



THE MARK WHITACRE STORY

Finishing Well

By: Mark Whitaker

We all make mistakes. Day in, day out we are subject to our frail human tendencies, as the Apostle Paul wrote, "***For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.***" Even as fully committed Christians, we don't always make the right choices, some of which can have far-reaching consequences. But through God's amazing grace, we can seek forgiveness, repent and move on and He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. It's the next steps that truly define us. As Jazz great Miles Davis said, "***When you hit a wrong note, it's the next note that makes it good or bad.***"

Few of us have made a mistake that has landed us in a Federal Penitentiary but that's exactly where Mark Whitacre found himself. A rising young executive at a Fortune 500 company, Mark was on track to lead the company when poor judgment and high-level corruption brought his world crashing down around him. That could have been the end of his story, but that was just the beginning.

The Driven Scholar

Mark is a driven and accomplished scholar who graduated from Ohio State University in four years with a both a Masters and Bachelors degree. He was then offered a full scholarship to attend Cornell University where he received his Ph.D. in nutritional biochemistry and later pursued multiple other graduate degrees. After receiving his Ph.D., Mark accepted a position with Ralston Purina in St. Louis, MO.

Within two years, he received an offer from a multi-billion dollar company, Degussa Chemicals (now known as Evonik). Soon after joining their company, Degussa moved him to their world headquarters near Frankfurt, Germany to obtain some international experience. In 1989, he was a division VP for Degussa working on a joint venture with Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) and became friends with several top executives who eventually offered him a new position with their company.

The Rising Star

At the time, 1989 when he was 32 years old, ADM was the 56th largest company on the Fortune 500 and one of the largest food additive companies in the world, with over \$70 billion in annual revenues and over 30,000 employees. ADM's ingredients are in the foods people eat and drink every day: Kellogg's cereals, Kraft Foods, Tyson Foods, Coca-Cola and Pepsi. He was president of the bio-products division, the youngest divisional president in the history of the company. Within three years he

was promoted to corporate vice president and corporate officer and was positioned to take over as COO and president.

Mark recalled, "My base salary and stock options combined were well into seven figures and I had free access to one of the many corporate jets. My wife and I and our three children enjoyed living in a huge mansion and our children went to the best private schools. We had the best the world had to offer, or so it appeared."

The one person who was able to keep Mark grounded was his wife Ginger. They both grew up in small towns in Ohio and met when he was in 8th grade. They became a couple in high school and have been together ever since, just celebrating their 36th wedding anniversary.

In 1992, Ginger started noticing some big changes in Mark. She sensed that something was weighing heavily on his mind. She persisted in asking him direct questions about what was happening at work and why he was so intense, unhappy and greedy. No matter how much money he earned it never seemed to be enough. The immense burden that he had been carrying was crushing him and he needed to talk to her about it.

The Criminal

He started pouring out his heart to her about illegal activity that was occurring at the top level of management at ADM, activity that he had also been involved with for seven months: price fixing. He explained how they were conspiring with their competitors and fixing the prices of several key ingredients. It was something that the company had been doing for over a decade,

before he joined them but he quickly learned their elaborate techniques. They were stealing a billion dollars each year from their large food and beverage customers, and that increased cost was being passed on to consumers. Mark found himself involved with a federal crime and was in way over his head.

As traumatic as the news was to Mark's wife, she had a strength to draw on – her faith. She had a personal relationship with Christ that had sustained her since she was thirteen. In contrast, Mark went to church, but just went through the motions. Mark said, "If someone had asked me in 1992 if I was a Christian I would have said, 'Yes, I go to church almost every Sunday.'

"Ginger, understandably frantic at what I had just told her, said I should turn myself into the FBI. I told her I could go to prison and that we would lose our home, our cars and our lifestyle", Mark said. Ginger firmly replied that she would rather be homeless than live in a home paid for by theft. She persisted, saying that he either turn himself into the FBI, or she would do it for him. "An hour later I was confessing to an FBI agent about my white-collar crime, but it was Ginger who was the true whistleblower of the ADM case. If it was not for a 34-year old stay-at-home mom of three young children, the largest price-fixing scheme in U.S. history may never have been exposed."

