

*How a robbery gone bad changed one man's life.*

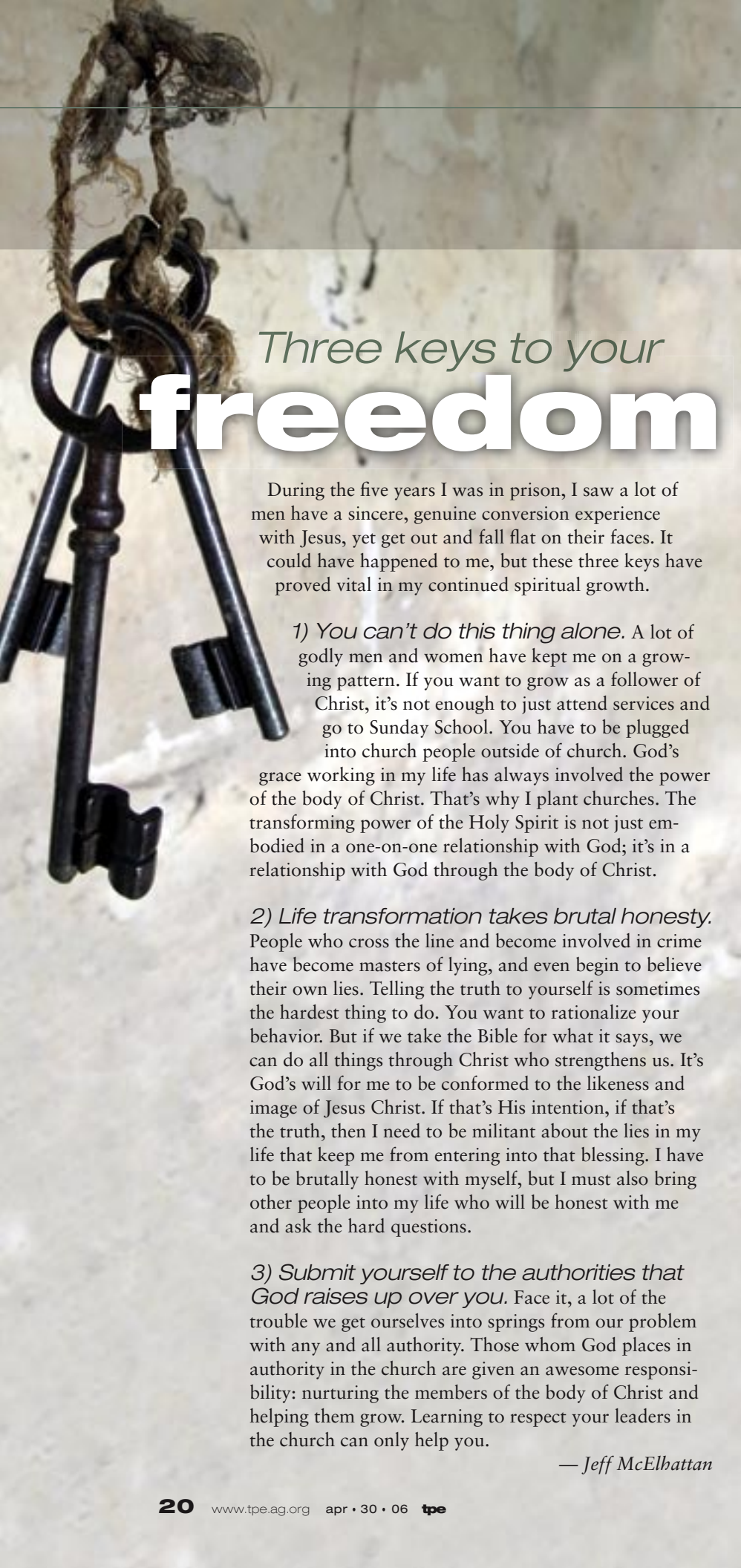
# Thief

*By Jeff McElhattan with Scott Harrup*

The old man was choking and I was trying to save him. Under other circumstances I might have been a hero. But when he died guilt washed over me; I had become his killer.

It had looked like an easy robbery. My partner and I craved the money for drugs, and the man we targeted kept cash in a safe. We only planned to restrain him, take the money and run.

He was so terrified by the ordeal he began to choke and wheeze. **In minutes he was dead.**



# Three keys to your freedom

During the five years I was in prison, I saw a lot of men have a sincere, genuine conversion experience with Jesus, yet get out and fall flat on their faces. It could have happened to me, but these three keys have proved vital in my continued spiritual growth.

