

# TESTIMONY



## When Jesus Calls a Gang Leader by Name

How a mysterious prison “movie” drove me to my knees.

By Casey Diaz

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER FRAGAPANE

**I**n prison, I was a shot caller.

Shot callers have an elevated rank in the gang world. They are the power-brokers who determine who gets hurt (or killed) and who doesn't. They command respect.

I started down this path as a teenager in South-Central Los Angeles, as a leader in the Rockwood Street Locos. I led the way when we invaded homes, broke into cars, ransacked convenience stores, and stabbed rival gang members. It didn't take me long to figure out that the streets were bloody. Most of the time, it was kill or be killed.

Eventually, the LAPD caught up with me. I was sentenced to nearly 13 years for second-degree murder—along with 52 counts of armed robbery. I actually breathed a sigh of relief that those were the only charges the cops could pin on me.

### LIFE WAS VERY CHEAP

While awaiting transfer to New Folsom State Prison—a Level IV maximum security prison near Sacramento, California—I was housed with 120 murderers and violent criminals inside Pitchess Detention Center, north of Los Angeles.

At Pitchess, we segregated ourselves: blacks aligning with blacks, whites with whites, and Latinos with Latinos. Several dudes from two long-established gangs, 18th Street and Florencia 13, approached me about becoming a shot caller there.

One of my responsibilities was the control and distribution of shanks, the crude homemade knives used for stabbing another prisoner. I slept with all 13 of them under my mattress. When a riot went off, I made sure the right people got shanks. There were many violent upheavals at Pitchess, and inmates got stabbed and killed all the

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time. All it took was a wrong look at the wrong person, and you were done for. Life was very cheap.

After about six months, I was transferred to New Folsom State Prison. When the bus dropped us off at the main building, I saw guards pacing on catwalks, their arms cradling Mini-14s—small, lightweight semi-automatic rifles.

The warden, standing next to a phalanx of serious-looking guards in riot gear, cleared his throat. “I want you to look at the sign to your right,” he said. My eyes alighted on a white sign with red lettering that read, “No Warning Shots Fired.” “In case of a riot,” the warden continued, “we will not be aiming at your feet, we will not be aiming at your legs, and we will not be aiming at your torso. We will be aiming directly at your head to kill you.”

When the warden was gone, a guard approached me with a manila file in hand. “Diaz, follow me,” he ordered. I was led inside the prison to an interview room, where the guard introduced himself as a gang coordinator. “Listen closely, Diaz,” he said. “We know that you’re a banger and a shot caller, so we’re putting you in solitary.”

I would be cooped up in an eight-by-ten-foot windowless box, with all my meals slipped in through a slot in the steel door (or “gate”). Social interactions with other inmates (and guards) would be nearly nonexistent.

The only source of illumination in my cell was a heavy Plexiglas light that couldn’t be turned off, which made it difficult to get any sleep. And without a clock or wristwatch to consult, I had trouble distinguishing whether it was day or night. There was nothing to do—no TV, no radio, no books. Only the meals broke the monotony.

I had been told by prisoners in Pitchess that if you’re not strong-willed, then solitary confinement could absolutely break you. There were times when I wondered if I would keep my sanity.

#### ‘JESUS IS GOING TO USE YOU’

After about a year at New Folsom, I heard the guards come by my cell with an announcement: “Protestant

service. Any inmate wanting to go, stand by your gate.”

I had heard the same announcement for Catholics. Religion wasn’t something I was interested in. I knew next to nothing about Jesus, only that he was the one on all those crucifixes.

One time I was lying on my bed, listening to the voices outside. I heard an older woman say, “Is there someone in that cell?” She sounded Southern and spoke with a syrupy drawl. “Yes, ma’am,” the guard said, “but you don’t want to deal with Diaz. You’re wasting your time.”

“Well,” she answered, “Jesus came for him, too.”

She approached the cell: “Young man, can I speak with you?” Looking through the open slot in my gate, I couldn’t see anything except for the guard’s boots and a pair of spindly legs.

“How are you doing?” she asked. “I couldn’t be better,” came my sarcastic reply. “Young man,” she said, “I’m going to pray for you. But there’s something else I want to tell you: Jesus is going to use you.”

By now, I was certain she was crazy. Couldn’t she see I was locked away in solitary confinement? “I don’t think that’s going to happen,” I said. But she persisted: “Young man, every time I’m here, I’m going to come by and remind you that Jesus is going to use you.”

