

Desperate Cry in the Ghetto

Carmelo Santana Cuascut

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Also, a special thanks to all our ministry partners, and the people who have previously and continue to serve on our Board of Directors since 2006.

Very special thanks to my loving wife Marsha, to whom I dedicate this book. Marsha not only stood by me with encouragement, but also spent long hours by herself while I worked on this project. I also want to make mention that I was worried because she didn't know my past in depth, and I was afraid of how she might react to the story. I thank God that I have a wife that knows how powerful He is, and that I am no longer that person she read about in this book. She finds it exciting to read and know how life changing it can be when God gets a hold of your life, truly I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. Thank you, baby.

About The Author

Carmelo Santana Cuascut [www.streetgideonministries.com] who conceived the idea of the story of "*Desperate Cry In the Ghetto*" is an ordained minister, evangelist, nationally certified Christian Counselor, and is the founder and president of Street Gideon Ministries, Inc. Presently Carmelo Cuascut minister's to the troubled youth and adult's in urban intercity neighborhoods, both in Florida, and Northeast parts of the United States. Former Co- Founder of The Way out Concept Program in Paterson, New Jersey, he is committed to taking the life saving message of Jesus Christ back into the troubled streets where he came from. Carmelo Cuascut has been in ministry for over fifteen years. "*Desperate Cry in the Ghetto*" is Carmelo Cuascut's first book to be published. He is the father of one grown child, one grown step child and is a soon-to-be grandfather. Walking in nature, communing with God, traveling and scuba diving are among his leisure activities.

Roger Pace, Youth Leader and Counselor, who deals with youth and the families of youth who are constantly dealing with the devastation of life on the streets in the various communities of great country here in the USA.

I find it fascinating to have gotten to know Carmelo Cuascut and his lovely wife Marsha Cuascut. In getting to know them both, I realize more and more the saving grace of a loving Christ! To know them is to know the book, and knowing the Book is as knowing them. Carmelo manages to put many life lessons and shed light on the best pathway out to recovery in a book! From page to page, "*A Desperate Cry in the Ghetto*" will be sure to make readers think of themselves and loved ones that are looking for better ways of living rather than continually fighting to survive! As Carmelo reveals his very own testimony, it demonstrates how he lived life recklessly and suddenly the powerful destiny of the Lord headed him off and changed his life forever! I feel that this book is a great start to what is known as the renewed hope of "Ghettos" and urban communities everywhere!

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement	pg 2
Introduction	pg 5
Chapter 1 Click Boy	pg 7
Chapter 2 Baptism of Hatred	pg 11
Chapter 3 Son of Evil Streets	pg 15
Chapter 4 Into the Pit of Darkness	pg 18
Chapter 5 Encounter with Despair	pg 27
Chapter 6 Quest for an Answer	pg 32
Chapter 7 Into the Light	pg 41

Introduction

I have debated for many years with the idea of writing this testimonial or if we may call it, a personal story, because of the many challenges I anticipated. First of all, I am not writer; therefore my grammar would need a lot of correcting. Second of all, my involvement as the leader of one of the most hostile street gangs from New York to New Jersey brought back fears of past retaliation, you know, once you become a g. (gangster) it will have to cause blood shed to get out (blood in blood out) - even though the blood shed to get out was already done on the cross through our Lord Jesus Christ, and third of all, I never learned to finish anything I've started, except violence. I had attempted to start writing several times in the past and even got material together to begin putting it together, but then I would fall away from my momentum. And it would finally wind up in the back burner once more. So this time, once again, I have started to write this. I pray for the Lord's anointing and wisdom to finish it. It was only through His grace and mercy that I was able to get out of the streets with my life and become a part of His kingdom and a kingdom child. So as I write this testimonial, all the glory has to go to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This is not my story or the story of a tough street warlord, but the story of what the power of His love can do with loveless people like me, and there are lots of us out there. Praise His Holy Name!!!

There is a code in the streets that grants honor to a gang member when he takes the rap for another, meaning he takes the blame and goes to jail in place of his home boy. That is exactly what He [Jesus] did for us. He took the rap to the point of being executed in our place beginning with a criminal in the Bible called Barabbas, who was supposed to be executed on that day, but he was set free because Jesus took his place when He went to the cross. Man, that's not just honor, it's cool. So again, this is His story and not mine. I

don't intend to talk about things or highlight the deep ugliness of my past sinful life, I just want to acknowledge the forgiveness of God, and speak of His mercy and grace. I can't remember a lot of things, that's how much He's transformed my life. So I blend in a little logical fiction. And this is not to make this story any more exiting, because the most exiting part was when I ran into His arms. But to be able to describe His grace given to us at the cross, and how it can take part in your life also, no matter whom you are.

Chapter 1

Click Boy

Hey man, we got to get out of here, the dogs a coming! (Police) Someone cried out loud behind me. At the sound of that voice I began running as fast as I could through the back trails of Sandy Hill Park, where we had just assaulted and badly beat up five high school kids that were on their way home from Eastside High, as part of an initiation to become part of the Street Kings Gang. But no sooner than I ran down the park stairs, there were several police cars already blocking the exit. It was too late. I had run right into their blockade. Two policemen grabbed me and threw me face down on the ground and cuffed my hands behind my back. At the time I was only fourteen years old and already rebelling against anything that represented authority, at home, in school, the police and so on. My mother hardly ever knew where I was. Only in moments like these, when I was in trouble the law and being processed into juvie (Bureau of Juvenile Delinquency) did she finally realized that I was out of control.

As I sat there in the patrol car, with my hands cuffed behind me, my mind began to drift back to a simpler time. A memory before my mom and dad separated. I remember going to the kiddy play park with my dad. As he carried me on his shoulders, I remember the bright sunny day. And I could feel the soft texture of the green grass as he put me down on the ground so I can run and play. He said "Go ahead Carmelito, run

and play with the other kids". So as I did, I would look back at my dad and see him standing there smiling, as if he was proud that I was his son. It felt good hanging with my dad. I must have been about four years old because every where we went he carried me on his shoulders. At that time it was only three of us kids, my sister Marie, my baby brother Frank and me. I don't know if it was the child innocence in us, but the hard times and hostility that existed in many homes in our large city at that time, didn't seem evident in our home. The City of Paterson was made up mostly of Black and Hispanic people in lower section and Irish and Italian people in the Westside. You can walk five blocks and find yourself in a totally different culture. We lived on East Eighteenth Street, that was considered the Eastside, where everything connects, such as public transportation to downtown and the major highways that lead away from the city. It made it very convenient for people who didn't drive a car because the bus service was right there as you stepped out your front door. On the street where we lived there were trees that lined along both sides of the road. In the winter when it snowed, it was a sight to see those trees glowing white with snow. I remember looking out the window and seeing how beautiful it was. But now sitting here in the police car, it was the month of May and spring had begun. Looking out from the window of the police car I could see the trees in this park. It almost seemed like they were hesitant to bloom and spend another summer trying to beautify the ugly ghetto park. The graffiti on the rock walls and park structures made it even worse. Not to mention the apartment buildings across the street. These were covered with black graffiti writings of local street gang code names that had claimed that territory. Finally the two cops got in the car to drive off the scene. They were taking me in. As they drove off, people kept staring at me. I felt like a

