



# HEAD TO THE CROSS

THE STORY OF  
STEPHEN BARBEE

God blessed me with parents who loved the Lord. They ensured my five siblings and I knew that God was a loving Father who would never leave us and who sacrificed His Son to forgive us of our sin (John 3:16). My dad, Pastor Leo Barbee Jr., preached the gospel weekly, and at the age of seven, I professed my faith in Jesus and was baptized.

Being a preacher's kid wasn't easy. People in our church and community had high expectations that I often failed to meet. Whispers and disapproving stares met

me every Sunday. I was sure I was an embarrassment to our family name.

Sports provided a place to shine and somewhat helped keep me out of trouble. Then we moved to Kansas when I was in high school, and I really struggled. Being the new kid on top of being the preacher's kid...well, it wasn't fun. I turned to sports to gain popularity. Soon I was being invited to parties, and there, I worked hard to fit in.

I'm sure it was difficult for my parents to watch me being so careless with my God-given potential and opportunities. I had earned an All-American honor as a

running back and was being recruited by esteemed colleges like Stanford. But on every recruiting trip, I got high. My lack of control did not go unnoticed. Several coaches warned me to slow down, but I ignored them.

In 1985, I accepted a full-ride scholarship to play football and baseball for Peru State College in Nebraska. But my appetite for alcohol and drugs quickly impacted my performance. I started using cocaine, and my life became unmanageable.

During the summer break after my junior year of college, I drove while

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEPHEN BARBEE

impaired, blacked out, and hit a telephone pole going 85 miles per hour. The car was totaled. It was a miracle that I survived and suffered only a few injuries and battery acid burns.

I was afraid to tell my dad and couldn't face my team. Humiliated and depressed, I called my football coach to tell him I was quitting. But Dad found out and made me face the music. He drove me back to college and made me stand before my coach and teammates and confess my actions.

I was sure they'd hate me, but they didn't. Surprisingly, they rallied around me and encouraged me not to give up. Their support led me back to the field until an injury took me out of the game for the rest of the season.

I went to church two whole times during college, one of which was when my dad did a chapel service for our team. I was filled with shame as he preached before my peers, coaches, and teammates. Everyone's eyes were on me, just like when I was young. I'm sure my teammates wondered how someone could have such a godly father and be so off the chain. It didn't make sense to me either.

In hindsight, I know why. I had wandered from God's Word and the structure of our family's faith values. My waywardness made me vulnerable to the attacks of Satan, an enemy who wanted to rob me of my destiny (John 10:10).

Reckless behavior and drug use soon ended my academic and athletic future. One night, during a blackout, I pulled an illegal stunt that led to the college dean telling me I could either withdraw or go to jail. I quit school and walked away from my scholarship and my dreams.

Because of my reputation as an athlete, I landed a coaching job as an offensive coordinator. My comeback was cut short by my prideful and careless actions when a coach discovered I'd gotten high with some students and our star players. The school immediately asked for my resignation. Once again, I had disgraced myself and our family.

I should have gone home, faced my father, and asked for help. Instead, I moved to

Chicago with a girl I barely knew, thinking that a change of scenery and a fresh start was all I needed. When the relationship fizzled, I found myself defeated and alone.

An uncle in the area offered me a place to stay while I got on my feet with the condition that I wouldn't get high while I lived with him. I stayed true to my promise, got a job, and saved for my own place. But the first thing I did in my new apartment was get high. As always, that decision undid any progress I had made.

I went off the deep end in the late 1980s

## MY WAYWARDNESS MADE ME VULNERABLE TO THE ATTACKS OF SATAN.

when the crack epidemic struck Chicago. One hit of crack swung wide the door to destruction. Before I knew it, I was homeless and desperate and doing unimaginable things. I was like the prodigal son in Luke 15 who found himself in the pigsty.

I roamed the streets, sleeping on park benches and begging for food—all the while thinking how good my life had been before drugs and the world got hold of me. Finally, I came to my senses and prayed for God's mercy. I wanted to go back to church, my family, and the Bible.

But would God and my father take me back? Would they forgive me? The answer came swiftly through a divine intervention that included the kindness of a stranger, a sandwich, and the police.

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*Opposite: Stephen shares his life story with the incarcerated and mentors men through his ministry, Passion to Purpose.*

*Right: A rebellious spirit caused Stephen to forfeit the opportunities his God-given athletic ability had provided.*

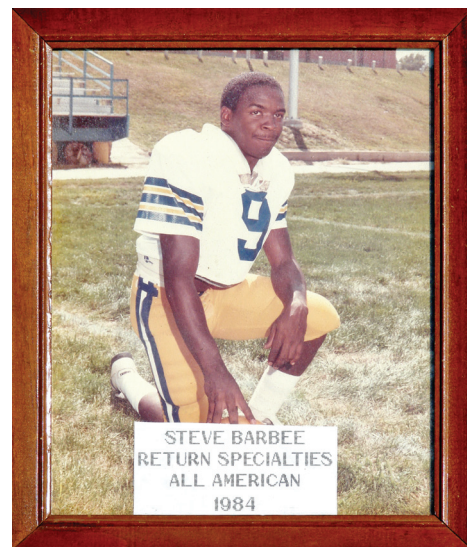
One night, desperate for food, I rang a random doorbell and asked an elderly woman for something to eat. She answered my plea with a PB and J and a Coke. But just as I sat down on her steps to eat, two police cars pulled up.

