# INMATE 46857

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If God Can
Change Me,
He Can Change
Anybody

**EDDIE CHARLES SPENCER**
**LAFON WALCOTT BURROW**

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# Dedication

This book is written to the praise and glory of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and in honor of Mary Elizabeth Spencer, a loving mother, and the late Eddie Clarence Triplett, a forgiven father.

# Contents

# Acknowledgements

We are so grateful for everything God has done in our lives. Apart from His grace, we would not have a story worth telling. We are also thankful to the Lord for all the people who have accepted us, encouraged us, taught us, helped us, prayed for us, and loved us along the way—especially our spouses, Betty and Bill. We love and appreciate you so much.

## Chapter 1

# My Sister's Shoes

It only takes a moment to turn your life around. It doesn't matter who you are or what circumstances you find yourself in, God can make things different if you'll just let Him. I know that for a fact. I used to be the angry inmate in the prison mug shot on the front of this book before God gave me a new shot at life.

Inmate 46857, that's me. At least the me I used to be. A convicted felon imprisoned by my anger and sentenced to ten years mandatory in the Mississippi State Penitentiary for armed robbery and attempted murder. Take a look for yourself. My seventeen-year-old face is already hard with hate. My lips are tight, barely able to hold back the cussing and hollering. My dark eyes defy everybody in authority.

*Click!*

That prison camera pretty much captured the real Eddie Charles Spencer the day in June of 1980 when they locked me up at Parchman Penitentiary. A furious boy living in a grown man's body, I'd been chased by inner demons since before I learned to write my own name. By the time I was ten years old, I'd turned into a gun-toting

kid-criminal so out of control the law couldn't wait to lock me up. I had finally gotten myself incarcerated on account of the violence and crime I'd created running in the streets of the Mississippi Delta and, even though I knew I didn't really have anybody to blame but myself, I was dead set on getting even with the world.

Except for God's grace, I know where I'd be today—either lying in my grave or still locked up in some prison. Instead, I've been out of jail for more than a decade and I don't even resemble—inside or out—the angry criminal I am in that mug shot.

Now I want to share with you the story of the person I used to be and how God transformed me into the new man I am today. I'm hoping that once you hear about my life you'll see for yourself that if God can change me, He can change anybody.

Try to picture me the day in 1968 when my feelings of rage first showed up. I was only six years old and in the first grade, but already anger owned my soul. I wish I had a photograph of myself back then so you could see what I looked like, but I don't have any snapshots of myself as a child. My family was so poor that we didn't own a camera. At one time, we did have these little school pictures Momma used to keep tacked up on the walls in the front room of our house, but even those are gone now. I reckon I'll just have to show you with my words what I remember about myself and the world I lived in. Once you've heard what I have to say, maybe you'll understand how I became the angry person I used to be and why nothing short of the power of God could turn my life around.

Exactly where all my anger came from, I can only guess. Could be I was simply born that way. Some folks say that's possible. Anger certainly crawled like kudzu through the branches of my family tree, so maybe rage was just my nature. Inbred— an inheritance from one side of my family or the other, most likely my dad's.

My father was a big man, hard and impulsive. When Daddy got upset, he just reacted and went to the extreme. He was always

striking out. As a young child, I saw the times my daddy and my momma got into it, and I remember all too well those whuppins Daddy gave us kids—especially me. He tore into me whenever, wherever, and with whatever he could lay his hands on: hose pipes, extension cords, fan belts. He didn't care.

For sure, my anger festered in the place I was raised. It was so easy to become outraged inside the dilapidated shotgun house my family lived in over on Hays Place. My rage just sparked into flame from the friction of the eleven of us all crowded up in that three-room house with its rusted tin roof and sagging front porch. No air conditioning. No running water indoors. Toilet out back.

My family was one of the poorest of the poor in Hollandale, a Mississippi Delta plantation town. We weren't just your ordinary poor; we were a notch lower. "Po" would be how some people might describe our standard of living. We lived like that even though my parents were people who really were trying to make a better way. It may be hard to understand, but both my folks worked all the time and still didn't have much of anything to show for it.

That could have had something to do with the fact that if there was any kind of minimum wage back when I was a boy, it didn't seem to apply to blacks like us. No matter how hard they tried, it seemed like my parents couldn't earn what it took to meet our needs—not even with government assistance.

My daddy usually handled three jobs at once. During the day he worked on a farm, and at night he served as a deputy sheriff over in the black section of town. Being a law officer might have brought him some respect, but not much money. To try and make ends meet, he did mechanic work on the side. Still, all three of those jobs didn't pay him enough for our family to live on. So, Momma managed two jobs herself. She did domestic work during the day and cooked in cafes at night, but she didn't make much of anything either.

