



# Getting Out of Jail—Free

**Three years ago, Josh Ortega was in jail for murder. Today, he's a college student and Covenant youth leader. Here's how God changed his life.**

Lisa Dornback

Josh Ortega sat in his car outside of a convenience store, unaware that his world was about to change forever. It was January 1994, and Josh, then seventeen, and two friends were out to have some fun. And in their South Sacramento neighborhood, fun meant going on a “beer run”—grabbing a couple of six packs from a convenience store, bolting out the door without paying, and hopping into a getaway car.

What Josh didn't know was that one of his companions was carrying a handgun, which he fired blindly as he rushed away from the store. The shot struck the store's clerk in the chest, killing him.

Josh was charged under the felony murder rule—he was held responsible for the clerk's death even though he was not directly involved in the shooting. After three years awaiting trial at Sacramento County Jail, he was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to thirty-five years to life. Because of his age, he was sent to the California Youth Authority, the state correctional

system for youthful offenders. As an “M-number lifer,” he would be transferred to adult prison when he reached the age of twenty-five.

It's the kind of story that makes the papers every day in America's cities. Just another kid who has lost his future to violence.

But Josh's life took an unexpected turn. Just when he thought he would spend the rest of his days in prison, he got a second chance. Released from prison three years ago, he is now a college student and director of junior-high youth ministry at Valley Hi Covenant Church in South Sacramento. He

hopes to someday follow God's calling into full-time ministry.

“I never set out to be a gang member,” Josh says, while sitting in the church's youth ministry office, a well-worn place filled with books and bikes, computers and candy, and a lot of unclaimed teenage debris. After taking time out to talk with a youth group member who has a question, Josh returns to telling his story of how he ended up in a gang.

“I found a group of peers, people I could hang out with,” he says. “I had a lot of camaraderie with them because they accepted me. I carried guns and did a lot of stuff because that's how you showed you were a man. . . . I guess I wanted approval.”

Josh grew up in the neighborhood around Valley Hi Covenant, attended a local Catholic school, and went to Mass on Sundays.

“We went to church but it was like, ‘Give God your hour per week, hit the door, and you're outta there,’” he says.

"I didn't learn that I could have a relationship with God. He was there and I was here."

By fourteen, Josh had fathered a child and was sinking into a rebellious and violent lifestyle. His school farmed him out to a "continuation school," where he first became indoctrinated into a gang. By sixteen, Josh had only completed sixteen high-school credits, and soon afterwards his gang activities landed him in Sacramento Juvenile Hall.

There was so much violence surrounding Josh's life—even while he was locked up, shots were fired at his parents' house and cars—that his father pleaded with a judge to keep Josh at juvenile hall and not send him home.

"He said that I was safer there," Josh says. "That hurt, you know. I know now that he was doing that to protect me. But at the time it just hurt."

During this time at juvenile hall, Josh says his life began to change. He was cleaning up his room and com-

plaining that he had nothing to read when another young man handed Josh a Bible, saying, "Here, you want to read this?"

"Yeah right," Josh replied sarcastically.

"No, really," his friend said. "Read Revelations. It's really interesting."

Josh began to read the Bible, and through the revelation of God's word discovered that he could have an intimate friendship with God. He began to pray, asking God to change his life.

"Do whatever you have to do to me, God," he remembers praying. "I don't care what it takes to save me. I can't continue to live this way."

When he was finally released, Josh tried to repair his life. He married the mother of his child (they divorced after his sentencing), and tried to find a job. But he didn't cut his ties to his gang friends, and went along on the beer run that resulted in a life sentence.

Still, Josh had developed an unshakable faith that God was present in his

life. His incarceration proved to be a wilderness experience that drove him closer into his relationship with God.

In November 1999, five years after his arrest and two years into his sentence, Josh was called before the same superior court judge who had sentenced him to life in prison. The Youth Authority (YA) had no interest in housing "lifers" and wanted Josh transferred from their facility to adult prison. The facts of Josh's case were so clear that, according to his records, no transportation was arranged for him to be returned to custody at the juvenile institution after his hearing. YA staff expected that he would be transferred immediately to state prison.