The Informant

Mark's world would never be the same. He said, "After confessing my role in the international price-fixing scheme, I agreed to work undercover for the FBI. Working undercover was an extremely stressful life—a life at odds with itself. For example, I acted like a loyal executive, building the company during the day, and tearing it down during the evenings. I would meet the FBI at 6 a.m. when they would shave my chest in order to tape mini microphones and check the batteries in the tape recorders that were in my brief case and a special FBI notebook. I would record my peers during the day, and then meet the FBI at various hotels from 6 p.m. to midnight in order to turn over the tapes and endure what seemed to be endless debriefings."

Mark wore the wire for the FBI for two years and it took a toll on his family, his life and his sanity. He came close to a nervous breakdown several times, performing his work duties as normal during the day and hours of debriefings at night with the FBI. When the evidence gathering drew to a close, his sentencing was up next and when all was said and done, he was given a sentence of ten and a half years in a federal penitentiary. There is no parole for federal inmates, just the possibility of a 15% reduction

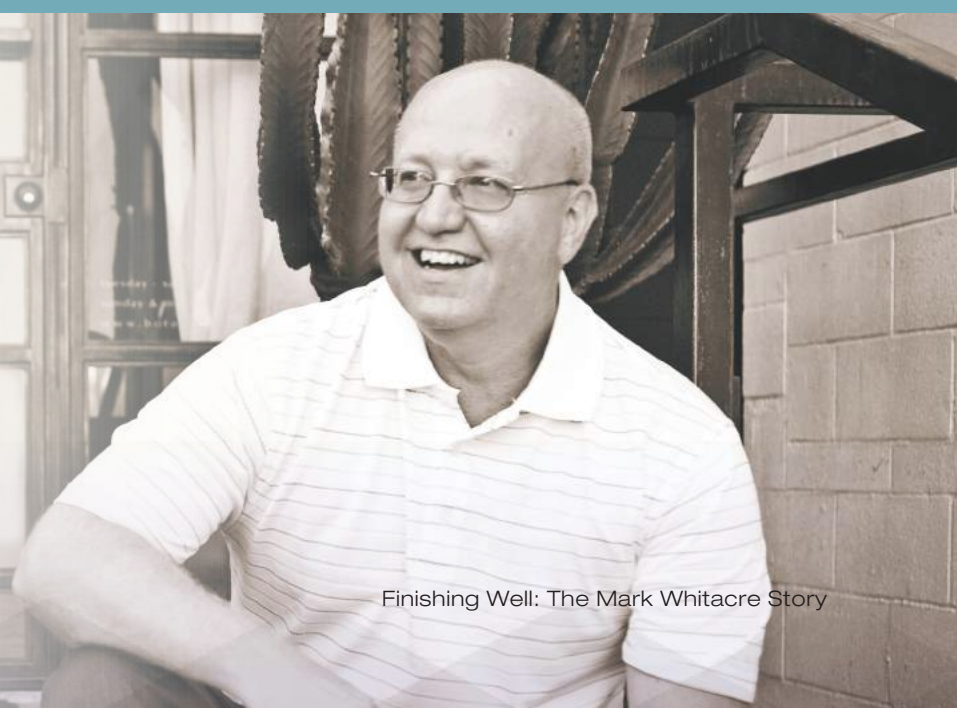


in the amount of time to be served for good behavior. The news of the scandal hit all of the major news networks, destroying his reputation and worse, that of his family.

Mark said, "My biggest fear was the impact on my family. How would they go on without me? Would they go on without me? I had already missed so much of their lives. I was going to prison at age 41 and wouldn't be released until I was 49. My selfishness and pride had robbed my family of the stability and security a father should provide."

