

From a life of drugs,
crime, and misery...

SECOND --- CHANCE

...to worldwide ministry

JIM AYER
WITH MAYLAN SCHURCH



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A SHORT TIME TO DECIDE

Y*ou want high, Jim Ayer?* God rumbled. *I'll show you high.*

I'm putting words in His mouth, of course. I didn't hear Him say anything—at that point. I didn't even believe in God. But both those sentences ended up being true. I did want to get high, and God showed me a *real* high.

It was 1967, and I was 19 years old. Perched on the edge of my unmade bed in a postage-stamp-size rented room in Mount Shasta, California, I inserted a smoldering marijuana joint between my lips.

I'll show you high.

Three long drags and I was feeling the familiar buzz. After all, I was a hippie's hippie. A commune in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury was where I'd bought my drugs when I lived in Oakland the year before. I'd been not only a user but also a dealer, and had convinced dozens of other kids to try drugs by telling them about the “higher plane of existence” these drugs would open to them.

I'll show you high, Jim Ayer!

I stared at the floor, and inhaled again. To my surprise, the floor fell away from beneath me and widened into a basketball court far below. The walls and ceiling also expanded, and suddenly I was *really* high—sitting on the top tier in a huge stadium, the bleachers sloping dizzyingly down in front of me.

But though the polished floor far below gleamed in the spotlights, I saw no basketball team. Instead, a small table stood at center court, and in chairs on either side two men sat facing each other. I was too far away to see them clearly, but each looked impressively powerful. And with weird certainty, I knew exactly who they were.

That one is God, I thought. And the other is the devil.

I could hear them speaking, their voices echoing in the empty stadium. I don't remember all their words, but I do know whom they were talking about—*me*. My life was on the line. God and Satan were discussing my destiny.

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I almost said *arguing* my destiny, but it wasn't really an argument. In tones which made me shudder, the devil would claim me as his servant, but God would calmly respond, and whatever He said made the devil fall silent.

Gathering his thoughts, Satan would lay out more reasons why I should belong to him, using the same lines of reasoning I'd used to talk everyone I came in contact with into doing drugs. I heard phrases like "expanded mind" and "heightened consciousness."

The master deceiver had written my playbook, my whole script, the words I used to bring as many people as possible down to the pit . . . the pit I was in. Could he have used these ideas when talking Eve into taking a bite of the mind-expanding forbidden fruit? Come on, Eve. Try it. Just once. You will be like God . . .

But God wasn't buying the devil's line. From His side of the table He said something emphatic and powerful yet calm, and again the devil went silent.

How long I gazed at that awesome spectacle I don't know. But suddenly, in an eyeblink, the floor swooped up, the walls telescoped inward, and I was back on my bed in my postage-stamp room.

But no marijuana-buzz lingered. I'd gone stone-cold sober.

"What's going on?" I muttered. "I've never had that kind of trip before. And who was this God? Who was this devil? And why did I know them?"

"Jim," said a clear, strong voice very close to me.

I glanced around. I was alone.

"Jim!" The voice crackled with authority. "*You have a short time to decide.*"

Deciding—wisely—hadn't been one of my strengths to this point. Unlike a lot of less fortunate kids of my generation, I can't blame Mom and Dad for my daily marijuana joint. (I can't even blame the name of the California town I where I was born, "Weed"!)

For one thing, my dad had set me a totally different example. Not only was he a hard-working timber-faller, braving daily danger to put food on the table. He'd also been a World War II soldier attached to the 101st Airborne Division. And three years before I was born, something happened to him that could have made things a lot different for me if they'd gone wrong.

In December 1944 Dad and his company found themselves in the little Belgian town of Bastogne surrounded by Hitler's troops. The German army wanted that town—a key transportation artery—and their forces relentlessly pounded the 101st in what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge.

While it was daylight, American aircraft beat back the enemy. But when the American planes left, the Germans would get revenge by sending in the Luftwaffe, bombing and strafing all night long. Dad and his company needed a

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safe place to get some sleep, and they thought they'd finally found it in the basement of an old church where they bedded down to get what rest they could.

Suddenly, above them, they heard a horrific smashing of stone and snapping of timbers.

"Bomb!" someone screamed.

Everybody grabbed their flashlights and scrambled upward through the rubble.

"It hasn't gone off yet!" someone else shouted. "Run!"

The only way out was past the massive 500-pound explosive. *It's gotta be on a fuse, Dad thought, or a timer. Or is it a dud?* He was about to take to his heels when he noticed a crack in the bomb's casing, and what looked like powder was pouring out onto the floor. Dad reached down, grabbed a fistful, and dashed out to take cover with his buddies. Palms over their ears, they waited.

"It's a dud," someone said a minute or two later.

