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Testimonies Of Life

We have all at one time or another have heard the saying: "Life is precious!" After 23+ years on Texas Death Row, I have seen and experienced all that this statement brings to the forefront.

At the young age of 20 I made one of the most crucial mistakes a person can make. I took someones life. No amount of excuses or explanations could ever make what I did excusable or justifiable. There's consequences to every action and mistake. I have been living with mine every day since July 1992. The pain and suffering has been great for all involved. It's been a heavy burden to carry knowing that my mistakes touched and devastated so many lives. It doesn't really matter what all was happening in my life that led to this tragedy. All that matters is I struggled deeply with what I did for the majority of my time here on the Row. Then in the early months of 2007 I reached what I thought was the end of this terrible life and journey. My execution was set for July 10th, 2007. The news was not a shock to me. I was prepared. I followed the course of my appeals and as each one got denied I knew I was one step closer to facing the consequences for my mistake. Here in TX when a person has an execution date set they are moved to an isolated section called "Death Watch". Only those with an execution date are allowed there and are constantly being monitored; moreso than usual. Every movement is being recorded. Hence the fitting name: Death Watch.

Everything changes when a date has been set. It's one thing being on death row, and it's quite another to have an execution date. It may sound redundant but I've seen firsthand how people change from who they were before and after a date was set. It's like, all is done mentally to not face the reality of this place, and why we are here. Many hang on to the hope that they never have to face an execution date. For me, execution was something that I felt was inevitable. I came to terms with it quickly and simply waited for that day to come. When it did, what I wasn't prepared for was all the emotions and memories it would bring. I came face to face once again with the enormity of my past. Having to face my family and helping them to be strong was very painful and so overwhelming. None moreso than my mother who

was going to lose her one and only child. It was moments like this that forced me to put absolutely everything about life in a much deeper perspective. I was dealing with a flood of emotions all at once. I've always known there was a God, and I knew of His Son Jesus, but I never sought to know Him, muchless seek His mercy or forgiveness. I lived in fear of Him. I felt unworthy and my sins too great to even bother seeking Him. However, as the clear reality of my fate stared at me in the face, I got on my knees and prayed. My prayers were never to be spared. I prayed for forgiveness, for peace, and for strength for what me, my family and so many others were gonna have to go through. It was during these moments that I came to the realization that I was asking for forgiveness, yet I couldn't forgive myself. How did this forgiveness thing work when someone is torn in such a way? My guilt was so heavy that there was no way I could forgive myself. As time grew closer I was led to speak with a preacher and shared my struggle with him and asked if God would still forgive me. He assured me of God's grace and forgiveness but he also said we are called to believe in Him and His promises. Luke 6:37 says: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Many hear/read these words spoken by Jesus Himself and automatically think He was speaking only to those who do these things to others. But it can also be addressed towards those who carry such a heavy guilt and shame on themselves. I had to find it in me to let go of my guilt and shame. I had to believe and place my faith in God. Unfortunately, the hold guilt had on me was too great.

3 days leading to one's last day we are allowed to visit with up to 10 people during regular visiting hours of 8am-5pm. (Last day 8am-12pm) My time with family and friends were filled with a rollercoaster of emotions. I was very grateful for this opportunity because I knew not everybody is given such a chance. The night before my scheduled execution the warden granted my request to have a special mass service per the chaplains office. I was handcuffed and shackled and taken to a small room where the chaplain, his wife, and 2 priests were waiting and sitting around a small wooden table. The service was amazing. I grew up catholic and hadn't been to a mass service since D/R was transferred to this unit in 1999/2000. I attended catholic services on the Ellis unit (where D/R was housed previously) every saturday mornings but sadly it never helped me to fully believe and walk closely with Christ. Well, this night truly felt like I was "feeling" Christs' presence in my heart. When the moment came for confession the room was emptied except for the head priest and me. I'll never forget that moment. There's no realer moment in one's life than when they know it's time to lay it all into God's hands. I did not want to carry anymore guilt and shame.

I wanted peace. I wanted God's mercy and forgiveness. I wanted to be held by His loving arms and know I would see His face soon. Letting go of all the pain, guilt and shame had me so emotional that it was like the dam being broke. It ALL came out. When the priest placed his hands on me, prayed a beautiful prayer over me, and covered my face in oil, I felt so light and at peace. It literally made me release a deep breath as if I could finally exhale all that was hurting and troubling me inside. At the conclusion of mass service, the priests and chaplain hugged me. PHYSICALLY HUGGED ME! For me, this was truly astonishing and unreal. I had not felt another human being's touch like that since coming to prison. I had forgotten how it felt to be held like that. However, the moment that really touched the deepest parts of me was when the chaplain's wife approached me and opened her arms and said: "I want to give you a hug for your mom." This act of love and kindness had tears coming down my face. I knew it could only be God because I did not deserve any of this, yet He doesn't give us what we deserve but what we have been blessed with through His Son Jesus Christ and His blood! Needless to say I left there and as I was being escorted back to my cell, there was such a peaceful feeling within me despite knowing that the following day would be my last.

