

# On the Road to Damascus



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You know about Saul's dramatic experience on the road to Damascus, right? When he recovered from it, his name and his life forever changed. *(The story is in the Bible's book of Acts, chapter 9.)*



Joe Bergeron

Well, Joe Bergeron had one of those, too. Seriously! He was also on the road to Damascus ... and he also found his life forever changed ... but I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's start his story when his sister was 14. Or, no! Even better, let's start when he was a child from a badly dysfunctional home.

His dad was a wife-abusing biker type, often absent; his mom – a chronic alcoholic. She dared not complain that her husband mistreated her and withheld his child support – because he'd threaten to have their three children taken away.

Joe learned at far too young an age to protect and take care of his mom and sister, particularly after his father took Joe's youngest brother and virtually disappeared. Despite spending occasional time in county-supported juvenile homes, Joe assumed responsibility for the little family. So it's not hard to understand why he tried one miserable day to stop an older man from sticking a dope needle into the veins of his 14-year-old sister.

Joe did stop the dope dealer. The charge was murder and Joe served 22 years of regret behind bars. He is still surprised that it wasn't life ... but unknown to Joe, God had quietly taken notice of him.

Prison has its own culture and it took the young man a very short time to learn the rules of survival on the inside. His anger and rebellion were natural allies, keeping people at bay so he couldn't get hurt.

He expected to die in prison; had little to lose and no use for trust. He kept his mind sharp by taking college courses and got the equivalent of a two-year degree, obtaining 160 or 180 college credits.

The system is organized so that long-term prisoners are reviewed at 17 years, and Joe was scheduled early, after 14 years. Functionally, without expectation, he went before the review board. He knew they'd send him right back to his cell. He answered their questions and sat waiting.

It happened that a state-level tour was going on that day. Joe caught the attention of a powerful diplomat and was shocked to hear the verdict: "Three more years to your next review, and here's what we want you to do..." Now, THAT changed things.

Some amazing things began happening to Joe during these years, but let's fast-forward to the next review. This time things were different. Joe had expectations. Joe had done nearly all they'd asked him to do. Joe had learned a vocation. Joe had dared to hope. So what did the review board say this time? "Three years," and they dismissed him with more instructions.

Pow! A real gut-punch. But somehow Joe survived the disappointment without caving in. A guy named Paul Wilson had said he would pray for Joe, and despite himself, that meant something to Joe. He couldn't know, too, that God was behind the scenes, pulling all the right strings.

So what were God's intentions, keeping Joe in prison after getting his hopes up? For one, Joe was receiving a quality apprenticeship under the close

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supervision of a good man, a master electrician in the electrical field. For another, he had time to become accomplished in computer knowledge.

And for another ... well, this is pretty wild. Did you notice, above, that Joe was in and out of boys' or juvenile homes as a kid? In one way and another – and another – the youngster was exposed to the classic prayer of salvation: Acknowledge that you are a sinner, Believe that Christ died to pay for your sins, Confess your trust in that work on the cross, and Ask God to save you.

Someone in prison brought the subject up one day. Yes, Joe did know something about the plan of salvation. (*He had not found it to "work," but he knew about it.*) Yes, he'd heard about other guys who had prayed for salvation. Yes, there was stuff in the Bible about it. No, he did NOT want to show the other guy how to do it. No, he was not a Christian.

But somehow Joe found himself holding a Bible, which fell open to just the right verses. And, unbelievably, the guy prayed the prayer of salvation – with Joe's unwitting help – and got saved! Word spread. Joe reluctantly led other guys to the Lord. They couldn't stop thanking him. Talk about the blind leading the blind!

Joe was no stranger to the Bible during his years in prison, but he says it never made sense to him. It was wooden, hollow, rote. He had tried praying. That, too, was empty. But his poor heart was searching, yearning for something from God.

In frustration and anguish, he called out one day. "God! WHY can't I experience what these other guys are experiencing? Why can't I know you?!!!"

This time, Joe's prayer was heard. And God very nearly took Joe's life in sending His Spirit to respond. "My insides caught on fire," Joe says. "I couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. I figured I was sliding straight to hell that very

instant and all I could manage was a squeaky, 'Jesus!' as I passed away."

Like Saul, Joe had companions around during his dramatic conversion. When consciousness returned and the fires began subsiding, his friends were full of concern and questions. Joe told them that heaven had come into him. The euphoria lasted for three weeks; Joe's spiritual change was permanent.

There's not enough time to outline how God eventually brought Joe to his personal "Damascus." He will graduate from Damascus Way on February 10, 2011 if all goes as expected. He's a skilled carpenter and electrician which skills will serve him well when he's finally out on his own. He is part of a local church and has been spiritually guided by several fine, godly men, among them Woodland Hills Church Senior Pastor Greg Boyd.

Joe doesn't live in heaven all the time, and there have been bumps and disappointments along his road since that memorable day in November 2002. He will still have years of accountability to the corrections system, even after he graduates from Damascus Way. But Joe describes his spirituality as "an unseverable connection with God," and he thoroughly enjoys his friendship with God. God has changed Joe's attitude toward others, toward work and toward prayer and Bible reading. "And," Joe marvels, "now I don't work at it! I used to wear myself out ... now I'm just honest and relaxed. God just keeps filling me ..."

Sounds to me like Joe might look forward to a really interesting visit in heaven with Saul of Tarsus ... I mean, with the Apostle Paul. What do you think?

For the men of Damascus Way,

Dick Harden, Executive Director

Damascus Way Reentry Center, Inc.

P.S. Joe had a word for you who faithfully support the Damascus Way ministry. "Thank you so much for making this opportunity available," he said. "This place fills a vital need for many men as they transition back into the community. Life [on the outside] rushes in so quickly; this is a place of safety ... a huge difference to success." **Please be generous in your support today.** Our envelope is enclosed.