1) *You can't do this thing alone.* A lot of godly men and women have kept me on a growing pattern. If you want to grow as a follower of Christ, it's not enough to just attend services and go to Sunday School. You have to be plugged into church people outside of church. God's grace working in my life has always involved the power of the body of Christ. That's why I plant churches. The transforming power of the Holy Spirit is not just embodied in a one-on-one relationship with God; it's in a relationship with God through the body of Christ.

2) *Life transformation takes brutal honesty.* People who cross the line and become involved in crime have become masters of lying, and even begin to believe their own lies. Telling the truth to yourself is sometimes the hardest thing to do. You want to rationalize your behavior. But if we take the Bible for what it says, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. It's God's will for me to be conformed to the likeness and image of Jesus Christ. If that's His intention, if that's the truth, then I need to be militant about the lies in my life that keep me from entering into that blessing. I have to be brutally honest with myself, but I must also bring other people into my life who will be honest with me and ask the hard questions.

3) *Submit yourself to the authorities that God raises up over you.* Face it, a lot of the trouble we get ourselves into springs from our problem with any and all authority. Those whom God places in authority in the church are given an awesome responsibility: nurturing the members of the body of Christ and helping them grow. Learning to respect your leaders in the church can only help you.

— Jeff McElhattan

I can look back and identify the same factors in my life that push a lot of men and women to the wrong side of the law.

The oldest of five children, I was born in 1958 to teenage parents in Trinidad, Colo. Both of them were alcoholics. My father became a policeman, but he was prone to violent, irrational outbursts.

After nine years of abuse, my mom took us and left my dad. But the grip of alcohol never let go. A parade of men came in and out of our home as my mom moved from relationship to relationship.

One year later, my dad and mom agreed that he would take my two brothers and me. She would take my two younger sisters. We would go our separate ways.

As I grew up with my dad and stepmom in Tennessee and Colorado, they began to change their lives and draw closer to God. They got us involved in church. But by then I was fighting my own battles with alcohol and drugs. Those battles continued when I moved out on my own.

In 1980, I was living on the edge. I had put together a band; we played in bars and at parties in little Sturgeon Bay, Wis. Life became a continuous cycle of revelry and recovery.

There were bright spots in my existence. That June I married Cheryl Savage, the woman of my dreams. Somehow I convinced her I had kicked my addictions. But I was living a lie.

A friend and I heard about a guy who kept a lot of money in a safe. We decided to rob him. No planning. On a drug-induced

whim we threw reason aside and broke into his house. We never dreamed it would cost that man his life.

The four days that followed the crime I was wracked by fear, guilt and horror. Whether it was the drugs or satanic forces or both, I could hear audible voices swirling around my head. They taunted and jeered, telling me the only way out was to commit suicide.

## Still, small voice

The sheriff was conducting his investigation in the area; I knew sooner or later he'd come to my house. When he did, the voices got louder and louder.

*It's over. You're worthless. Just end it all.*

But I began to hear a soft voice as well, and it whispered a compelling message — *The truth shall set you free.*

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# Thief...

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# An open letter from an inmate

Dear reader:

The dramatic story of the *Titanic* has intrigued generations of audiences in print, on Broadway and ultimately as a movie blockbuster. After all we have heard and seen about the sinking of the “unsinkable” ship, there still is something hauntingly magnetic about the story.

Ninety-four years ago this month, an iceberg sent the then crowning achievement of human technology to the bottom of the North Atlantic Ocean in two hours. Few ships have carried so many of the world’s wealthiest and most powerful at one time. Yet, the wealth and power were rendered meaningless in a moment by six small gashes in the ship’s massive hull.

wearing a life jacket couldn’t find a lifeboat. They jumped or fell into the ocean and floated in the frigid waters crying into the night for help.

Their fate is the most shocking human tragedy of that heartrending night. Though those in the water continued to cry out for someone to rescue them, those safe in the partially full lifeboats just kept rowing away. They considered rescue attempts too risky. Out of 20 lifeboats, only one turned back — in time to save only six passengers.

Three days later, when funeral ships arrived on the scene from Nova Scotia, a ghostly sight greeted them: 338 life-jacketed men, women and children suspended in the water, frozen to death.

And why did they die? Not because the *Titanic* sank, but because those already saved wouldn’t risk rescuing them.

Could this be a spiritual picture of us? Are we people already saved, yet doing nothing about those dying nearby?