My family was so hard up that we had to just make do with whatever we could get our hands on. Nearly everything we wore was a hand-me-down. We got used clothing, not just from white families, but from other black families almost as bad off as we were. A lot of times all we had to eat were leftover fried fish and old Nabs my mom brought home from the cafe where she cooked. Lousy as it was, food somebody else was about to throw away was better than nothing. That's exactly what we had some days. Nothing.

No doubt about it, I hated being that poor.

But maybe it wasn't just the poverty, maybe it was the rejection I experienced on a regular basis from whites and blacks alike. I can remember times folks would say, "Oh, you know Eddie Spencer. He stays in that raggedly house." Sometimes children in my own neighborhood taunted me with, "My momma gave you those clothes." I hated that kind of rejection even more than I hated being poor, especially when it came from folks whose skin was the same color as mine.

Perhaps anger just seemed a better choice than the hopelessness I saw all around me. There weren't any blacks in Hollandale going anywhere. Our only future lay in farm work or house work or gin work. Those jobs only kept poor blacks like us broke, powerless, and living at other people's mercy. Trapped in that situation, I couldn't see any chance to make something out of my life. In its own odd way, anger gave me a power I couldn't find any other place.

On the other hand, maybe it was everything—heredity, my dad's example, the environment I grew up in, my family's poverty, the rejection I experienced, the hopelessness of my world. Could be all those things shaped my feelings and set my anger on fire.

Or maybe, it was just me. Maybe I chose that anger myself. Maybe I liked the taste of payback on my tongue.

When you get right down to it, could be that where my anger came from really doesn't matter. I've learned that even though an-

ger always has its reasons, once it sets hold, it no longer needs any excuse; it just needs something to crank it up.

For me, serious anger showed up one day in 1968. Even now voices from back then haunt me.

First thing every morning, somewhere about six-thirty or seven, someone would call from across the room. Sometimes it was Momma. Sometimes it was one of my sisters. This particular day, it was my oldest sister, Emma, I think.

"You better get up right now. Momma says so," Emma hollered at the rest of us kids still piled up all over each other in the bed.

I slept with my brothers. There used to be four of us squeezed together in that one double bed every night, but my oldest brother Joe Lee had drowned that summer over at the dam. Now he lay by himself over in the cemetery in an unmarked grave. So, it was only Booker and Richard and me in the old iron bed we shared. The girls all slept together in the other bed right there in the same small, crowded room: Priscilla, Carolyn, and Roxie. Sometimes my momma's sister, Tain, stayed at our house and she'd sleep in the bed with them too.

Little Quentin still slept up front with Momma and Daddy. My folks weren't married. Never were, just shacking. The two of them moved in together after they started having children. Each new baby stayed in the bed with them until the next one came along. For Quentin, that wasn't very long. Little Larry showed up the next year. He was Momma's tenth child, and she hadn't even celebrated her thirtieth birthday yet.

Just like our bedroom, that front room stayed stuffed full too. There was a heater and the chifforobe in there, plus Momma and Daddy's bed, the dresser, a TV, and some old junk chairs Daddy'd brought home and Momma had covered up with bedspreads. I listened as Momma slipped through the door from in there and moved into the middle room all the kids shared. I couldn't see Momma from where I lay in the bed, but I knew her large, tall

frame nearly filled the doorway. Probably, she was putting on her glasses. I loved my mom in those glasses. To me she was a beautiful woman—beautiful, yet always wearing a weary look of struggle on her light-skinned face. For Momma, life was just work of one kind or another. Seemed like she never got time to stand still or get rested.

Most mornings when we had to be up and out of the house early, Momma would get us all going with her switch. She'd stop at the girls' bed first. *Bap!* Her switch would pop the quilt on top of the girls. *Bap!* She'd most likely pop them again. *Bap!* They'd squirm and stir around under the covers.

"You better get up!" Momma'd holler. "You'll be late for school if you don't."

Once Momma got the girls, I knew she'd find us boys next. So, I'd try to scramble out of the bed before I caught the sting of her switch on some bare part of my body. Pretty soon Booker and Richard or whoever else was still under the covers would come tumbling out behind me.

"We up, Momma," somebody'd holler. "We up."

After Momma had gotten us out of the bed, she'd disappear through the door to the front room again to get the baby up. Most likely, Daddy was already gone from the house. He came in late and left early, so he wasn't home most mornings. After Momma grabbed Quentin, she'd come on back to where she'd left the rest of us children.