"Look at this," Dad said, opening his fist and showing his buddies the grainy substance in his hand. "Give me a cigarette lighter and let's see what happens." Carefully he tried to light a few grains, but nothing happened.

"It looks like sand," someone said.

"It *is* sand!" Dad said.

"But who would put sand in a bomb?" a young recruit asked, bewildered.

"A saboteur," an older soldier replied promptly. "Once in a while the Germans use prisoners of war in their bomb-making factories. Maybe a Yank or a Brit or a Pole got the job of filling this bomb, and shoveled in sand instead. Just doing his bit for the war effort."

It still amazes me to think that the reason I was even born and able to write this is that a prisoner of war, forced to work in a German factory long ago and far away, cared so much for people he would never meet that he risked his life to disable a German bomb.

Just fate?

I don't think so.

Dad made it home in once piece and started his family. I was born on a cold January day into a happy home. Like most kids, my earliest memories are dramatic ones, such as the time I saw a cat walking past a window and threw a pair of pliers at it. I missed the cat, but scored a direct hit on the window.

Or the time my parents discovered me enveloped me in a brilliant flame of light, caused when my 5-year-old hand gripped a screwdriver and thrust it into a 220-volt kitchen stove socket. I was also 5 when, using a paint roller and a can of fire engine red, I helpfully painted the beautiful wooden walls of our guest cabin as high as I could reach.

"Go to your room!" Mom hissed. "Right now!"

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Later she told me why she chose that punishment. “I was so mad,” she confessed, “that I was afraid I’d do something to you I’d be sorry for later.”

And I can’t say I began using drugs because I was a spoiled kid. Mom and Dad barely had enough money to survive, let alone spoil me. When popular singer Tennessee Ernie Ford sang—the song that contained the line “I owe my soul to the company store!”—he was singing about the life and times of my mom and dad’s post-Depression era. My mom started working for the company store shortly after she was married at age 16. I was born much later, but the company store was still the place to go in town. I loved going to it. It was Walmart on a smaller scale, especially to the excited eyes of a 7-year-old.

Our home had no real religion, and I had no clue who God and the devil were. But we were a happy country family. Life was hunting and fishing, *Leave It to Beaver* and *Andy Griffith*—and a strong work ethic, family togetherness, old-fashioned truthfulness, and a your-handshake-is-your-bond mentality. Dad loved me. I knew he did, but dads of his era just didn’t say it much out loud.

But even though my parents weren’t religious, Mom sensed religion would be good for me. So she asked our Baptist neighbors down the road if they’d take me to church. Dad (whose name is also Jim) had attended a Lutheran church before I was born—unless it was hunting or fishing season.

One Sunday morning the pastor met my mom at the church door. “Where’s Jim?” he asked snidely. “Hunting or fishing again?”

Well, that was that. I think that was the last time either of them darkened the door of any church for a long time.

Back on my bed, my mind reeling from the dream and then the Voice, I found that I’d been jolted to my very soul. But I was also stubborn. The next day I smoked another joint and got high again, and the next day, and the next. But the Voice was stubborn too. Every time I got high it would slice through my fantasies and sober me up: “*Jim. You have a short time to decide.*”

“Who are you?” I wondered. “Am I going crazy?”

LIFE'S TRANSITION

Little by little, the Voice was wearing me down. And pretty soon, It wasn't the only one talking. I was talking to myself.

Jim, I admitted, you have royally screwed up your life.

And I had. Since I wasn't raised in the lap of luxury, Dad and Mom—through their example just as much as their words—let me know that if I wanted anything I was going to have to hit the ground working.

So as a grade-school kid I went around to the neighbors and got as many jobs as I could. I mowed lawns, cleaned houses, raked yards, stacked wood—anything for a buck. And if that sounds wholesome and all-American, think again. It's good to be hard-working and industrious, but in my case I was simply becoming a believer in the idea that money can buy happiness. I guess you could say that money was my first addiction. I even bought huge bags of marbles, rebagged them in smaller bags, and sold them to my classmates.

At age 11 (!) I landed a great little part-time job with Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company. Those were the days before child-labor laws were strictly enforced, and Pepsi let me work as often as I liked—and they paid me well. I sorted cartons, cleaned up broken glass, and did everything and more that was asked of me. To my money addiction I added two more: work and soft drinks. Believe it or not, by the time I was in high school I was glugging down *two six-packs of Pepsi a day*, and when the company merged with a beer and wine distributor I added another addiction: booze. I was on my way to becoming a borderline alcoholic.

By the time I was 15 I worked five hours a day at Pepsi, clogging my system with sugar and ruining it with alcohol. Surprisingly, I was a high school honor roll student. And when I—finally!—reached driving age I sank my Pepsi wages into a red Oldsmobile Cutlass, aluminum engine, dual white racing stripes over the top, custom racing wheels, Hurst four-speed tranny, black leather tuck-and-