

Ex-Prisoner Becomes Pastor and Mayor After Life-Changing Encounter With God

A prison cell became the place where Jermaine Wilson stopped looking at his circumstances and started looking to God.

Wilson, who later became a pastor and two-time mayor of Leavenworth, Kansas, shared with Fox News Digital how a cry for help from behind bars became the turning point that reshaped his future and the future of his family.

Raised in a home marked by addiction and incarceration, Wilson entered prison at 15 for robbery. He returned to prison at 19 for drug dealing after becoming involved in gang activity. While serving time in a maximum-security prison, he faced a realization that changed the direction of his life.

"My father had been to prison, my brother was in prison, my sister was in jail. I knew if I didn't change my life, my son was going to end up going to prison," Wilson told Fox News Digital. "And so, I wanted to break that cycle of crime and incarceration. And that's when I cried out to God and said, 'God, I need help.'"

That prayer led Wilson to Prison Fellowship, a Christian prison ministry founded by Chuck Colson. He enrolled in the organization's yearlong Prison Fellowship Academy program, where he began rebuilding his life from the inside out.

Wilson said the program helped him develop accountability while surrounding him with men who encouraged him to pursue a different path.

"It was the accountability piece that really helped me and shaped me and motivated me to be the man that I am today,"

Wilson told Fox News Digital. “But ultimately it’s because I surrendered and gave my life to Christ. That’s when the transformation started to take place, not just in my mind but also inside of my heart as well.”



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His decision to follow Jesus reached far beyond prison walls.

Through Prison Fellowship’s Angel Tree program, Wilson was able to send a Christmas gift and handwritten note to his young son. The gesture reopened communication with his longtime girlfriend, Jessica, and brought healing to strained relationships.

“The church did more than just deliver a present,” Wilson told Fox News Digital. “The presence of God showed up through that gift.”

Jessica later became a Christian after witnessing the change in Wilson’s life. The couple eventually married following his release from prison.

Wilson continued growing in his faith after graduating from the academy in 2009. He attended Bible studies, met with counselors and mentored other inmates before leaving prison and stepping into community leadership.

Today, he serves as a pastor, mission ambassador for Prison Fellowship and a former two-time mayor.

His story arrives as Prison Fellowship celebrates its 50th anniversary and marks a significant milestone. The organization recently became the first nonprofit to receive an evidence-based recidivism reduction designation from the Federal Bureau of Prisons for its Prison Fellowship Academy program.

Prison Fellowship President and CEO Heather Rice-Minus told Fox News Digital that a Texas Department of Criminal Justice study found academy participants had a recidivism rate of less than 6%. Graduates were also more than 50% less likely to return to prison than inmates with similar criminal histories who did not complete the program.

“We really know that the program is making that kind of impact based on the evidence,” Rice-Minus told Fox News Digital.

The ministry plans to continue expanding its work in federal prisons while remaining anchored in the message that changed Wilson’s life.

“For people of faith, especially if you’re a Christian, you have received a second chance from Christ,” Rice-Minus told Fox News Digital.

Wilson now shares his testimony with a message that reaches beyond prison ministry and speaks to every person carrying the weight of yesterday.

“We all have made mistakes, and we are all made in the image of God,” Wilson told Fox News Digital. “And we all walk around with scars and each one of our scars tells a story. Your scars can reflect strength or shame.”

He pointed to a truth that remains at the center of his journey.

“The world would define you by your past, but God redefines you by His purpose,” he told Fox News Digital.

Wilson’s story stands as a reminder that God’s work does not stop at failure, regret or a prison sentence. He still writes new chapters. He still restores families. He still reaches people exactly where they are and leads them toward the purpose He created them to fulfill.

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