A year or so later, I was lying down in my cell, daydreaming, when I turned toward the wall opposite my bed. On that wall, something strange was happening. A movie was playing, a movie about my life. I saw myself as a young child, walking the old neighborhood at 9th and Kenmore. I witnessed incidents from my early days with the gang—everything in picture-perfect detail.

Then I saw a bearded man with long hair carrying a cross. As he trudged

along, a mob of angry people shouted at him. When he arrived on top of a knoll, rough-looking men nailed his hands and feet to the wooden beams and raised the cross so it stood between two other men on crosses.

What got to me most was when this man looked at me and said, “Darwin, I’m doing this for you.” I shuddered. Apart from the guards and my family, no one knew my real name. Everyone called me Casey—my nickname for as long as I could remember.

Then I heard the sound of breath leaving him. At that moment, I knew he had died.

That’s when I hit the floor in the middle of the cell. I started weeping because I knew, somehow, that this was Almighty God, even though I didn’t understand what he had done for me. After hitting the floor, I knew I had to get on my knees. I started confessing my sins: *God, I’m sorry for stabbing so many people. God, I’m sorry I robbed so many families.*

With each new confession, I felt another weight come off my shoulders. When I finished, I knew something major had happened.

I asked to see a chaplain, who opened his Bible and explained who Jesus was and told me that what I experienced in that cell was salvation. He handed me a Bible and urged me to start reading.

I’d spend five or six hours reading that Bible, then fall asleep, wake up, and do some push-ups and calisthenics before picking up where I had left off. I didn’t understand half of what I was reading, but that didn’t bother me.

That was the start of my journey of faith. Eventually, I was released from solitary confinement and returned to the mainline prison population, where I was beaten for being a Christian and turning my back on my fellow gang members. But I was okay with that, because I was no longer a shot caller. I had found a new calling: telling other inmates about Jesus.

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## SOUL TRAINING

## worship



The exercise for this week is to go to church with what Richard Foster calls “holy expectancy.” For many of us, attending church is fraught with frustration and distraction: “We are running late—hurry up!” or “Oh no, someone is sitting in my seat” or “I can’t believe she wore that!” or “The sermon was way too long today!” In this chapter I have tried to focus on the right narratives about worship: it is an invitation (not an obligation) and is not about meeting my needs as much as shaping my soul. We also looked at some of the basic elements of worship, focusing on their meaning and impact.

For this reason, I would like you to make your corporate worship more meaningful by engaging in a few acts of preparation. The following are some guidelines, not laws, that may be helpful as you seek to experience the wonder of worship.

## ENGAGING IN MEANINGFUL WORSHIP

1. *Prepare through margin.* Simply getting to worship with the right attitude is a challenge for many of us. The culprit is not our lack of desire but our lack of temporal margin. The proper attitude for worship cannot be cultivated in the ten seconds we spend walking through the narthex. We must prepare for worship long before that. One way is to go to bed early on the evening before worship. This will allow us to awaken earlier, which will create some margin in terms of time for

need a few hours to eat and dress and prepare our hearts for worship. Time margin is thus necessary in order to create *heart* margin.

2. *Arrive early.* A simple but effective way for me to be more attentive in worship is to come well before the service begins in order to become fully present. Richard Foster offers this advice: “Enter the service ten minutes early. Lift your heart in adoration to the King of glory.” This has helped me appreciate worship and has reduced the distractions that often happen when I arrive late.

3. *Come with holy expectancy.* As previously noted, Foster encourages a sense of holy expectancy among worshipers. This can be done by a simple prayer: “Spirit, speak to me. Jesus, teach me. Father, let me experience your love and power.” I believe this is a prayer God loves to answer. And it is a prayer that awakens our desire.

4. *Focus on one aspect of worship this week.* There are many acts within a worship service (e.g., sermon, Bible reading, singing, Communion). This week focus on one particular element of worship. For example, if you choose singing, pay attention to your body, to the sounds and to the words being sung. Reflect on its meaning—why do we sing? What is happening to us as a community as we sing? You can pick a different aspect each week. If you do this each week, over the course of a few months you will have reflected on nearly every aspect of worship, thus enabling an entire worship service to become an act of doxology.

5. *Apply one thing.* Worship transforms us and leads us into new ways of living. Foster wisely writes, “Just as worship begins in holy expectancy it ends in holy obedience.” This week pay attention to what God might be asking you to *do*. Is there someone you need to speak with? A change you need to make? A new practice you need to make as you walk with God? Keep it simple and try to discern what *one* thing God may be asking of you, and then labor to put it into practice this week.