"In the months before entering prison, I was emotionally and spiritually bankrupt. I did not want to live and doubted that I deserved to. I knew my life insurance policy would grant a death benefit if I took my own life, so believing there was no other solution, I attempted suicide twice which landed me in the hospital, spiraling deeper into depression to the point that I was diagnosed and treated for bipolar disorder."

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The Prisoner

On March 4, 1998, Mark entered federal prison in Springfield, Missouri as inmate number 07543-424. Chuck Colson, President Nixon's "hatchet man" and founder of the Prison Fellowship ministry that has touched countless lives, visited him and became one of his mentors along with another friend of his, Ian Howes. They told him that God loved him and no matter what mistakes he had made, God could and would forgive him. At first, he thought that the damage he caused and the mistakes he made were too large for God to forgive. Through his studies he learned that in the Bible, it says, "But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness" (1 John 1: 9 NLT). Chuck told him how God sent His only Son, Jesus, to live on the earth and die on the Cross in order to pay the penalty for his sins so he might be made right with God. For all of his sins, not just those he committed at ADM. Mark exclaimed, "For the first time I realized from the Bible that I could go to heaven and have eternal life by putting my faith in what Jesus accomplished on the cross and believing He had been raised from the dead."

The Forgiven

"For the first time I understood being a Christian is not about going to church every Sunday or what I did or didn't do, it was about a relationship with God. In June 1998 in a prison cell, I got on my knees and admitted to God that I was a sinner, and I asked God to forgive me. I told God that I fully understood that His son, Jesus, came to earth to die on a cross for my sins. That day, June 4th, 1998, for the first time in my life, I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ. At last, I had peace."

"Although I was only three months into a decade-long sentence, for the first time in my life, I was content. My life's void, which I had tried to fill with money, mansions, cars and business success, was now satisfied. Before entering prison, I thought prison would be the end of my life, only to find that it was the beginning of my life. I placed my burdens on God's shoulders, trusting that He was going to take care of things. Unlike the first forty-one years of my life, from that day forward I would strive to know Him, love Him and serve Him in making all decisions with prayer and His guidance."

The way that God intervened while he served his sentence was nothing short of miraculous. His family visited him every

weekend and grew stronger through their faith. In August of 1998, an attorney from a prestigious law firm in Washington, D.C., contacted Ginger to inform her that companies such as Tyson Foods, Pepsi, Coca-Cola and Kraft, who had won hundreds of millions of dollars in class action suits against ADM, wanted to assist his family while he was in prison. ~~What~~ a blessing to have the burden of providing for my family lifted and knowing that they would be provided for in my ~~absence~~!

The New Man

After his release from prison, Mark found a job with another Bio-Tech company whose CEO was a Christian and on the advisory committee of CBMC (Christian Business Men's Connection). Mark has since been very active in CBMC and is a Marketplace Ambassador. Mark made such an impression on the FBI agents that he worked with, four of them and a former prosecutor have written letters to the White House in support of a full presidential pardon for him. He has also been invited by the FBI numerous times to conduct training sessions on undercover missions for new agents.



God's great irony was further demonstrated when Mark's story caught the attention of Hollywood.

His story would be seen by millions of people when it was the basis of the 2009 motion picture *The Informant* starring Matt Damon as Mark.

His story was also the subject of a 2010 Discovery Channel Documentary as well as numerous other news documentaries. Through God's infinite grace and mercy, Mark's life has come full circle. Even at his darkest hour and in spite of all of the mistakes he made, God still had a plan for his life full of hope and significance, a plan that would allow him to finish well.

VICTORY ■



Mark Whitaker is the Executive Editor of TwoTen Magazine. He is inspired daily by his God, his wife Kim and his three daughters Hannah, Sarah, and Rhea.



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THE WORLD NEEDS AMBASSADORS TO SHARE THE GOSPEL ...ARE YOU READY?

2 Cor. 5:20



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