caged animal that had just been trapped. Only this animal was being taken in for assault and battery. The cop driving the car radioed something about me to the station, and the station crackled something back in code numbers. I felt sick to my stomach. I didn't know what was going to happen now. At this point in my life my mom had long remarried and now there were seven of us kids in the house, so very little individual time was given to each of us. But I knew that this was not an excuse for me. I knew better. My mom would always play the guilt on me, telling me that I'd be responsible for taking her to her grave early. The last thing I wanted was to be the cause of that misfortune. So now the police car was pulling into the caged area, where I had to sit and answer a bunch of questions. "What's the phone number at your home son?" The policeman asked me after knowing I was only fourteen. "We don't have a phone at home, officer, sir," I replied. "Then what about a neighbor or a family member?" "You better get one because if not, you're going to be here a long time." As I sat there being processed as a juvenile, I could feel the coldness in that place. Nothing in there had anything that was appealing. Even at that age I noticed how the criminal justice system is designed to break you. I could hear the loud voices of other people cursing at the cops as they were being processed. Finally I remembered the phone number to my mom's job, and I looked at the officer, taking my case. "Well, do you have one?" He asked. "Yes, sir I do." "Then let's have it." Within less than an hour I was handed over to my mom with the reminder that I would receive a court date in the mail. Several weeks later I went to court expecting the worst. For one thing I didn't want to go to Jamesburg juvenile correctional facility for boys. Everybody in school knew about that place and the reputation it had. But I was surprised when the family of the kid I had assaulted took mercy

on me and dropped the charges. I looked at the kid and noticed how much damage we had done to him, because he wore a jaw brace and could hardly speak. I couldn't understand how these people could forgive such an evil assault on their child. But I would get to understand this better in the future, down the road.

Chapter 2

Baptism of Hatred

In the summer of 1972, the streets became restless with violence. A young black kid had been shot dead by a policeman in the south side of town, and resentment began to rise to the point of a city wide riot in protest to the killing. There were four large rival gangs including us that came together to declare war on the police and anyone that identified with them. I got my hype from drugs like tripping acid and began to go crazy. Business windows were being shattered, and Molotov bombs (bottles with gasoline and a rag lit with fire) were being launched into buildings and set on fire. People were in the streets everywhere expressing their anger. This lasted two weeks. The news reporters and television cameras were capturing everything for the evening news. Everyday I would cut school and head to the park for the action that began with popping drugs. Then while in the state of being high, I'd wear my colors (gang jacket and bandana) and joined the others in the gang to rumble with the cops. In our ignorance, we couldn't see the advantage the police had over us, and the damage we were doing to ourselves. Swat teams marched in armed and holding up shields like Roman soldiers. All we had were knives, baseball bats, maybe a few guns and lots of hatred. That alone fueled our courage to fight. But the fact remained, that we were no challenge for them. Therefore many of our guys would wind up being thrown into the wagon and taken off to jail. And many would wind up with a cracked head and bleeding all over

themselves. For me, this kind of fuel added to the excitement of the way I was growing up. I was already abusing drugs heavily, because I started at age twelve, playing hooky from school to go swimming in the "Paterson Passaic Falls" in a hidden area near Garret Mountain. There, along with other kids that were much older than me, I learned to sniff glue and smoke pot; we called it "zest" back then. Garrett Mountain was situated in front of Public School #8 where I attended. So it always amazed me that the school principal, Mr. Kline, knew where I was at. But how did he know? Well, one day I found out the hard way. When I finally decided I was going to go to school one day, he called me into his office. And standing by his window, he showed me a standing tripod telescope. It was aimed exactly at the trail me and my buddies would scale up when we left the school ground to play hooky and go swimming. I couldn't find anything to say. I was caught in my own actions. And I felt very embarrassed. The school faculty found out that I had a problem with drug abuse and they assigned a state social worker to work with me. Her name was Mrs. Ramirez. And she thought that if she could catch the problem early in my life, there would be hope for me. What she didn't know was that the problem stemmed out of my own home, living with a highly abusive step-father and a mother who hardly ever had any time for me, because she was so consumed with her job and making ends meet. Things weren't like they are today back then. Society only judged the physical and not the emotional. So at the age of twelve I was sent off to Harlem, New York, to be processed into a drug program where everybody was much older than me, many were convicts ordered to finish their time there. Many people were amazed that someone as young as me could be a resident there. So I was made an example as the youngest resident of the program. In public advertisements I was named

the youngest and an older gentleman of over 60, the oldest. After two weeks of being in the program, my mom and step-dad came to visit me. After seeing the kind of place I was in, my step-dad was moved with compassion, and demanded that I be taken out of there. This act of mercy helped me to see that maybe there was some goodness in him for me. But I still couldn't understand the rageful hatred I felt towards this man. The ride home was uneventful and quiet. My mom finally broke the ice by asking me a question. "Son, did you miss being home?" "It was only two weeks." She said. "Yeah, but those two weeks seemed like two years." I replied. I slouched in the back seat and frowned at her. My step dad stepped in; "you'll be able to go back to school now." "They're willing to take you back again." But when I got back, things hadn't changed much, and it all began to fall apart fast. Every day there were fights in the school play ground, and I was in most of them. The middle school I went to was mostly made up of Black and Puerto Rican kids. So we fought against each other. Almost every kid carried a concealed weapon into school and every day an ambulance was taking someone to the hospital. One day my little sister came to me crying because this kid named Jerome kept picking on her. Jerome was a tall black kid who had a reputation for picking on smaller kids. That day I was hanging out with my cousin Papo outside the school grounds. "Common cuz, lets go talk to this guy," I said. I could tell by the look on Papo's face that this wasn't the kind of excitement he had in mind when he came to hang out with me. I was always told that when you strike first, you'll strike last, meaning you need to have the advantage of the surprise. When we got to where the kid was Papo's eyes grew wide. Hey man, there's six of them and only two of us! How do you expect us to fight all these big guys? The truth was that I was scared too. But I took advantage of a

reputation I had built for myself for fighting a lot and getting in trouble with the police. I walked straight into the circle of kids and asked the one, "Are you Jerome?" "Yeah, what about?" With out saying another word I closed my fist tight and punched him as hard as could across the jaw. He hit the building wall from the impact so hard that I could here his head make a thump sound. "What did I do to you man?" He asked as he grabbed the hurt side of his face. I looked at the other guys thinking they were going to jump us. But to my surprise, I noticed that no one made a move. They were all shocked and confused. "That's for messing with my sister," I said. And walked of the group bopping like I was tough. I looked at Papo and he was bewildered. "Man, you freaked me out!" "I'd never thought you'd do something like that!" He kept saying as we walked away from the seen. I was hoping they wouldn't try chasing us to get even.