All around us — where we work, where we live, where we shop, where we go to school — are people who will die spiritually unless someone rescues them. Some of them are people you know, people you love and people within your reach. God has placed us close to these spiritually lost and dying people so we might give them hope of being rescued. Will we take the opportunity to give them a chance to live forever? Or will we just keep rowing, uninterrupted from our daily routines?

Tragically, too many Christians are content to enjoy their own safe place in Jesus’ lifeboat. We fellowship with our lifeboat comrades, sing our lifeboat songs, and even work on ways to make our lifeboats bigger and more comfortable. Meanwhile, people we see day after day are drowning spiritually, with no understanding that God’s one and only Son died so they don’t have to face eternal judgment.

And they remain abandoned or unnoticed because those of us who are already rescued are self-absorbed. We want to pile up more blessings on our already overloaded plates. We expect programs to meet our needs, a place where we feel comfortable and church the way we like it. All too often, our notebooks are full of sermon notes, our schedules are full of Christian meetings, our heads are full of Christian beliefs and our lifeboats are full of empty places where dying people desperately need to be sitting.

You and I have nothing more urgent or more significant to do than to try to get the people we know into the lifeboat before they slip away — for eternity.

— A Kansas inmate

More than 1,500 passengers and crew died; for 700 survivors the images of that horrific night were unforgettable: the brightly lit ocean liner sinking; the flares exploding futilely in the sky; the ship’s last agonizing moments with the stern pointing upward, then sliding beneath the water; and the sudden near-silence as the ocean erased the *Titanic* from the icy surface.

But none of those images is more unsettling than what happened after the *Titanic* sank. The vessel had only half the required number of lifeboats aboard to fully evacuate the endangered. Some lifeboats ultimately were half empty. Many passengers already



When the sheriff knocked on the door, I opened it and blurted out a confession.

“I did it,” I said before he could even begin to ask questions about the crime.

He was dumbfounded.

“I did it; I’m your man,” I repeated.

He quickly called for backup and put me in cuffs.

Cheryl watched in disbelief as I turned over my drug stash and was soon on my way to jail.

I spent the next four days naked in a drunk tank as my body cleansed itself from all the poisons I had poured into it.

I was charged with second-degree murder, robbery and burglary. The D.A. was asking for “life and 40.” But no prison could match the bondage of spirit I was in.

One of the hardest moments was facing my young bride. We had been married only eight months. I rehearsed my speech again and again as I waited on the inmate side of the visiting room; it was the size of a closet with a dirty steel mesh between the inmate and visitor.

Cheryl entered. She didn’t say a word; she just looked at me. For the first time she saw the needle tracks on my arms. I had kept them covered with long-sleeve shirts.

“I don’t expect you to hang around,” I said. “I’ve made enough of a mess of your life. If you want a divorce, I’ll give it to you.”

Her response stunned (and still stuns) me: “When I said ‘I do’ I meant it; we’ll get through this somehow.”

I didn’t deserve this woman. For the next five years she waited for me. Our first anniversary together was our sixth.

## Encounter with Jesus

I had been in jail about two weeks when I received an unexpected visit from Marion Moss. Marion was a Spirit-filled Lutheran in her late 60s. I met her at a Bible study a year earlier during a time I was exploring Christianity.

Marion talked to me about Jesus. She told me of the second chance He offers sinners. She encouraged me to look for God in the Bible. She gave me an old King James Version and I started diving in. The “thees” and “thous” peeled back, and I encountered eternal truth.

I can’t pinpoint the time or day when it happened; I just remember coming into the realization that I knew Jesus and He knew me. He spoke to me from the pages of Scripture. He was in my dreams at night and thoughts throughout the day. He consumed me. I couldn’t get enough of the Bible; I met Jesus on every page.

During the five months I was in jail I read the Bible cover to cover about four times. I felt a freedom I had never known. I was in jail — but I was free. God’s Son had set me free.

One day I was sitting in my cell, reading and praying. I closed my eyes and raised my hands to Jesus in worship. I was overwhelmed by a

*I can't pinpoint the time or day when it happened; I just remember coming into the realization that I knew*



*Jeff (in front) with Bible study friends in prison yard in '84.*

*Jesus and He knew me. He spoke to me from the pages of Scripture.*

# ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

**A. Admit you are a sinner.**

"There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23  
(See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

**Ask God's forgiveness.**

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13

**B. Believe in Jesus** (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

**Become a child of God by receiving Christ.**

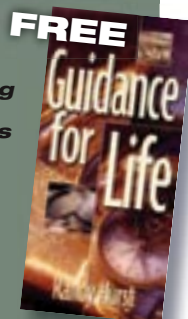
"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

**C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.**

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

For further help, contact the Assemblies of God church near you.