The next morning I woke up after one of the most peaceful sleeps I had had during my time on death watch. I got ready for my last visit with my family but not before sharing a few words of encouragement with the others who were awaiting their day. It's hard to put into words being around others right next to you who are also counting the minutes, hours, days, weeks, to their execution. A lot of the men who were there w/ me I had known very well. Seeing how D/R is separated from regular prison population, this is our own little community, and we get to know one another very well. As well as solitary confinement allows anyway. Walking out of my cell and stopping in front of every cell to say my goodbyes, I urge them to stay strong and never lose faith. What I saw in these men's eyes were heartfelt emotions. Some were holding strong and some were not. I knew all too well what they were going through for I too stood at my door when countless men walked out and never returned. Entering the visiting area where my family was awaiting me had me eager to share my love for them and the peace within me. Sitting there looking at my mother's beautiful face and seeing how strong she was, gave relief to my heart that God was answering my prayers. When it came time to say our goodbyes we touched hands behind the plexiglass staring deeply into each others eyes knowing that the hardest part of this whole process was only hours away. I was led out of the visiting area and eventually placed into the transport van to be taken to the Death House in Huntsville. I recall everything feeling as if it was all happening in slow motion. Maybe it was just me trying to

soak up every bit of this world as much as possible. The drive from Livingston to Huntsville I was able to look out from a window and I was taking in everything. Every tree, house, car, dog/cat, building, absolutely everything and anything that had to do with freeworld life. Doing so brought so many thoughts, feelings and emotions. The most heaviest was remorse. I can honestly say there was never a day of my life that I didn't feel remorse. Some days were heavier than others, but it was always there nonetheless. This particular day brought on a much deeper sense of it because it was very clear what I took away when I took someone's life. The reality escapes us of this because we are in a prison cell every moment of our days. But on that ride to the Death House I saw what I took away and the remorse was literally unbearable.

Entering the Death House I couldn't help but feel how heavy the air felt as I stepped in. I wonder if what I felt had anything to do with the many men and women who had been executed there? One of the many things TX is famous for is the number of executions that have taken place since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. The death chamber was to my right as soon as I walked in, and I saw the small brightly lit room and the gurney. I still had a few hours (executions take place at 6pm) so I was led to a small cell where I was stripped searched and given another set of prison clothes. I was able to use the phone while waiting. This gave me the opportunity to say my goodbyes to extended family and friends who weren't able to come see me in person. I also spent time talking and praying with the unit chaplain. With each passing minute and hour my sense of peace grew. I had refused a last meal because food was not important to me at that point. My focus was on being strong and at peace knowing that I would soon be facing my family and other witnesses, and address them all for a final time. As my time grew near with only a few minutes remaining, the chaplain and I said a final prayer. Afterwards he stepped away to give me some time for myself. It was during these last few minutes that my prayers to God felt so intense that my spirit felt heavy. Even at this moment I didn't pray for my life to be spared. My heart and focus remained on His peace and forgiveness and strength. There was one more step I had to take before I took my last breath, and it was important that God's Holy Spirit be with me. As I looked towards the front of my cell thinking the guards would be there to escort me to the gurney, all I see is the chaplain standing there looking perplexed as he stared at his watch. He then looks at me and says something is wrong because the time said 6:01pm and no execution is ever delayed unless something was happening with some sort of last minute appeal. I wasn't aware of any legal issue holding things up as I had not communicated with my attorneys, but I did know they were trying their best to get me a stay. However, we were all

pretty much in agreement that it was unlikely any court would grant me a stay. I didn't know how to react to what the chaplain was telling me. I felt like I wasn't even here anymore, that's how focused I was. So I just kept pacing and praying. About an hour after I should have been executed, I was informed by phone that I indeed was granted a stay of execution. I didn't bother asking for any of the legal issues that caused this because I knew who was really responsible. A flood of emotions hit me at once after the initial shock. I fell to my knees with tears coming down my face as I praised God for His mercy, and from that moment on my life has never been the same.

Many people have spoken of near death experiences, well, this was mine. I may not have seen any bright lights or seen angels or any such things so common with near death stories, but what I did experience was the mighty hand of God on my life! 2 Corinthians 5:17- If anyone belongs to Christ, there is a new creation. The old things have gone' everything is made new.- Since I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord & Savior, I have not only found peace within myself, but I have come to understand that we are not defined by our failures. We are defined by God's forgiveness. Jeremiah 29:11-"I know the plans I have for you", declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."- Mistakes in life will be made. Some more critical than others. There's going to be pain, struggles, and dark moments when we question ourselves and even God. But God is good. He is so faithful. God gives us a testimony so we can know Him! I may not be able to change the past and redo my life over. Or even that moment that led me here, but I continue to stand on God's promises and open my heart and life to Him. The Apostle Paul experienced guilt and failure and in Philippians 3:13-14 he talked about it openly. We have all done things for which we are ashamed, and we live in the tension of what we have been and what we want to be. Because our hope is in Christ, however, we can let go of past guilt and look forward to what God will help us become. We musn't dwell on our past, instead, grow in the knowledge of God by Concentrating on our relationship with Him NOW! We must realize that we are forgiven, and then move on to a life of faith and obediance. We must look forward to a fuller and more meaningful life because of our hope in Christ! Amen!