Chapter 3

Son of Evil Streets

Growing up in a large inner city ghetto, you either had to know how to fight to survive in the street, or had to bluff being tough. I did the latter. Don't get me wrong. I was good when I rolled with punches, or when I had a weapon in my pocket. But I was really a coward. I was good at mind games, and making it seemed like I could really make things happen. But isn't that how a lot of us really feel inside? We're scared. So we find ourselves blowing a lot of smoke up in the air, and pushing attitude around us. You know, like a dog that barks but doesn't bite. Now, because of the lip sound I knew how to make, at age sixteen I became Pres. or call it top G, (leader). As warlord, I had already earned the respect of all my home Gs (gang member's buddies). So that moved me right in to top G. when our president, Moon Face Ray had to lay low for a while because of problems with the police.

Things began to happen fast when I took my position as President of the Street Kings Gang. Our Spanish neighborhood appealed to us for justice. At times someone would hire us to impose justice on somebody that owed them money. Or a lady whose husband was cheating on her would try to get us to express her feelings to him; if you know what I mean. And lots of other things I don't even care to talk about in this book was part of my leadership back then. But I remember there was always some compassionate soul that would have the courage to

try to reach out to us juvenile delinquent kids, and try to guide us in the straight and narrow. In saying this, I'm talking about a man who was a Catholic priest to the church that was up the street at the corner of Park Ave. and Carol Street. We called him Father Pat. This man would bravely cross over to our territory and make his way over to us, to befriend us. Somehow we warmed up to him when we saw the genuineness in him. He would take time to teach us things, like how to drive a stick shift vehicle or fix something. But I'm sorry to say that things just don't always turn out good to a kind heart's motives. One day we were hanging out bored with nothing to do in the park. And in times like this is when trouble calls. One of guys made a comment that sparked the appetite for real trouble. "Man, I wish there was something for the head (to get high on) Big Louie sighed." We all agreed. Then I remembered something. "Hey man, I know where we can get money and lots of it." "Yea, where", asked Fleche? "The church up the street, where Father Pat works, it's always open, and there's a money box in the back where people put in the offerings." "I'm sure it's there." That did it. We all got charged up. In less than fifteen minutes we were in, and just as I suspected, the money box was full. To add to the surprise, Father Pat's office was open. We went in and took the communion wine and a big bag of communion wafers that we used for the munchies. We bought lots of weed and ripple, a cheap street wine. We didn't know it then, but there were cameras in the church and we were being watched by a security monitor. Till this day I don't know why Father Pat never pressed charges. But he knew what we did. And he knew just how to get the message across with love. It's amazing how deep a little love and kindness can go. And all through the night I kept tossing and turning, replaying what I'd done in my mind. I kept seeing Father Pat and his smiling face telling us that we

can achieve anything if we put our efforts to it. It didn't seem to matter at the time, because I was with the boys. But later I understood that I couldn't hide from myself. "I'm disappointed at you boys," he said to us several days later. "But I going to forget about it, because I know it won't happen again." Now how do you fight that? I would have preferred hostility from him instead. We could handle that. But we weren't prepared for this kind of acceptance, especially me. All I knew was how to respond to hatred. That was what I saw all through my life time. That act of kindness became a seed in my life from there on. Even though nothing seemed to change, and the vicious activities and street rumbles with rival gangs went on, something began to happen inside of me. I couldn't understand what it was, but it felt deep.

Chapter 4

Into the Pit of Darkness

One day, that deep feeling began to weigh heavier in me. I got up early and went towards the park walking along Market Street. I couldn't figure out what it was I was feeling. Because it was early, none the boys were around. Every business along Market Street had reinforced metal stretch gates. This made it obvious how much this area was active with break-ins. In between some of the building were empty lots with lots of trash on it. Broken liquor bottles and empty beer cans among other things spoke loudly of what really goes on inside a man's heart, and how he deceives himself thinking the pain can just go away with a drink. So he becomes a part of the emptiness that lies in that trashed lot. Some of those lots have silhouettes of previous existing buildings that were either torn down or burned down. As I kept walking, farther up, I noticed a man pushing a gate open at Colons Hardware store to begin business early. You can tell by the look on his face that the dream for prosperity had become a vicious struggle to survive in his business. And now his dream was also a nightmare of trying to keep his family fed. He noticed me looking at him and hurried into his store. I lit a cigarette and pulled up the collar of my jacket to hide my face from the chill of the morning. Because even though it was early spring, the morning temperature dropped below 30 degrees. I tucked my hands in my pocket and looked around. Directly across the street were two girls chatting, and smoking something I knew immediately to be a joint. (Marihuana) Their

faces were red from the cold wind. Something told me they were prostitutes, and they've been up all night trying to get business. One of them had long black hair that hadn't been combed. And her white coat of imitation fur was short. It almost seemed like it was all she had on, displaying her long thin legs. The other girl was black and spoke loud. In my mind, I assumed about the night before. I was still puffing on my cigarette when I noticed a big black car drive up in front of the two girls. I recognized the man with the white hat. We've seen him around the neighborhood, and we even raised the peace sign at him. We knew he was a pimp, and we kept a curious eye on him, joking and commenting about his business. We thought he was cool. As he gazed at me from the car, I nodded my head at him and said, "Peace". I moved on. I felt lonesome and boarded. There it was again, that haunting feeling of emptiness and lonesomeness. Man, I wish there was someone around to talk to, at least one of the guys. I finished my cigarette and flicked it away from me into the air. The cold wind blew it back at me. As I continued to walk down the street, I couldn't help but notice four homeless men huddled around a trash can lit inside with fire. They were passing a bottle of cheap wine around and laughing. I envied their fun. By this time, other businesses were beginning to open. The city began to come alive with traffic noise. Far off I could see the large sky scraper buildings that sat in the middle of downtown. As I stared at those tall office buildings I wondered if there could be anything in life bigger. And suddenly, I caught myself wondering not only if there was anything bigger, but greater beyond those buildings, something more exiting to life itself. My day dream was interrupted by someone calling from behind me. It was Carlos! I was glad to see him! But He had a worried look on his face. "Indio man, there's trouble!" "I have to talk to you!" "So speak man, what's

up? I asked. "Jose and Birdman broke into the St. Paul church office downtown and the priest was there. They shot him dead! And now they're hiding." "Some kids were playing basketball across the street when the shots went off and they saw them running out of the building." "They may have identified them." "Man, this is crazy." I said. "How could these guys do this?" "Where are they now?" "I don't know," he said; "but we can't go back there." "There are lots of cops, and the news truck is there also." "Man, that's where Dena works," I said to him. (Dena was one of the girls in the gang that worked in that church office.) Fortunately Dena wasn't there that day. A heavy feeling of guilt came over me, even though I had nothing to do with this crime. And it had nothing to do with Dena either. But it made me wonder if I was the cause that motivated these guys to act out this ugly crime, when it was my idea to break in the other church where Father Pat worked. The name of this priest was Father Paul. And he was highly cherished by the entire Spanish community. So this crime brought a great feeling of resentment towards us on the part of the community. Even though no one dared to point us out, I could feel the hatred of the people towards us. I decided not to wear my colors for a while, and lay as low as I could. Everywhere I went I kept my warlords (body guards) around me. At any time someone could take a shot at me. The constant feeling of fear kept rising up in me. We had become allies with the Latin Souls, a gang in the south side of town. But even they felt it was the bloodiest crime anyone could ever dare to commit. "How could anyone even think of killing a priest?" Asked James, the Pres. of the Souls? "I don't know man." I said. "But I need to rise above this and get the hate off of us." "That's a low blow man, I'm sure these guys didn't mean to kill him." "He probably just happened to be there when they broke in." I said, trying all the harder to avoid

more guilt. I turned to walk away, and James said, “Don’t worry man, it’s going to be OK.” That felt good to hear. And it felt even better to know that several days later, these two guys decided to turn themselves in.

