrate the depth of darkness that Jesus can save us from. Some people reading this have been in darker places, done more violent things, and had longer periods of addiction. Jesus can deliver you too. That old me is dead and buried, and Jesus has given me a new life and for that I thank God. That's what the new birth is: a fresh start with fresh power to live a new life.

It has been ten years since *Christ, the Cross and the Concrete Jungle* was first published. I wrote the book as a tool to share the good news of Jesus. It was a way for me to say to people: 'Check out my story and discover what Jesus can do. If Jesus can change me, there is hope for anyone.'

I've been deeply encouraged by the impact that the book has had, and continues to have, not least among individuals whose lives are in chaos through drugs, alcohol, violence and crime.

Since first publication, my own ministry has changed. For the last few years, I've been serving as the lead chaplain in a maximum-security prison in Scotland. Prior to taking up the post, Beacon Light, a ministry committed to making Christian resources available in prisons, had supplied a number of prisons with the book. As I've talked to those doing time, a number of lads have said

they can relate to the description of scheme life that is portrayed in this book.

Russell Brand once said: ‘Drugs and alcohol are not our problem, reality is our problem; drugs and alcohol are our solution to that problem.’ That was certainly true for me. A governor once said to me, while reflecting on the problem of substance misuse and its consequences in prisons, ‘All the people in prison I speak with are saying the same thing: “There is no hope.”’

To that I responded, ‘Hope is the only thing chaplains have.’

That is ultimately what the good news of the gospel is—reality-transforming hope. We can’t face reality because it feels hopeless. The good news presents us with the possibility of a new reality, a reality that is built on forgiveness, a new identity, a real purpose and the true hope that comes from Jesus Christ.

No matter who you are, what you’ve done, or how messed up your life is, there is hope. This story isn’t written to glorify violence, drugs or crime. It’s not written to put the spotlight on me. It’s written to celebrate Jesus Christ and what he has done for me, and to make it plain what he can do for you. Jesus promises forgiveness, and a fresh start to all who will come to him in repentance (turning away from your selfish ways) and faith (trusting in the person and work of Jesus). God is in the business of changing lives. Multitudes have found this to be true, and you can too.

GLIMPSES OF CHAOS

I AWOKE in a cell in Giffnock Police Station. The police officer had just clattered the cell door and shouted through the gap that it was time for me to be released. I was hungover, disorientated, cold, choking for a fag, and could only vaguely remember why I happened to be in a cell. I was eighteen years old, and this was the first time I'd been arrested.

I was accompanied to the front desk by the police officer, given my trainers back and informed that I would be given a date for court. I simply responded by asking, 'What did I do?'

'You took a baseball bat to several car windscreens,' replied the officer. The truth was, I was so drunk the night before that I could barely remember any of it.

Here I was being released from the police station with no money, fags or any way of getting back to Barrhead. Actually, I had no idea where Giffnock was. I asked the desk sergeant how I was to get home, to which he bluntly replied, 'Walk.' After getting some directions, I made my way to a phone box; I was supposed to be working

with my godfather that morning. I called the operator, reversed the charges and asked the guys to pick me up in the work van.

As I waited at a bus stop for them to arrive, I tried to piece together the jumbled collection of hazy memories from the previous night. I remembered meeting up with an old schoolmate and drinking some cans of lager. We then bought cider and later some vodka. By the end of the evening we were wasted. As we were chatting, I recalled a recent incident in which I'd been attacked by a guy from one of the other schemes. I was outside a shop with a mate; we were about to buy a carry out and the guy came towards me swinging a heavy pole attached to a chain.

It was only seconds into the pursuit when I felt the thud on my right shoulder. I continued running, and my pursuer turned back. The guy was after me because I owed him money and he was fed up waiting for it. After discussing this with my mate, he informed me that the fellow had moved into a house on a street nearby. Fuelled by alcohol, we headed to my mum's house for a baseball bat in order to go and see if we could find him.

The rest of the details are lost to me. From what I've been told, we tried several houses to no avail. Somewhere along the line I got myself into a bit of frenzy and began to smack lamp posts, fences and car windscreens with the baseball bat. I think I smashed approximately half a dozen car windscreens that night. As I was too drunk to run very far, the police had no problem in catching me.

I share this story not to portray myself as some sort of hard man. I wasn't. Neither do I share it in order to glorify the incident. There is no glory in it; it was a senseless act of vandalism. I share it in order to give a glimpse of the level of chaos my life had spiralled into by the time I was eighteen years old.

BEGINNINGS

My early childhood was quite normal and happy. I grew up in the small town of Johnstone in Renfrewshire with my mum and stepdad. A few years later, my younger sister came along, and a few years after that, my younger brother. There were grandparents on both sides of the family, both parents worked and both grandparents would babysit. Both sides of the family were Roman Catholic, so we also went to church (chapel) regularly on Sundays. All in all, things were happy and normal.

Although I was growing up with a stepdad, I am not sure I had a real awareness of this fact. I do remember being at my mum and stepdad's wedding at the age of four, but I have no recollection of my biological dad whatsoever. My mum's first marriage ended when I was still a baby. My mum remarried, and family life was reasonably stable.

TROUBLE

However, trouble was to hit our home in the early nineties. The difficulty was in the form of an extra-marital affair, followed by separation and divorce. I was about ten years old, my sister was five and my brother was three