

Humbled Former NBA Star Now Living Life God's Way

When **Jayson Williams** walked into his cell at Mid-State Correctional Facility, the first thing he saw was a Bible. It was open and two verses, Proverbs 30:8-9, were highlighted.

“Remove falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches—feed me with the food allotted to me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God.”

As a former superstar player for the NBA's New Jersey (now Brooklyn) Nets, Williams once knew all about riches. He was in the midst of a six-year, \$86 million contract in 2000 when a leg injury forced him to retire from the sport he loved. After his playing days, he worked with NBC as an analyst for its NBA broadcasts.

Williams had it all, or so he thought.

Trials and Tribulations

His life took a drastic turn for the worst in 2002, when he was charged with the shooting death of chauffeur Costas Christofi. While showing it to some friends, he failed to check the safety mechanism of his 12-gauge shotgun. He then tried to cover the shooting up by wiping the weapon down and placing it in Christofi's hands.

The case lingered until 2004 when a mistrial was declared. The next six years became a cornucopia of trouble for the charismatic Williams, who averaged 7.3 points and 7.5 rebounds during a nine-year NBA career played in an All-Star game in 1998.

His wife, Tanya, filed for divorce. His best friend, his father, passed away. Williams was arrested for assault

following a bar fight, but the charges were dropped. While awaiting retrial for the shooting death, he pled guilty to a lesser aggravated assault count and was sentenced to 18 months. He also was charged with driving under the influence, for which he was sentenced to an additional year.

During those years Williams became involved with drugs and alcohol, which only helped to elevate his personal problems.

Wake-Up Call

At Mid-State, Williams quickly found Jesus. He had grown up in a Catholic family in Ritter, S.C., and he always went to church twice on Sundays. But a personal relationship with God never entered his mind until he walked into his cell for the first time and saw the open Bible.

"I always knew the Lord, and he tried to deal with me so many times privately," Williams said. "I wouldn't listen, so he had to deal with me publicly. That bought me 26 months of isolation time with just me and Jesus Christ. That changed my life forever."

After reading Proverbs 30:8-9, Williams knew exactly what it meant.

"My daddy used to say, 'Jay, hold onto the railing of the stairs when you're going up them.' In life, when you're walking up the stairs, you very rarely hold the rail, the rail being God. My dad told me, 'You've got money, you've got gifts, you've got fame and you're not holding on to God.'

"Any time I thought I was doing something that was not God-like, I would just donate a lot of money to some charity or some cause, depending on how bad the sin was. It came to me while I was in prison that it wasn't my money anyway. It was God's money. I saw what God was trying to tell me. I told Him, 'Don't give me riches because I will deny you are Lord. Don't give me poverty because I will steal and desecrate your holy name.'

That's how I live now. When I wake up in the morning, I go wherever God leads me."

Humbled

While spending more than two years combined at Mid-State and at Rikers Island in New York, Williams, who had already published a *New York Times* best-seller called *Loose Balls*, began writing letters to both his dad (who had already passed away) and his heavenly Father. His friend Matt Maher introduced him to a Christian friend, who, five months before he got out of prison, agreed to edit Williams' letters and put them into book form.

The result was *Humbled*, a compilation of the journals and letters Williams wrote during his incarceration. After losing many business contacts and the agency that represented him due to his criminal infractions, he went through several literary channels to get the book published, and is donating the proceeds from the book to charity.

Upon his release from prison, Williams encountered difficulties in find a place to live due to his criminal record. A woman who owned one of the buildings where Williams' application was denied called him after hearing him speak at the Yale Club. She offered to allow him to reapply, and he was accepted.

Nearly five months removed from prison, Williams lives in New York City and has become a motivational speaker. He is asked frequently to give his testimony.

'A Good Crew'

Williams has plenty of spiritual support to help in his daily walk with Jesus. Deborah Raho, whom Williams encountered by what he calls a "divine appointment" in a Catholic church in New York shortly after the shooting incident, meets with him frequently.

If they cannot meet in person, the two connect by either phone

calls or texting.

Raho, who has known Williams for more than 10 years, has become a mother-like figure to him. She has watched over him and witnessed his development into a mature Christian.

“Jayson goes to church and **prays** every day. He now has a peace about him that he has never had before,” Raho said. “He doesn’t have his own agenda; he did that long enough in his life. He has had a very rough life and has been hurt by a lot of people.

“I try to always be there for him and he knows I won’t judge him. He takes the good and the bad each day and praises God for everything. He’s got a huge heart for God now.”

Williams also meets three times a week with former New York Jets running back Curtis Martin, who was inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame in August, for a Bible study and devotional. Barry Rand, president of the AARP, is also a close friend and confidant.

“I’ve got good crew around me,” Williams said.

He also attends many recovery meetings weekly, including Alcoholics Anonymous.

Rev. DeForest B. Soaries Jr., the former secretary of state of New Jersey who met Williams when Williams was a spokesperson for the state’s violence prevention campaign, wrote the foreward for *Humbled*. Now the senior pastor at First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens in Somerset, N.J., Soaries believes Williams will make the most of his second chance in life.

“Jayson has access to the same power that St. Paul had when he said the words, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,’” Soaries said. “When a public figure has been humbled to the point of admitting the truth about himself to the very public from whom he seeks admiration, that is

something worth respecting and giving the benefit of the doubt. He has proven to have a deep appreciation for both the opportunity and the challenge of facing himself and starting his life over—even if it had to occur behind prison bars. In church, we call that being born again.”

Williams certainly cannot undo the damage he did in years past. He is grateful, however, to serve a God who is full of grace and forgives him daily.

“I caused so much pain, and I realize that. Your actions always cause a ripple effect. I want to come out of jail and make the world a better place. I trust God that He is going to use me to do that. Now, I don’t make plans, I look for my purpose. I believe I’m spiritually, mentally and physically ready.”

And certainly humbled.