Now, a lot of the fear that I felt inside came from the very things I had lived through and experienced as I was growing up in my home. Like in most Spanish cultures, superstition and witchcraft mixed with religion becomes a stronghold in one’s life. Many of my relatives, especially several of my aunts, practiced something called “Santeria”, a form of white magic witchcraft mixed with Catholicism. And they did this in our home basement, because it was big enough to accommodate a lot of people. And it also accommodated a wall to wall alter filled with black statues and candles of all sorts. So as I was growing up, these activities played deep into my emotions. They would put on a celebration to the dark spirits and sacrificed animals like chickens and birds. The very sight of these people as they danced in a trance and the heavy smell of there incense in the dark gave me an eerie feeling when I just happened to be there. One day there was what they called a round table consultation meeting of mediums, and one of the mediums told my mom that I needed to be there, because she had a prophecy for me. I resisted immediately. “You need to be there son they’re going to speak something good over you.” My mom was saying to me. “But I don’t need anything said to me!” I insisted. She said, “It will just take a few minutes.” So I finally gave in and went down to the basement. It was dark except for the candles, and it took a while for my eyes to get accustomed to the dark. As soon as they saw me, one of them got up and began to holler loudly something I couldn’t understand. She was speaking in another language and pointing her finger at me.

The other one said that I had a gift and that I would be a powerful leader in the streets for a spirit called "Indio". And she also said a lot of other things I don't care to mention at this time. But I believe that most of the things that were said to me did come to pass, and for evil and not for good, as a leader of a street gang, and not for good leadership. Again, a lot of things happened in my life I believe as a result of this prophecy. But I don't care to share more now, because it was all evil. At times, I myself was amazed at the kind of thirst for violence that existed inside of me. For example, one day the church of St. Michaels held a community carnival and some of us went there to kill the boredom. Now there was a kid in that carnival that was known to be gay. We began to pick on him and tease him till he could take it no more. He was mad with rage and began to curse at us. I ordered two of my Gs to take hold of him and drag him into the alleyway of the church. There were a lot of people in the carnival and so much activity that no one noticed what was happening. When we finally got him in the alleyway, I reached into the inside pocket of my jacket and pulled out a 007 switch blade. Then Chico, one of the other warlords pulled out an even bigger knife. Let me do this one, Indio, I want to make him a woman. He said. I looked at the kid and said, "So, you want to be a woman?" By this time he was foaming at his mouth with fear. OK, pull his pants down, I ordered to the other guys. Suddenly one of the girls that were with us began to scream hysterically at the very thought that I was really going to cut off his manhood. "Please, leave him alone," she hollered, "He's not doing anything to you!" "But he wants to be a woman," I said sarcastically. "Leave him alone, please," she cried out again. By this time people were starting to get curious and started coming into the alleyway to see what the commotion was all about. I immediately sensed trouble with the police. Let's blow (get out

of here) before someone calls the dogs. As we were exiting the church gate, I saw two very pretty girls that I recognized from my neighborhood. They were handing out pamphlets to something called a coffee house in a church up the street. "Hey baby, I'll go if you're going to be there," I said to her as I winked my eye. "Yes, we'll be there," she said winking her eye back at me. "Is it free?" I asked. "Oh yes, and there's lot's of food," she replied. "That does it fellows, we're going." I demanded. Susie, one of the girls with us that night made a derogatory comment. "You're such a pig!" "You just want to get in her pants." "Oh, you're just jealous because it's not you," I sneered back at her. And I turned to the guys and said, "let's go to the coffee house, I think this is going to be good." When we got to the coffee house, we had to go around the side entrance of an old church building that sat in the corner of Madison Ave. and Market St. Something about this place didn't seem like what I expected. The kid at the door seemed too clean cut for a social gathering with people like us. But we went in anyway. He smiled at us warmly and handed us a pamphlet as we entered. Inside I noticed members of other gangs in the neighborhood. There was a band playing cool music but the words of the songs were somewhat religious. Some of these clean cut kids were talking to some of the gang members that were present. Suddenly, a kid came up from the corner table over to me. "Hey man, how are you doing?" He asked. "I'm cool man," I replied. There wasn't much light except for the light in the stage. So I squinted my eyes to take a better look at him. When I finally was able to see his face, I could hardly speak. This was the kid my gang and I had assaulted two years earlier that I had to go to court for, and his parents dropped the charges against me as an act of mercy. There he was standing in front of me, with a smiling face and extending his hand to shake

mind. "Hey man, I'm sorry for what we did to you," I said without hesitation. "Hey that's alright man, it's all good." "Besides, they did worse to Jesus, and he forgave them," he continued to say as he held out his hand to me. A warm feeling came over me. This was something I didn't know how to respond to. I wanted to get out of there and run as fast as I could! I was about to come face to face with a power that was far greater than all the hatred that had built up inside of me for years, the power of forgiveness through love. I didn't know what he meant by that comment of, they did worse to Jesus. But my feet were frozen in place. There was something that was mysteriously strong, and it felt genuine, not religious. I looked around and noticed how some of the other gang members were also frozen in place chatting in peace with these people. What was it that was so appealing to these guys about this place? Was it the music? Or what was it? There didn't seem to be any liquor in the place, or even anybody sneaking off to get high outside with weed. But I wasn't about to find out. I looked at the kid in front of me and said to him, "Hey man, we've got to roll out of here," and I motioned my boys to leave. As we were leaving, he hollered out to me, "We'll be praying for you and your friends!" Pray for me, now why would anybody need to pray for me?

That night I lay in my bed trying to drown that scene, the kid whose jaw I had broken with a vicious blow was saying to me that he was praying for me. I smoked pot and drank cheap wine until I could reason no more. Tossing and turning all night, I finally dozed off into a tortured slumber. I began to have nightmares of dark figures trying to grab at me. I dreamed of being chased by something that wanted to kill me. In the dream, I somehow knew that I would wake up if I ran fast enough. I saw myself running into a pitch dark cave that had no end to it.