Once everybody got up, there'd be right at seven people in that small space between the beds. Everyone would be milling around trying to get themselves going. Most of the time, we'd taken a bath the night before, all of us in a little ol', round, Number 3 galvanized washtub, one after the other in the same water. That way, all we had to do come morning was get dressed. But even just getting the whole bunch of us ready for school was a chore.

There weren't any closets in our house. Momma hung most of her clothes and purses and things on nails on the wall in our room. The rest of her stuff she kept up front in the chifforobe. All the kids' clothes were just stuck in different boxes stacked up over in the corner. That morning, we were all rambling through those boxes like we normally did, searching for something to wear to school.

Pretty soon, I found myself a shirt to put on, but the only pants I could find were too short for me—what we called "high-water" pants. I hated high-water pants. I would have thrown them back in the box, but I couldn't find any more that fit. So, I pulled them on me, zipped them up, and then snatched some thick white socks out of another box and picked my shoes up off the floor.

They were my only pair and I'd been complaining for weeks to Momma about how they were tearing up. She'd been saying she'd get me some new ones some time soon, but she hadn't. Couldn't, probably. I'd been dreading when those broken-down shoes finally fell apart.

Today was the day.

Right under the bottom of my old tennis shoes, the sole had come completely apart. Now, what am I gonna do? I asked myself, pulling at the place where the shoes had separated.

"Look here, Momma," I remember saying. "I told you this was gonna happen." I poked my finger through the hole and stuck my busted shoes up in the air for my mother to see. "My shoes are all torn up. Now, how am I gonna go to school?"

Right off Momma picked up an old pair of my sister's shoes and put them on me. They fit, so my mother buckled them up. "Eddie Charles, you know what I always say. You can't wear what you don't have, so you just as soon be satisfied with what you got! You just go ahead and wear these shoes. I'll get you some more soon as I'm able."

Now, my mom said to wear those shoes to school, so there was no opposing her. I just did what I was told and never gave a thought to the fact that they were girl's shoes.

I don't remember if we had breakfast that morning or not. Some days we did and some days we didn't. Even when we did, it wasn't much. Usually just flapjacks and salt meat. I do remember that pretty soon—hungry or not—we all rushed off, me wearing those high-water pants and Roxie's shoes.

Simmons Elementary was within walking distance of our house, and this was my first year to go there. All the kids I went to school with were black just like me. Folks from outside might have seen that as a problem, but not me. I loved going there, no matter who I went to school with. In fact, being in first grade excited me. I especially liked sitting at the lunchroom table. At home, we didn't even have a table. When we ate, we just had to take a seat wherever we could and the children mostly ended up eating on the floor. Sitting around a table in the cafeteria for lunch was something special to me.

As we headed out that day, some other kids from around the neighborhood caught up with me and my brothers and sisters, and we all walked together just like we did every other morning. Everybody acted normal, with me right in the middle of them wearing my sister's shoes.

The whole group of us hustled toward the long, low, red brick school building sitting right on the edge of town next to a cotton field. When we got up there, I dashed in the front door, raced down the long hall, cut a left onto the other hall and headed toward the very last room on the left. The teacher stood outside the door greeting us kids. I don't remember her name or even her face, but I do remember her speaking to me.

"Morning, Eddie Charles," she said, just like always.

I scooted past the teacher and stepped inside the classroom, thinking nothing in particular other than I was running late. Right

away I noticed everybody's eyes on me. I felt so uncomfortable. Why are they lookin' at me? I wondered.

Pretty soon, I heard everybody laughing. Why are they laughin'? I wondered again. Then, I heard a voice above the snickers: "Look at Eddie Spencer. He's got little-girl shoes on."

I don't remember exactly who was taunting me. I didn't put any face with it. Couldn't. I was too embarrassed to even see straight. I just remember hearing someone say those hurtful words.

"Look at Eddie Spencer. He's got little-girl shoes on."

Right then and there, my whole life seemed like it crumbled down. I was so humiliated, so wounded, so angry. All at once. I'm not just talking about your everyday angry. I'm talking double angry: angry at those kids for laughing at me, angry at my parents for allowing this to happen to me, angry at my whole world for putting me in this position.

My hands clenched up and I started huffing and puffing. I could feel tears rise in my eyes, but Eddie Spencer wasn't going to let anybody see him cry. I took off running and shot into the bathroom at the back of the class. The door slammed behind me and I slumped against the wall over by the commode. I allowed the tears to spill out onto my face, and I cried until I ached from the sobbing. Then, I let my anger take hold.

For me, hurt always gave way to anger and that anger twisted my mind and made me think crazy, this day more than ever before. You hurt me, I thought, now I'm gonna hurt you back. That became my philosophy and I began right then and there to plan how to torment those who wounded me.

