

## **THE MEANEST MAN IN TEXAS by Don Umphrey**

### **A Book Review**

Clyde Thompson was seventeen years old when he was found guilty of the murder of two brothers and sentenced to death. On death row, he repented and was baptized for the remission of his sins. The night before his scheduled execution, he received a stay of execution.

He had prepared himself to die and doubted the advantage of ninety more days. Faith in God, guilt, need for punishment, and desire for freedom warred in his mind. He prayed even as he feigned insanity in hopes of avoiding execution. His death sentence was commuted to life in prison. He was taken to the unit known as “crazy row.”

He returned to the general population with an “us versus them” attitude. Influenced more by other prisoners than by God’s Word, he lost his faith and trusted in being tough. He killed two other prisoners and became known as The Meanest Man in Texas.

After ten years in prison, Clyde was ushered, naked, into a concrete building that had previously served as the prison morgue. It was now to be used as a special solitary confinement cell for him. For thirty days his only food was a daily glass of water and a piece of bread. He felt hatred, fear, isolation, hunger, thirst, and weakness. Loneliness caused him to consider suicide.

After the first month in the morgue, conditions improved infinitesimally. He began studying the Bible, not because of a desire to learn about God, but to show that the Bible was full of contradictions and to show the church-going Bible believers what fools they really were.

Over the next few months, he eliminated his long list of places where the Bible seemed to contradict itself. His thinking began to change. He remembered his many close brushes with death; his close escape from the electric chair; two more life sentences, when he could easily have been executed; and wondered why he was alive in the morgue reading the Bible. He began to wonder, “Is there a God, after all?” He thought about Jesus’ getting what he, Clyde, should have gotten. Jesus didn’t deserve what He got; Clyde deserved what he got — and worse! He quit blaming everyone else for his troubles and started taking responsibility for his own behavior.

Clyde started to regard God as his heavenly Father who wanted nothing but good for him. He started his Bible study as a con job, but when his belief in God outweighed his doubts, he decided he could ask for and accept forgiveness from God without having to be baptized again.

His attitudes and goals changed. He was gradually granted more privileges, including being allowed to talk with other prisoners. He discussed his faith in God with them. He began writing articles for religious newspapers and corresponding with ministers.

Clyde understood why his old reputation continued to prevail over his new life. Prison officials had seen many prisoners “get religion” and soon revert to their old ways. He couldn’t blame them for having doubts about him. He told one prisoner, “I’d like you to know that I wouldn’t leave here illegally now if the walls fell down and all the guards disappeared ... I’m a slave to this state because I deserve it. And the Bible teaches even slaves should be as obedient to their masters as they can.”

After having spent five and a half years in solitary confinement in the morgue, Clyde was transferred to a new isolation unit where fellow prisoners could be heard but not seen. During two years there, Clyde converted twenty-seven men through his Bible studies.

A false accusation resulted in Clyde’s being returned to the old morgue. Bitterness filled him and he asked, “Why me, God? I’ve been trying to do Your will for a long time now, and I end up in exactly the same place as when they thought I was the meanest man in Texas. What’s

the point of all this? ” However, after praying, he vowed to show prison officials that he wasn’t the same man they had first put in the old morgue nearly eight years ago. After a week in solitary, he was moved to another new isolation unit at another prison.

After nearly thirteen years of close confinement, Clyde was sent to a prison farm. The conditions had greatly improved since his difficult days at another farm early in his prison experience. The best thing was that it made him eligible for a parole.

Parole was denied every two years for six more years. He dealt with disappointment by concentrating on the things he had for which to be grateful and continued preaching and teaching. The Biblical Joseph inspired Clyde. “Because Joseph hadn’t lost faith in God during low periods in his life, he was able to accomplish great things. Perhaps the same might be true for Clyde. He renewed a vow to trust that God was running his life and doing what was best for him, and he prayed for forgiveness of his doubts.”

After the third denial of parole, he was disappointed but not crushed. “He had made up his mind not to let his happiness be contingent on the actions of the parole board, something over which he had no control. He had decided to do the best he could each day, whether he was in prison or on the outside.” Soon the board agreed to consider his case again in three months — instead of two years. His changed behavior (transformation) finally convinced the board of pardons and paroles that he was fit to reenter society, that he no longer deserved the title, The Meanest Man in Texas. He was granted a conditional pardon on October 23, 1955, after more than 28 years in prison!

He sought freedom from prison, but he found freedom through Christ long before he was released. Clyde taught the gospel to many men while he was in prison and continued teaching prisoners, ministering to them and working on their behalf after he was pardoned. Texas Governor John Connally granted him a full pardon in 1963.

*(Barbara Edwards, Madison (AL) Church of Christ)*