There were animal like creatures closing in on me. In desperation, I woke up as I fell off my bed. It was hot in the room, and I was drenched in sweat. I got up and went outside. Still trembling with fear from the nightmares, I sat on the cold stairs looking up into the sky. Daylight was starting to break, but the moon was still shining high. My thoughts were going crazy, they did worse to Jesus, and He forgave them. Could He really forgive me? Could there really be a better way? My body felt cold as the sweat mixed with the breeze of the morning air. I went back inside and lit a cigarette. My hand was shaking as I took the cigarette in and out of my lips. I have seen the many faces of death up close, but this time it was trying to take me in. I knew that at any moment I could wind up like the many others in the ghetto; stretched out on the side walk dead, from a drive by shooting. My life was always targeted because of who I was and what I'd done. The latest thing I had going against me was a threat for moving in on some guys' lady. This guy was the leader of a gang called the Aces High, and he swore to kill me. All of a sudden I heard a knock on the door. I looked out the window and saw a large van with the name of a church on it. I opened the door slowly. There was a man dressed in a suit and a woman with him. "We're here to pick up your little sister for church," he said. We came by last week and your mom said we can come pick her up today for Sunday school. I invited them in to wait while my sister got ready. I didn't care much for these people either way, but their presence made me feel like there was something good about them. The man took an interest in me immediately and began to ask questions. "What's your name son?" "You can call me Indio," I replied, His eyes widen to my response as he saw my jacket lying on the chair. I gathered that he knew who I was by then. "Why don't you come to church with us this morning son?" "It will only be two hours."

“We’ll have you back early,” he said. But I didn’t know how to respond to what he was asking. I said the first thing that came to my mind, “I don’t have any dress shoes and I’m not going in these sneakers,” I said. Little did I know that this man’s faith was much greater in valor, than any of the spunk I’ve seen in the streets anywhere. He held me to my word. The following Sunday, when he came to pick up my little sister, he brought with him a brand new pair of cool looking shoes that he had bought, so that I could go to church with them. This time I had no way of backing out, and I didn’t want to be disrespectful. So I put on some clean clothes and wore his shoes. When I got in the van, everybody stuck their eyes on me. I felt awkward. But I sucked up my pride and sat in the back. The drive there seemed to take forever. I wanted to get it over with. I kept thinking that church was for sissies and here I was, in a van full of them. We got to the church house and unloaded by the side entrance. I sat in the back pew and began to feel hopeless as I saw the clean cut people that began to fill the church. Behind me sat a family with two toddlers and the toddlers seem to take an ample interest in my mop type hair. And that’s where the challenge started. They picked and pulled at my hair all through the first part of the service. I turned around and told the parents to mind their kids, but they thought it was cute what their kids were doing. I felt like getting up and punching the fathers’ face in. So, instead I got up and left the church.

Chapter 5

Encounter with Despair

Several days later our warlords were on a war conference to rumble with the Black Spades, a gang that hung out near the Alabama Projects across town. The leaders, name was Dave Graves and he was known for having the largest drug zone in the city. But he was also known for being dirty in his dealings. Two of our boys went to his zone to cop drugs because there was a panic (no drugs) on our side of town. When they got there, they were ambushed and beaten nearly to death, because they were Latin Kings. What they didn't know was how big we were, and how crazy most of our boys also were. So we declared war and named our weapons. Guns, knives, baseball bats, heavy chains and zip guns (home made guns made out of car antennas and a piece of wood with a springing device.) That night I was in my room getting high on something called black dungeon, a tripping weed mixed with acid, and I was drinking Swiss Up wine heavily to the point that I could barely stand up. In gang wars, the President always stays behind calling shots and planning, but I wanted to be in this one, and if I went down, I wouldn't feel it. I didn't know it then, but several of our boys were going down (die in the fight). Dena came storming in with news of the action that was taking place. "Indio, come on man, there's shooting going on!" I got up but stumbled and fell down the stairs. Dena shouted at me. "Man look at you!" "You can't go anywhere like that!" "You're tripping!" I cursed at her and ordered her to take me there. So she helped me into the car and

sped off. I was tripping so much that I was seeing things and mumbling nonsense. The traffic lights were freaking me out. Then all of a sudden, as we stopped at a traffic light, a bright light seemed to burst open and explode. As I was staring at the traffic light, I yelled out to Dena, "I see something, I see a man dressed like a king in a long robe wearing a crown on His head, and He's sitting on a throne!" This was really freaking me out. Dena said man, "forget this, I am turning around and taking you home." "You are not fit to fight." So she pulled the car around and drove me back to my apartment and walked me back upstairs to my room. The next day, when my head was clear, and I could reason, I saw what happened. Three of the boys were dead. Two were shot dead, and one died of stab wounds. I understood clearly what this meant. If I would have made it to the rumble, I would have been the first to go down. But what really made Dena turn the car around and take me back home? Or better yet, what was that vision I saw? A man dressed in a white robe with a crown on His head, and sitting on a throne like a powerful king? All I knew was that I was still alive when I should have been the first to die in that rumble. If that vision I saw was God Himself, then it was He who was responsible for me being alive. But my problem was I didn't believe in God. And if there was a God, why would he be interested in someone like me. Someone with so much evil and hate that I couldn't notice how much I delighted in hurting, even those who loved me, those closest to me, like my mom, my brothers and sisters and even my closest friends. There was no interest in me for religious beliefs. But I do remember standing at the corner of our hangout one day and noticing a small store front church in the middle of the block. It was Sunday, and the people going in were simple looking. I remember wishing I could be like them. I even remembered the church where my little sister went. I felt

out of place the day I went there. But I saw something genuine in those people, and it made me want to be a part of it. I thought about the kid at the coffee house. What was it he said? They did worse to Jesus and He forgave them. Who was Jesus anyway? I began to feel the fear creeping up in me again. Maybe the vision I saw meant that my days were numbered. If I didn't believe that there was a God, then why was I scared of the unknown? It sure didn't make any sense. But from that moment on, strange and unnatural things began to happen before my eyes, things that had God written all over them. Like the day my best friend and vice president Joey came to me to tell me about somebody named Nicky Cruz, who was a gang leader, turned preacher who was going to be speaking in an auditorium nearby. "Everybody's talking about him," he said. I looked at him suspiciously and said, "If this is a church thing, you can forget about it." "By the way, are you going religious on me now?" "Better tell me, or I'll kick your butt." But he insisted in trying to get me to go listen to this man talk about I don't know what. "Alright" he said, "I'll leave you alone, but we could learn something from this guy." "Like what?" I asked. "Like how to turn from a gangster to a punk?" He looked at me bewildered, "What's up with you, man?" "What have church people done to you anyway?" "You figure it out," I replied, "and when you do, just let me know." I pulled up the collar of my jacket and turned to walk away. Later, I said, and went to the corner candy store, where we hung out everyday. But none of the boys were there. I leaned against the building wall and sparked a smoke (cigarette), and reached into my pocket and pulled out my switch blade. It opened with a dry snap sound. The blade gleamed with the sunlight as I held it in front of me. I stared at the shining chrome of the blade through the smoke, and thought to myself; this is it man. This is all you got going