"Eddie Charles?" the teacher said, knocking on the bathroom door. "You clean yourself up and come on out."

From the tone in her voice, I could tell she wasn't mad at me. Besides, I knew I had to come out sometime. Swiping at my face with the bottom of my shirt sleeve, I went back into the class. By then, the teacher stood at the front of the room talking to the boys

and girls about not hurting people. I sat down at my desk, but I didn't really hear much of anything. My mind was so involved in what everyone had done and said to me. You will never laugh at me again, I threatened in my head. If you do, I'm gonna get back at you.

Some kids might have let this situation go, but I just couldn't quit thinking about how the other children had made fun of me. Even worse, I felt like my parents were the ones who'd put me in this predicament. Now that I'm a grown man, I can see my folks were doing the best they could. But as a child, I couldn't see anybody to blame but them, especially my dad. Seemed like he just wasn't ever able to provide me what I needed. Not decent clothes. Not enough food. Not even love and attention.

The whole rest of the day, my mind was totally locked up. I stayed in my desk and stared out the window, but all I could see was my hurt and anger. Nobody said anything else about my shoes. It was only that one moment, but that was enough. That's all it took. My life was never the same from then on.

As soon as the last bell rang, I headed for home. I couldn't wait to get there. My sister's shoes—set off by those white socks—were still so noticeable to me under those high-water pants. I couldn't quit feeling like everybody was looking at me. Worst of all, I felt like my heart had been stomped. I hustled back home.

"Momma, where you?" I shouted into the house.

"Here I am!" Momma shouted back. "What you want, son?" Home from cleaning some white family's place, Momma hadn't left yet for the cafe where she cooked at night. "I said, what you want?"

My hands clenched up again. From where I stood near the front door of our shotgun house, I could see clear through to the back of the place. I felt my anger rising as my eyes took in that run-down shack. I hated the old crumbly wallpaper that had been there so long it was faded and dirty, the bare light bulb hanging down on a cord, and the places where you could see clean through the walls.

"I'm not gonna wear these shoes ever again!" I shouted loud enough for the whole world to hear. "I hate 'em."

"There's nothing wrong with those shoes," my mom said. When she fussed at me, Momma pointed her left hand straight at my face and seemed to grow even larger than her normal big self.

"Yes, there is. Kids at school all laughed at me," I argued, feeling small and vulnerable. "I hate you for sendin' me there in these shoes. I hate my daddy, too. He don't have nothing but nice shoes."

I knew my dad's Stacy Adams—the good dress shoes he prized so much—were freshly polished and put up in the chifforobe right across the room from me. So did my momma.

"You hush up, Eddie Charles. I still say there's nothing wrong with the pair you got on. They're perfectly good."

I heard what Momma was saying, but then there were those words my dad always said: "No matter what kind of pants a man's got on or what kind of shirt he's wearin', he always needs to make sure he's got on a quality pair of shoes."

Keeping to that philosophy of his, my father always managed to have something nice to put on his feet. Yet, it was clear to me that he didn't care one bit what I was wearing on mine.

I yanked Roxie's shoes off and stood there, bare feet begging for attention, resentment growing. I shouted at my mom. "I ain't gonna go back to school 'till I get something else to wear."

After a while, Momma left. When she came back, she had this little pair of Buster Brown sandals for me. I didn't know where my mother got those "new" hand-me-down shoes, but I was hoping they came from some white person so nobody I ran into would say my shoes used to belong to them.

I wore those sandals the next day and no one said a word, but I would never get over the shame of wearing my sister's shoes to school. Not ever. That experience—just hearing everyone laugh and ridicule me—gripped my mind. Inside my head, I felt less

than nothing, and I started looking for a way to turn that situation around. What I chose changed my life, all right. In no time at all, I became a four-foot-tall gangster out to get even with the world.

Ever wonder how a kid-criminal is made? I think I know the answer.

When you're hurting and nobody is around to help you deal with the pain, you have to find some way to release it. So, I began to lash out. You get angry? Then express it. That's the way I thought, and that's the way I began to deal with the world. If somebody hurt me, I'd hurt them back. Revenge and retaliation were all I had on my mind.

The rest of that school year, I stayed in trouble. I pulled more than one of my tormentors into the bathroom at the back of class and took my anger out on them. I knocked folks so silly, they couldn't see straight. When I wasn't attacking the other kids, I was stealing their lunches or taking their pocket change.

I was so focused on getting even that I couldn't concentrate on my lessons. I knew how to read my hurt better than any book. At the end of the school year, I'd flunked, but I'd begun to build a reputation as the meanest kid in Hollandale. For me, that was enough.

Or so I thought.