On the day of his sentencing hearing, Josh was at peace, believing that God would someday release him from a life in prison. "I wasn't sure how or when that would happen, but I knew

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Josh Ortega (center) and a group of junior-high students from Valley Hi Covenant Church

that God would be with me however things turned out,” he says. “I prayed before the hearing, but I had no absolute sense of how things would turn out. I knew that God would be with me whatever the outcome was.”

Josh’s release would come sooner than anyone expected. During the hearing, the judge resentenced him as a juvenile—meaning that when Josh turned twenty-five, he would be let out, instead of facing thirty more years in state prison. Josh remembers sitting in the courtroom and hearing the judge change his sentence to a straight YA commitment.

“When it hit me that I wasn’t going to do life,” he says, “it felt like the weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders.”

Josh interprets the meaning of this event through the eyes of Scripture. “I can only explain what happened through a verse that God gave me,” Josh adds. Grabbing his Bible, Josh read Proverbs 21:1: “‘The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.’ God made his will flow like streams in the sand, and he directed his will to me.”

During his remaining two years at the YA, Josh continued to grow in his journey of faith. Chaplain Carlton McAllister was a close ally to Josh during these years.

“They are all my sons, but Joshua was one of my favorite sons!” McAllister says. He helped Josh go through a process of self-analysis in which Josh identified those areas of his life that needed healing and redemption.

From there, McAllister led Josh into an understanding of Colossians 3:10. “You are a new creature in Christ,” he tells Josh and other young men like him. “You can’t look at yourself as the same person after you come to Christ.” This understanding, says McAllister, helps juvenile offenders find their true identity and release from the labels and stigmas left by their previous offenses and behaviors.

“Josh gave 100 percent commitment

and dedication to the Lord,” McAllister says. “He had a great deal of understanding of the Bible and he became a spiritual leader among his peers.” Josh also became part of an advisory group that assisted the chaplain in ministry.

“Josh was always able to discern when others were in need and where they were at spiritually,” McAllister says. “He was able to discern these things because of his strong devotional life. He was a very mature young man, faithful to the house of God, and he worked to help others to stay committed to Christ.”

Josh also managed to completely withdraw from gang affiliation—a

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miracle given the gang-entrenched environment of a typical YA ward.

In October 2001, Josh was finally ready to go home. “My heart had been free a long time, so being released was not a huge event,” he says. “But I had been gone for seven years, so the house I grew up in looked a lot different. I didn’t even recognize the street as we were driving home. That felt really strange. It made me realize how long I had been gone.”

The transition home was made easier by the love and support of Josh’s family. Because of his involvement in a work furlough program, he was able to save some money that helped him get started again.

Josh enrolled in college and began the transition back into community life. “It was an easy transition because I had my family behind me,” he says. “They are a huge blessing to me.”

Part of his transition included attending a service at Valley Hi Covenant Church soon after his release. Associate pastor Steve Carlson recalls his first encounter with Josh: “He came to a Sunday morning worship service with a big smile on his face,” Carlson says. “We had a short conversation after the

service. I remember thinking, ‘What a great guy—humble, friendly, and sincere—I hope he comes back.’”

The next Saturday, Josh was back at Valley Hi for a church workday and began to show evidence of his changed life by his willingness to serve.

After watching Josh serve faithfully at church for three years, high-school director Jen Williams asked him to come to an event, in hopes of convincing him to become a youth leader.

“I wasn’t planning on getting involved with the youth group,” Josh says. “I was invited. It is a calling and I love it!”

A few months after becoming involved with the youth group, a position came open for a junior-high director. Carlson says that Josh was a “perfect fit” for the job. “He has the background—growing up in our community—to identify with students who are struggling with some of the same issues he faced as a kid,” Carlson says. “What God has done in Josh’s life is a testimony to the power of God to bring change, forgiveness, and transformation . . . translating into hope for our students.”

On a typical Sunday morning, Josh can be found sitting with a group of roguish-looking junior-high boys in the second row of the church sanctuary. Although many teens tend to gravitate towards the rear pews during Sunday morning services, Josh’s group at the front appears engaged and involved in worship and teaching.

Next spring, Josh will graduate from California State University–Sacramento with a degree in communications studies, and is considering going on for a master’s degree or enrolling in seminary. His immediate plans are to put his degree to work in sharing the story of how God can bring hope into the most desperate situations.

“God is working in my life,” Josh says. “I have mountain-moving faith and I want to share it! I want to help build up the faith of believers and help them to never give up.” □