

Becoming a Person of Victory

THE STORY OF NICOLE DYSON



TO

say I was the apple of my parents' and my grandparents' eyes would be an understatement. They lavished me, their only child, with love, attention, and encouragement. They provided everything I needed and gave me everything I wanted. I even had a pony named Nicole's Dream.

I wish I could say I took those blessings and used them to change the world, but I did not. I couldn't see past my own desires to care about what was happening to anyone else.

I'm sure my parents hoped I'd grow out of my selfish phase, but I didn't. Everything was about me. Always. And I continued my selfish and careless ways well into adulthood. As a result, I unintentionally hurt many people.

I became a mom at 19. How my son and I survived is beyond me—I was a big kid caring for a child. I had no idea what I was doing. Still, by the world's standards, I was doing well. I became financially successful and provided a nice life for my son...for a while.

On the weekends, I'd take a break from all my hard work and ride motorcycles with my boyfriend. I loved hitting the road with my bleach-blond hair flying out from underneath my helmet. The wind on my face made me feel wild and fancy-free. I thought I was living the dream.

But at age 30, I found myself in the middle of a criminal investigation. My dream had become my nightmare.

I've often pondered how a person with such a great life could end up in prison. My rebellious spirit is to blame. I wanted what I wanted and never considered the consequences. I was the queen of my life's throne, and building my kingdom was all I cared about.

I never touched alcohol during the week;

I focused on work and my son. But when the weekend came, I partied hard. Eventually, my drinking led to hard drugs.

"It's fine," I convinced myself. *"You're just a recreational user."* My head was buried so far in the sand that I couldn't see the trouble that was headed my way.

It began when a local drug dealer gave up the names of his associates, which somehow included mine. Law enforcement didn't care that I was "only" an occasional drug user and had never bought drugs directly from this dealer. I was found guilty of misprision—I had known of felony activity and did not report it.

Just like that, life and all its comforts were gone. Prison became my home for the next thirteen months. Nothing could have prepared this spoiled girl for the shock of prison life. I had zero skills for survival or coping. Grief, anger, confusion, and despair suffocated me daily.

Nighttime was the worst. It was impossible to sleep as muffled cries and whimpers hung in the thick air of the shared

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bunkroom. My thoughts ran wild, and any sleep I did manage was full of nightmares.

Evil lurked in every shadow. Fear and loneliness were my constant companions, and sorrow and sadness hung over me like a thick, black cloud of doom. Hope and peace eluded me, and I shuffled aimlessly toward my release date.

I served most of my sentence and then transitioned to a halfway house. After four months there, the feds freed me to go home with a multiyear sentence of community service and parole.

I had hoped going home would free me from the tormenting thoughts that filled my sleep-deprived mind, but the night terrors continued. I woke up most nights, drenched in sweat, mistaking my bed at home for my bed in prison.

Desperate for rest, I started sleeping in my car, locked in the garage. When I woke up there, I immediately knew I was in my car at home—not in prison.

When my old friends started coming around, I realized I needed to make a change, or I'd end up back in prison. I put a for-sale sign in the yard, loaded up my son and whatever we could fit into the car, and left. I threw my cell phone with all my contacts out the window along the highway and never looked back.

My first stop was southwest Florida, where I lived with my mom until I could get on my feet. Not long after, a friend invited me to church. *Uh, no thanks!* Growing up, I had attended a religious school, and I imagined God was some angry guy dangling me over hell, just waiting for me to mess up. I didn't want any part of Him.

I don't remember agreeing to go, but somehow I found myself inside her church. My resistant heart melted as I heard about God's promises and love for me and the freedom I could have in Jesus. It's true: "Faith comes from hearing the message" (Romans 10:17 NIV). In the presence of the radiant power of Jesus Christ, I felt real hope for the first time.

I kept going to church with my friend, but it was six weeks before I could sit through an entire sermon. Emotions would overwhelm me, and I would rush out of the

service and go to the church bathroom or parking lot to cry. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. I'd never been much of a crier, but I was coming apart at the seams.

The day I finally made it to the end of a sermon, I felt every word the pastor said. I was under the conviction of the Holy Spirit and knew those words were for me. God's goodness brought me to repentance (Acts 3:19; Romans 2:4), and I surrendered to His love.

God's love broke through my pride, anger, resentment, shame, and traumatic memories. Peace replaced fear, and community

Victory comes to anyone who submits and surrenders their heart, mind, and will to God.

pushed away the loneliness as I discovered my identity as His daughter. He gave me a new heart, too; one that was no longer selfish (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ezekiel 36:26).

My ultimate desire was for the One who chased me down while I was still a hot mess. I had done things my way for too long; it was time to get off the throne and let God have His seat. I became sold out for Jesus and couldn't get enough of God's Word.