for you. Blood in blood out, and the blood out usually meant you're lying on the ground dead. All of a sudden, that recurring feeling of fear began to invade me again, but it only happened when I was alone. When there was no one around. I could feel it, creeping up from my stomach into my chest and into my throat. I feared it would only be a matter of time, and the time was closing in. What would it be like? How would it feel? Will it hurt? Already some of our boys had crossed that threshold to the other side. I would ask them how it feels but they were already six feet under. I thought about Rene, leader of the Black Eagles. He was ambushed in a dark hallway of an apartment building and stabbed to death when he went to visit his lady; or my cousin Raul, who was one of the biggest known drug dealers in the hood. He was shot at point blank with a high powered sawed off shotgun, and lived for a year. Paralyzed from the neck down, he coveted death day after day. Even in his condition he continued to deal drugs from his bed. One day he had one of his boys, inject a triple dose of heroine into his vein to end it all, and do away with the pain not just in his body, but in his soul as well. A cold chill ran down my spine when I heard about it. But I envied his courage and wished he could tell me about it. I remembered standing in front of his coffin looking down at him. As I stood there, people from the hood kept coming up and throwing little bags of drugs into the coffin as a tribute to his after life. Sorry you had to go this way, cuz. I'd tray places with you if I could, but guess this is your blood out and not mine, I thought. When it came to go to the cemetery, his funeral procession was one of the most unusual ones I had ever seen. He was placed in an antique Hurst that was horse drawn and taken around the hood one last time to say good bye, and the ladies that walked in front of the Hurst were dressed in black old fashion dresses. This impressed me deeply. I thought

it was cool to go out like this. It even made the local news papers.

Chapter 6

Quest for an Answer

One day another thing happened that referred to God. This was the arrival of a preacher that was going to speak in the auditorium where the ex-gang leader Nicky Cruz spoke, and Fernando was inviting me to go. The name of this man was Brother William Wonders, and I guess he was a wonder, because people began to flock to that place night after night. I began to hear crazy things about this man. Things like people being healed, blind people being able to see, even paralyzed people getting up from their wheel chairs. I even heard something about the Holy Spirit coming down on the people and changing them. The rumors about this man had grown so much, that some of the guys along with the girls from the gang made plans to go see him. "Why don't you come with us Indio?" asked one of the girls. "Sorry, I said, but I have other plans." "I got a big bag of weed, and I intend to get high tonight, maybe some other time."

The next day I was playing pool in the candy store where we hung out at, and I was still high from the night before when suddenly I saw Skinny Man, Big Louie, Connie and Lisa walking into the store with bibles in their hands. What caught my attention even more was Lisa. She was wearing a long skirt and her hair was down. I was used to seeing her dressed provocatively, in tight jeans and low-cut blouses. I thought I was seeing a vision from tripping too much. But Lisa made her

way over to me and said, "God is really up there, Indio, and He's calling you." I straightened myself up from the pool shot I was about to make, and looked at her directly in her eyes as I began to question her, "how do you know He's really up there?" "Did you meet Him last night in that place you all went to?" I asked her. Then I glanced over at Skinny Sammy with curiosity. He began to nod his head at what she was saying. "What's with you man, did you meet Him too?" I asked. He sensed I was mad, "maybe you want to talk about it later Indio, when you feel better." "Feel better; what makes you think I can't handle your rap now?" I shouted. I continued shouting my mind at them and didn't even realize how high on drugs I was. Everybody stopped what they were doing and the place became quiet. Finally, Big Louie stepped in and held up his bible as he began to talk, "Indio, I got to tell you man, this is real! God was really in that place last night, and we all felt Him come down on us!" "What do you mean came down on you?" I questioned insistently. "Did you see Him?" "No, we didn't see Him, but we felt Him." "I can't explain it, he said." I looked at Sammy again who remained quiet. "What about you?" I asked him, "Can you tell me?" "No I can't, he replied. I can't even begin to describe it to you." "All I know is it feels better than the best high you could ever feel." "And if you want, you can feel it too." Just come along with us tonight. This was all catching me off guard, and I didn't know what the next shot for me to call was. Again, that haunting fear of the unknown began to persecute me even more this time. But I played it off by putting my colors on (gang jacket) and leaving before anyone noticed it in me. "Later fellows," I said, and walked to the corner liquor store where Old Man Joe was always hanging outside hustling change for his next bottle of Mad Dog 20/20 wine. "What's up Joe?" I asked. He was glad to see me because he knew what I wanted. I wasn't

old enough to buy liquor, so he would always go in and get it for me and I would get him a bottle too. He bought me a bottle of Swiss Up wine and a pack of bamboo rolling papers which I took home, and as I locked myself in my room, I played music on my stereo very loud. I began to roll big blunts of weed and drink wine from the bottle to boost up my high fast. The music was loud but slow, with a haunting melody from the Black Moses album of Isaac Hayes. The more I got high, the deeper I felt myself descending into darkness. Man, what was going on? Some of the guys were in jail, others were dead and now these other guys were leaving the gang to become religious, and there seemed to be nothing I could do about it. I finally got up and stumbled down the stairs and out the door again. I was mad at what was taking place. I called Joey and two of my warlords and headed up the hill near Kennedy High. At this point kids were coming out of school and I schemed for violence. We surrounded this one tall kid who was all by himself and I viciously beat him up half to death, for no reason. While he was on the ground I told Louie to finish him off, but he was so shocked at what I had just done, and said, "What's up with you Indio, you're crazy man!" I can't do anything to him on the ground! As I exchanged words with Louie, the other guys sensed trouble and backed away. "Indio, you got to chill out bro, you're going to bring us all down," Joey, said to me. Suddenly, a lady that saw the whole thing from a window of a building across the street began to holler for the cops and we took off running, everybody scattering in different directions. A cop that was on the corner directing traffic took notice of the commotion and saw us running. He saw me running into the alleyway and got on his motorcycle to try to intercept me on the other side, but when he did finally catch me, he fell down trying to get a grip on me. He was big and out of shape. I took

advantage of the moment and disappeared through the buildings. Before long the whole area was swarming with police cars and cops going through buildings looking for us. We made it to our hang out and stayed there the rest of the night. Somehow I noticed that everybody stayed away from me. I myself began to feel that I was out of control, but I didn't know how to stop. It was like I was on a self-destruct mode that was beyond me. Little by little my buddies began to pull away from me. Everybody thought that I had fried my brains with drugs and I was losing it. Only the girl that I was dating at the time hung out with me. One night after hanging with her I decided to go home. This time I was all alone. I didn't have my boys with me, and I didn't have any weapons on me either. As soon as I stepped out of the house that night, I noticed that something wasn't right. It was dark, but I could see two guys in the corner of the block and two other guys in the other corner of the block. I put my hands in my pockets and began to walk across the street opposite the two corners. I was intercepted by two other guys there too. This was it! My suspicions proved right. These were the Aces High. And they were here to take me down! I had walked right into them and there was no where to run! I recognized the big black guy they called Charles, precisely the one whose lady I was dating. And precisely the one who threatened to kill me. He carried a heavy pipe in his right hand. "What's happening Be?" he asked. "I'd never thought I'd find you here," he continued. As he kept talking to me, I noticed the other boys formed a circle around us. "Everything's cool," I said. Already my body was prepared for the painful fate, whatever that was. He kept talking, "how's Lilly?" "How do you like that fine body?" Before I could even say a word, he swung a hard blow at me and brought me down and kept pounding blows at my body on the ground. Someone pulled out

