

'A Father Who Loves Me'

Senior Chaplain at Men's Central Jail in Los Angeles recalls the best News he ever heard

by ED WELSH

I grew up the oldest of three kids in a dysfunctional family. My dad came home drunk all the time and with a lot of anger. Often he would beat up my mother, and I would fistfight with him, trying to defend her. My dad was a big truck driver and a former boxer, so it wasn't a very even match.

When I was 14 years old, in 1963, a neighbor invited me to go to the Billy Graham Crusade in Los Angeles.

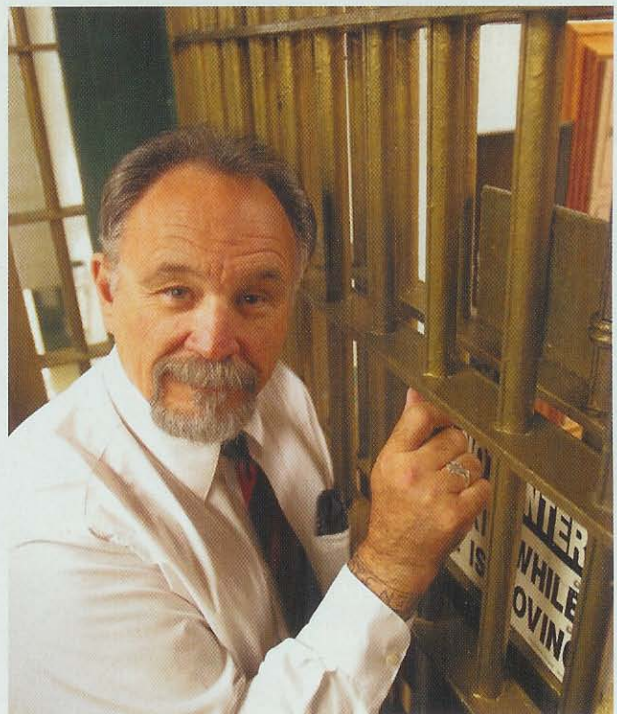
I remember Billy Graham saying that it doesn't matter what kind of a father you have here on earth—you have a heavenly Father who loves you. When you can fistfight at age 14 with your father and not cry over how much it hurts, you don't cry over many things. But I went down to the field in tears, crying freely because I wanted the kind of love and acceptance Billy Graham spoke of.

But after the Crusade I developed no strong roots, and I didn't get involved in a church. I got into trouble, ran away from home and soon found myself in juvenile hall. While I was there, my mother was in a serious car accident. I remember trying to make a deal with God, asking Him to save her, but she died about three days after the accident. I shook my fist at God, so to speak.

In 1973-75 I found myself in San Quentin Prison—at that time one of the worst prisons in the country. I had a lot of time on my hands, so I began reading the Bible. I didn't realize it then, but now I can see that God was still working in my life. In 1980, after spending about 15 years in and out of different facilities, I left prison for the last time. Two years later I married Allison, whom I had met when she came to the prison to visit her brother.

I now had a job and was doing well financially, but I was still living a godless life of drinking and drugs.


While Allison was pregnant with our first child, we took in our niece to live with us. We realized that we needed help to give the children a better life and that we should go to church. Watching my daughter's birth was a spiritual moment for me. I knew that I needed to steer a new course with Christ as my Lord. I was baptized two or three days



later, and since then it has been a whole new life for us.

I never dreamed I'd go back into a prison until my pastor asked me if I would pray about starting a prison ministry. I resisted at first, but in 1994 God led me to start such a ministry. It has been my passion ever since. I started by going back to San Quentin, and since then God has taken me into prisons all over the world.

Since 2000 I also have been the senior chaplain at Men's Central Jail in Los Angeles. Although much of my job is administrative, my main ministry is one-to-one counseling, and I see men accept Christ every day. I've seen that when they find Christ, they are new creations.

I wouldn't say that God "put me through" my childhood difficulties or my prison years, but He has used those times for His glory. I didn't have a loving earthly father, but God has filled that void in my life through a relationship with Him.  ©2004 BGEA