If you would like someone to pray with you concerning your decision to follow Jesus Christ, please contact the church indicated on the back cover or call:



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sense of His presence. Suddenly I felt like I was burning from the top of my head to the tips of my toes; I started speaking in tongues. I didn't know what it was at the time; I'd never seen Pentecost before, though I'd heard about it.

I was baptized in the Holy Spirit. For two hours all I could do was walk around speaking in tongues. The other inmates thought I'd lost my mind. One even threatened to jump me. I couldn't stop.

## Purpose through prison

In October 1981 I was sentenced to 11 years in the state penitentiary. But for me it became seminary.

I enrolled in correspondence classes through Moody Bible Institute. I wanted to be able to read the New Testament in Greek, so I took two semesters of Greek via correspondence.

Three Lutheran pastors became instrumental in my early spiritual formation. Kenneth Ebb was a Spirit-filled ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) prison chaplain who taught me the importance of finding God in Scripture. David Habermas, a Missouri Synod Lutheran chaplain, encouraged my passion for Greek. David Zitlow, a Wisconsin Synod Lutheran pastor, visited me monthly. He was passionate about truth and its impact on one's character and behavior.

Soon I was leading Bible studies in small groups on the recreation yard. When our groups grew to 20 or so men, they broke us up. A "mob" of inmates on a recreation field is not a good thing.

Without knowing it, I was planting my first church. I spoke to Chaplain Ebb about an inmate-led Bible study. He convinced the warden to give it a shot. We started with a half-dozen inmates meeting on Thursday afternoons.

Within a year that group had grown to 50 with a waiting list of 200. (The warden put a 50-man limit on the group.) Men came to Christ, received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, learned the Word of God and became part of a Christian community.

I was transferred to another facility 14 months later. Dan Brygger, a Campus Crusade volunteer chaplain, took the group over and kept it going after I left.

## Full-time ministry

Cheryl and I were growing closer together. She visited once or twice per month; we were allowed a six-minute phone call once a week. We wrote often.

In time I was transferred to two other facilities before entering a drug and alcohol treatment program required before I could be considered for parole. In each institution, I built a Bible study group and taught classes in the chapel.

# Thief...

I was paroled December 2, 1985, and reunited with Cheryl. We had both grown in Jesus. An Assemblies of God Church in Sturgeon Bay reached out to her while I was away and gave her a church family; that's why we're in the Assemblies today. They really believed in God's redemptive power and were committed to helping us experience it.

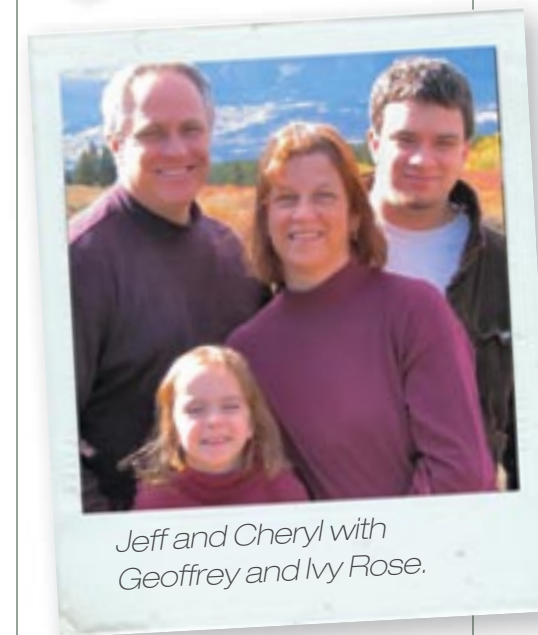
After several church planting projects and serving with our national church planting leadership in Springfield, Mo., we are poised to start a new church in Summit County, Colo.

I guess my life has come full-circle geographically. Elements, our home-group-based church, will reach out to a new generation facing the ageless challenges that tore apart my life.

But Jesus is faithful. **tpe**

JEFF AND CHERYL McELHATTAN are Assemblies of God U.S. missionaries. For more information on Elements, visit [www.elements.sc](http://www.elements.sc). SCOTT HARRUP is associate editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).



Jeff and Cheryl with Geoffrey and Ivy Rose.

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