a knife, and I saw the blade gleamed as it reflected in the dark from street light, like a deadly serpent ready to inflict its venom of death. This was it! I was about to find out what it was like to die. This was my blood out! It will all be over in no time, I thought to myself. But suddenly, something happened that made them back off and run. A police car drove by shining a spot light, and stopped as they saw them run. The cops didn't see me on the ground because it was dark and there was a car parked where I was lying. This gave me a chance to get up hurt as I was and somehow make my way home through the dark alleyways between the tenement buildings. I was hurt badly, but I was still alive. When I finally made it home, I snuck into my room quietly hoping not to wake my mom. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw how badly bruised I was, and my entire body ached. Man, this was crazy! I was still alive! I was supposed to die like the other home Gs, but I was alive! It's not your time yet, I kept hearing deep inside of me. I continue to look in the mirror. Suddenly, I wanted to live. I wanted out of the street life, but how? I was in too deep, and I'd hurt too many people. Where could I go that would allow me to start my life over without running into my past? If I stayed home, it wouldn't even matter, because I lived in the middle of it all. If I stepped outside, I'd be shot dead right there at our front door. But I wanted out so bad that I even tried getting out of the city. I couldn't go to New York, because it was just as bad for me there also. So I boarded a bus to Newark and left the city, but realized I was going nowhere, because I didn't know anybody there or anywhere. The only other family I had was in Puerto Rico, and I hardly knew them either. I didn't want to tell my mom what was happening because it would make things worse if I did. So I got off the bus in Newark and began to walk the streets aimlessly, trying to think to myself; where could I go for

help? It began to get dark as night approached. As I walked along Broad Street, the sidewalks became crowded with people getting off the city buses and the subway trains. I looked at some of them walking past me and even they seem to be going nowhere. The different colored neon signs flashed on and off in the night and added life to my dark feeling of despair. Here I felt safe, but I was lonesome. I had nowhere to go. I never thought you could feel so lonesome in the midst of a million people. My nerves were playing on me and my thoughts flooded my mind. I felt sick to my stomach. No problem seems as bad as what I was going through at this moment. I would trade places with anyone if I could. I lit a cigarette and tried to calm my nerves by smoking, but it made me feel worse. So I flicked it to the middle of the street. Continuing to walk on Broad Street, I saw a van come to a stop light. It was full of people, and the side of van read, "Christ for all the nations." It seemed like the people inside were happy. They were laughing and singing joyfully. As the van stood still waiting for the light to change, I noticed one of them looking at me. She smiled at me compassionately. It almost seemed like she knew what I was going through. Man, if only I could be in there with them now! If only I could be a church boy like them. It seemed like these people had it together. I'd trade places with any of them right now, I thought to myself. But here I was, going through the valley of the shadow of death, and they were on their way to heaven. Maybe it's not too late. Maybe she was trying to tell me that there was hope beyond her compassionate smile. Then the light changed and the van took off into the night, on its way to heaven. I wanted to run after it and call them back and beg them to take me with them to heaven! But they were gone, and they took my hope with them. Finally I made up my mind to return home. As I got on the next bus back to Paterson, I began to pray

and ask God, if you're real, please help me. I began to crave being with the people that picked my little sister up for church. The more I prayed, the more I remembered the things that kept taking place in the past that had to do with God. I remembered Lisa saying to me, "God is up there Indio and He's calling you." At this point in time I didn't know what I was returning to. But I was determined to let God take hold of my life. This way, if anything happened, I could probably go to heaven. When I arrived at the bus depot in Paterson, I began to walk towards Marshall Street to see if any of my boys were around. But the desire to get out of the streets continued to pull at me. So I turned around and made my way home through the shadows of night, where no one could see me. When I got home, my girlfriend was there waiting for me. "Where have you been?" she asked me. "I was out doing some thinking." I replied. I heard what happened to you. "What are you going to do now?" she continued to ask. "I don't know, I guess I'll make a different stride now." "But in the mean time I need to stay low." "So if you don't mind, I want to be alone for now." I said this because I was planning to sneak off and go to a church somewhere, and I didn't want her to know. But she was insistent, and said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not leaving you." "So where ever you're planning on going, I'll have to go too." "Alright, I'll confess." I said. "I'm going to church somewhere, but I don't know where." "There's a little church in the corner, maybe I can go there." "I'll go with you," she said. So we began to make our way to the corner, carefully watching all around so that we didn't get ambushed. When we got there, the church service had already started. This was a very small place, and it was packed. We walked in and made our way to the very back. Many of the people were startled to see us. They knew who I was. As we sat down, I kept my eyes on the door, hoping no

one had seen me come in. It would be a devastating thing if blood shed took place in there. I prayed within me, please God don't let anything happen in here tonight. The person speaking in the front was talking about how Jesus set him free from addictions. He began to describe the ugliness and hopelessness of the life that The Lord brought him out of. There was excitement in his words as he kept talking about his freedom from the streets. This is it; I thought to myself. This is what I need, this Jesus! I continued to listen to him speak while at the same time keeping my eyes on the door.

Some of the people in the back kept staring at me, especially the young ones because they knew who I was. I didn't know how to play off their constant staring, but I ignored it as much as I could and continued to listen to the man who was speaking. His words described what I was going through. It was everything I needed to hear.

Suddenly, something began to happen! My heart began to pound hard in my chest and my eyes began to well up with tears. It was like a flood of warm water mixed with the pain and despair trapped deep inside of me that was making its way out through my eyes. I couldn't remember when the last time I cried was. It must have been before I was eight years old, and I promised myself I would never cry again as I watched my dad walk out on us. Tears were for the weak and not for me. Not in the ghetto anyway. But here I was, crying. And the more I cried, the freer I felt of the guilt and the ugly shame I carried for so long. Then someone sat beside us and asked us if we wanted to receive Christ as our Savior. I wanted to, but I was scared to get up. But the desire to be a better person was stronger than the fear of going to the front. So I got up and the man that was sitting by me escorted me to alter, and that night I received

Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior! When I lifted my hands to the Lord that night, the whole church began to sing out loud joyfully, like the people in the van I saw in Newark. And I felt like I was in heaven! When I got up from the altar, the weird feeling of fear was gone, and everyone had that same compassionate smile I saw that night just like the girl in the van. This was so good. I kept hoping it wouldn't end, but now the church service had ended and the fact remained that I had to make my way back home without incident. I told Lilly to go home because I didn't want her to get hurt if anything happened. She kept resisting, but finally gave in and left. One of the men handed me a small bible and said that they'd be praying for me. So I made my way home carefully again through the dark alleyways hoping no one would see me. God, help me to make it home, I prayed quietly as I moved through the dark alleys. I realized I didn't have anything on me to fight with if anything happened. All I had was the little bible that the man gave me. I hope he's praying for me like he said, I thought to myself, and before I knew it, I made it home safely.