Once Jesus became the Lord of my life, I became like a baby. I had to learn to walk, speak, and act differently. I had to learn how to think and make decisions with the mind of Christ. It wasn't easy.

Since 2007, my journey with the Lord has been like Abraham's. In his story, God promised abundant blessings, but

Right: Nicole received much love and attention as a child. Pictured here with her late grandmother and riding her pony, Nicole's Dream.

Abraham had to obey what God told him to do and go where God told him to go. (See Genesis 17:1–25:11.) God gave me the same marching orders. Like Abraham, I had to move forward obediently, not knowing where He was leading me or why.

I don't recall the Lord *calling* me to serve in jail and prison ministry. It was more like a shove from the Holy Spirit. The idea hadn't crossed my mind until I saw a flyer at church asking for volunteers to visit the local county jail on Christmas Day.

I was alone for the holidays and needed something to do, so I volunteered. The next thing I knew, I was walking through the doors of Alachua County Jail in Gainesville, Florida. I don't remember anything I said during the five minutes I shared my testimony, but I will never forget what happened next. All ten women who came to our service that day gave their lives to the Lord.

"Is this something you'd be interested in doing more often?" Another volunteer asked me. "Absolutely not," I responded. And I thought I meant it. I imagine God got a good chuckle at my response.

From that day forward, He made things happen that aren't possible for an ex-felon like me. The couple who had been serving faithfully left to do ministry elsewhere, and they handed the women's ministry at the Alachua County Jail over to me.

Jennifer, one of the women there, reminded me of the need for services like ours in prison. She was being transferred to the Florida Women's Reception Center



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(FWRC) and was concerned about finding a Christian community there.

Fourteen years had passed since I'd been in prison, and I was not interested in returning, not even for a good reason like this. Besides, I didn't even know how to start the process, so I passed on the idea. Ignorance was bliss.

But then, I received a letter from Jennifer. "Dear Miss Nicole," she wrote. "I told

The Jesus Infusion Team ministers to over 3,000 incarcerated women in Florida annually. Nicole and her husband, Randy (pictured below), treasure their time with women like the ones in the above picture from the Central Florida Women's Reception Center.

Ministry behind bars is fertile ground for the Gospel, as evidenced by the over 500 baptisms that have been done by The Jesus Infusion team since 2015 (bottom).



PHOTO BY KOURTNEY ROBINSON PHOTOGRAPHY

the chaplain here about you, and he wants you to call him immediately."

I dialed the chaplain's number, chuckling at the thought of an ex-felon being cleared to go into prison. But the hand of God was working to put me on the mission field that He had been preparing me for my whole life. The doors to the prison system opened shockingly fast.

From the moment I walked through the doors of the FWRC, I felt at home. That's because I recognized my former self in the faces of the people before me. Lonely. Hurt. Lost. Humiliated. Broken.

These ladies desperately needed to know the love of their heavenly Father. They needed to know about Jesus, who died for their sins so they could have eternal life and find freedom from addictions, past abuse, and other traumas. They also needed to learn how to fight the spiritual entities waging war against their souls. (See 2 Corinthians 10:4-5; Ephesians 6:10-17.)

The needs of these women quickly exceeded my ability to handle them, and a friend suggested I start a nonprofit organization. The same favor from the Lord that allowed me to preach the gospel in prison came onto the scene, and I became the founder of The Jesus Infusion.

Since its inception in 2015, The Jesus Infusion has served thousands of women in prison. We meet them where they are in their walk with God and show them His grace. Freedom and new perspectives on

life are discovered daily. The Holy Spirit works through our volunteers to provide chapel services, mentoring and discipling, life-skills classes, and baptisms.

People presume that prison is a wasteland, but it's not. It's a place where God reaches out to His children who are sitting in darkness and pain. He commands us to go to them and infuse the light of Jesus into their lives (Isaiah 6:8). Prisoners everywhere need to know that there's hope and that change is possible.

I thought my life was over when I was arrested and taken to prison—but look at what my heavenly Father had in store. God transformed this once selfish woman into an obedient servant who cares for the welfare of others. And to think, I could have missed it all—including the incredible blessing of finding my best friend, husband, and ministry partner, Randy.

God has saved me from myself and made me a person of victory. He brought me from rebellion to redemption, from selfishness to submission, and has placed me in the land of victory.

You can live there too—victory comes to anyone who submits and surrenders their heart, mind, and will to God. †

NICOLE DYSON knows firsthand the importance of being loved and heard. She and her husband, Randy, are invested in infusing the love of Jesus into the lives of people on both sides of prison walls. For more information, visit www.thejesusinfusion.org.