I explained to the officers I wasn't there to cause trouble, but one of them cut me off. "Just get in the car, son." I gulped down my sandwich and soda and complied. After the longest ride of my life, we pulled up at a bus stop. The officer talked with the bus driver, put me on the bus, and told me not to get off until the driver said I'd reached my stop.

Grateful to not be going to jail, I obeyed. I had no clue where I was going. When the bus stopped at State Avenue in downtown Chicago, the driver opened the door and told me, "Okay, son. Just keep walking till you see the cross."

I stepped off the bus and began my journey. I walked and walked until the cross came into view. Then I saw a sign: Pacific Garden Mission. I began to cry. Through this rescue mission, I knew God was welcoming me, His son, home (Luke 15:20). He was rescuing me from my pit of despair (Psalm 18:16; 40:2).

When I walked through the mission's doors, I embraced my deliverance journey. After a good night's sleep in a warm bed, I signed up for the residential discipleship program. While there, I soaked in everything the program had to offer.





## I NEEDED TO STRENGTHEN MY RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS SO THAT I COULD STAND FIRM THE NEXT TIME TEMPTATION CAME MY WAY.

My family was overjoyed at what God was doing in my life. Dad even opened his pulpit and let me preach at his church one Sunday during a visit home. It felt good to make him proud.

In 1992, I got married and started a family. I worked as a chaplain for almost four years at Lawndale Christian Health Center until I felt God calling me to be on staff at Pacific Garden Mission. It was humbling to work in the place that God had used to save my life. I became the first African-American director of the men's ministry division.

God seemed to be blessing me abundantly. The ministry was flourishing, my kids were healthy, and I had a beautiful wife. From the outside, everything looked perfect. But soon I realized that in my quest to minister, my family had taken a back seat. My wife and I had grown apart in love and support. In July of 2001, she

packed our house and two kids and left. Then, after three years of separation, she requested a divorce.

I did my best to deal with the loneliness by staying busy. I studied daily for my master's degree and worked hard. But every night, I sat by the phone, waiting for my wife and kids to call. I missed them terribly.

The phone never rang, and I sank into a deep depression until one day, a thought crept into my mind. *Look around at your life, Steve. You deserve a beer.* I didn't even try to fight what I knew wasn't from God. Instead, I headed to the liquor store and bought a beer. A week later, that same voice convinced me I deserved crack. One hit awakened the monster of addiction that had lain dormant, and I threw away ten years of sobriety.

First Peter 5:8 says, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (NIV). That verse is no joke. Satan wasted no time pouncing on my weak moment.

I'd smoke crack for days, then check into rehab, then go back to church. But as soon as a craving emerged, I'd forget all about God and church, and the craziness would repeat itself.

God soon intervened, but not as gently this time. He allowed me to get caught buying crack by DEA agents in a crack house. The judge knew my dad, and on sentencing day, he stared at both of us before asking me to stand.

"Mr. Barbee," he said, "I pray that

after I render this sentence, God will deliver you from whatever demons you are wrestling with." And then he sentenced me to 70 months in federal prison where my journey to true restoration began.

I immediately picked up my Bible in prison. I knew I needed to strengthen my relationship with Jesus so that I could stand firm the next time temptation came my way. I started in Ephesians 6 with the armor of God.

God blessed me with an assignment in the chaplain's office—something that doesn't normally happen. There, I led chapel services and exercised the gifts of preaching and serving that I had developed in the free world; I shared the gospel with men of all faith backgrounds. I also completed a residential drug treatment program to address my addiction issues and prepare myself for the pressures of the outside world.

On January 18, 2012, I left prison with renewed faith and a transformed heart. For the first time, I was living for the Lord and not myself. I had found purpose. My life was no longer about performing, pleasing people, having a ministry, or having a degree. It was about loving God, His people, and myself (Matthew 22:37–39).

God used everything—the good and the bad and even prison—to discipline me and sharpen me as an instrument He could use (Isaiah 41:15; Romans 8:28).

I am grateful for the unfailing love of my heavenly Father. In His mercy and grace, He never gave up on me. Despite my destructive choices, I never once lost my identity as His son. And neither have you.

I'll tell you what the bus driver told me: "Just keep walking till you see the cross." There, you will find God's grace and mercy; He will help in your time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Give the Lord your dreams, disgrace, and any destruction the enemy has caused in your life. Without fail, He will welcome and deliver you (Psalm 34:17). †



Today, Stephen follows in the footsteps of his father (above), bringing the message of God's love to others.

**STEPHEN BARBEE** serves the incarcerated and reentry communities as a mentor and community outreach specialist. As the founder of P2P (Passion to Purpose), he shares his message of hope and transformation through Christ. For more information, go to [p2pministry.org](http://p2pministry.org).