Chapter 7

Into the Light

The days that followed were pretty much filled with the same challenges. I had to watch myself as I made my way to church at night. The change The Lord had made in my life was so big, that I wasn't afraid to keep taking my chances. One of the first things I did was get rid of my weapons, that meant if anyone caught up with me, the only weapon I'd have on me would be this bible. The next thing was my relationship with Lilly. I wanted to start clean, so that meant breaking it off with her also, because of what we were into. That move stirred up resentment in her to the point of retaliation, and she swore to get even. I had no idea how far she was willing to take her grudge, but I was about to find out. Last of all, I threw away my colors, gang jacket, bandanas and all the gang codes. It was a fresh start and it felt good. Even the hair on my head came off. One of the brothers in the church was a barber and thought he could do me a world of good if he knocked off my fro, which was pretty big back then! Everything was all good, except one night, when I was ready to make my way over to the corner to church. I looked out the window and saw a suspicious brown car driving slowly up and down the block. The guys inside had hoods and their faces were covered with bandanas. By the color of the bandanas I knew who they were and they were watching the house, waiting for me to come out. I began to feel scared again, but it didn't stop me. I went out the back door and got to the church safely. I still couldn't shake the fear of these guys

coming into the church with guns and firing not just at me, but also at the innocent people there. So I asked if I could have a word with the pastor. I made my way to the office and sat down to tell him what was happening. "Pastor," I said. "I'm afraid I've put the people here in danger." "How's that?" he asked. "There's a gang of guys that's been watching my house, waiting for me to come out. And they have guns. If they know that I'm in here, they'll come in, and who knows what would happen." He looked at me with concern, and said, "Well, we're just going to have to pray for God's protection on you, cause you can't go back home now." "I believe God brought you here with a purpose." "He's got a special calling on your life, and He's not going to let anything happen to you or the church." "So you just go back out there, and begin to praise Him." I was surprised at his response to my worry. I expected him to try to get me out of the church for the safety of the people. But instead, he encouraged me to stay and trust the Lord. That night, the weather was hot because it was mid July. And the doors and windows to the church were opened. I wished they were closed, because you can see inside from across the street. I kept looking at the opened door, hoping I wouldn't see any familiar face from the street coming in. Finally I put aside my worry, closed my eyes and began to sing and clap along with the other people. Then, as if out of nowhere, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I opened my eyes in disbelief! There he was, sitting beside me in his gang colors. There was absolutely no expression on his face. "They're calling for you outside," he said. I looked around and saw the people singing and clapping with no clue of what was going on. When I looked at the pastor in the pulpit, he was already on his knees praying. The guy beside me spoke again, "you better step out or they'll come in." Again, I looked at the people and realized that some of them had stopped singing and

were on their knees praying also. All of a sudden, I realized that I wasn't scared. As I got up and went towards the door, almost everyone was on their knees praying now. I made my way out and closed the door behind me. Even with the door closed you could hear the people praying loudly through the opened windows. No sooner than I came down the one step, one of them grabbed me by the shirt and slammed me against a parked car. I began to pray in my spirit, God help me! I looked to the side and saw Lilly leaning on a wall with her head low and her hair covering her face. Then I understood. This was her pay back, but now even she was scared for me. The one guy in front of me had a heavy stick in his right hand. One blow with that stick on my head and I'd be dead. He began to talk loudly. "I hear they're praying for you inside, but it's not going to help you one bit." As he talked, I watched his hand with the stick. "So this is where you've been hiding all this time?" I kept praying in my spirit, please God don't let me die like this. As I looked around I saw people looking out of windows from the buildings, but no one made a sound. "Go ahead, let me hear you pray," the guy with the stick said. Then suddenly, as I raised my eyes to look at him, he lifted the heavy stick and swung as hard as he could at me. I closed my eyes to receive the blow that was coming straight at my face, but to my surprise, it hit the street sign instead of me. It made a thunderous noise. Again, he swung another blow at me, but it hit the car fender that I was leaning on. He kept swinging blows at me but it wouldn't touch me. What made this even more intriguing was that some of those guys had guns, but no one made a move. By this time I was wondering why he wasn't hitting me. I could still hear the people inside the church praying loudly for me. "We can't do this around here," he finally said. "Let's get out of here now before someone calls the cops." He dropped the stick and they

got in their cars and left me standing there, without a scratch. Praise The Lord!!! God is real! He really is up there, and He heard our prayers that night! Indio, the leader of the Kings, ran into the King of Kings, whose blood made the way, for my way out. Finally the pastor came out to see what happened. "You alright?" he asked. "They couldn't touch me," I replied. "Some of them had guns but couldn't use them." I said. "Praise God!" the pastor said, "Come on in!" Through praises and celebration we ended the service in victory.

Now things began to change for me fast. People at church began to give me things. One brother gave me a white shirt and black tie that I began to wear everyday, because I now wanted to be like the other men in the church. Another person gave me dress shoes and lots of books to help me in my new life.

I began to walk the streets with my bible and dressed in my shirt and tie telling everyone I ran into, what Jesus had done in my life, not even taking into account what could have happened if I ran into my enemies. The Lord must have made me invisible, because I went everywhere in the streets talking about Jesus and the salvation He provided for us on the Cross.

People began to spread a rumor about me everywhere. Saying, did you hear what happened to Indio? He must have taken some bad drugs because now he carries a bible and thinks he's a priest.

That's right. Something did happen to me, but it wasn't drugs. It was Jesus! His love drove Him to the Cross for me and for the whole world! Praise His Holy Name. After that, I never again saw those gangs around my house, or anywhere. I was able to walk the streets freely. That's right, He heard my desperate cry in the ghetto, and exchanged it for His Glory in eternity. **Amen.**

Dear reader,

Even though this story ends here, I just want to let you know that it can be a beginning for you, if you let Jesus into your heart today. It doesn't matter how far away from Jesus you may be, or how deep in sin you may find yourself. Or maybe you may not be living a bad life at all. The fact is that you matter to Him so much, that He went to the Cross to prove it. The bible says in John 3:16 that He loved you so much, that He gave His only Son, so you can have eternal life if you only believe and accept Jesus Christ, as your Lord and Savior. All you need to do is to call on Him with these simple words.

Heavenly Father, I know that your Son Jesus died for me on the Cross. I want to accept Him as my Lord and Savior today. Forgive my sins, and write my name in your lamb's book of life, because I want to start a relationship with you today. Take control of my life, and help me to live all the days of my life for you. Both here on earth and in eternity, let me be a vessel for your righteousness. **Amen.**

If this story has impacted you in any way and you would like to know more about our ministry,

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Carmelo is available to speak at your church or faith based organization.

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