



# Perspective

By Jamie Buckingham

"... on the sidewalks of New York." But the music hath lost its charm.

A block from East River on 36th Street there's a small park, a lonely patch of struggling green and hard-packed sand cowering between skyscraper apartment and office buildings and dirty factories belching hazy smoke. Inside the steel-grated enclosure a few children splash in a concrete wading pool and clamber through monkey bars. Bored parents sit and wait, sipping beer and reading the paper.

Outside the fence two shabby men are sitting on a green park bench facing the litter-covered street. Thin and emaciated, both are scraggly — bearded — and ageless. They could be 25 — or 55. The ravages of drugs have taken their toll. Shirts and pants ill-fitting—stained with food and vomit. Both are glazed-eyed and shaking, too weak to even get up and panhandle as I approach.

The man nearest me bends his head forward, almost between his knees. His filthy once-blond beard is matted, his hair stringy. As I get closer I can see the sores, open and running, on his scalp where the hair has fallen out. He heaves, time and time again, and a small puddle forms at his feet. Now he's empty. Dry. But the heaving continues.

Every fibre of his body cries out for a "fix." But heroin is up to \$7—just for barely enough of the white powder to cover the bottom of a Pepsi cap which would serve as the "cooker" when mixed with water and heated over a match. His arms are a mass of scars where countless needles, pins, even nails have been used to open the veins to "mainline" the H.

His partner, nose running across his lips and into his stubby gray beard, is oblivious to his companion's misery. His eyes are dilated, like black holes in his bony skull.

A young man approaches. Early twenties. Pale blue eyes sunk deep in their sockets. Sallow skin pulled taught over his cheek bones. His nose, too, is running and he shuffles as he walks, hands stuck deep in the empty pockets of his urine stained pants. His filthy tennis shoes have large holes worn on top and sides. He wears no socks or belt. His hair hangs long down the back of his neck.

Gray-beard on the bench lifts his eyes as he approaches. Face expressionless. Voice flat. "You made your expenses yet today?"

"Not yet, I need forty (dollars) more."

"Got any ideas?"

"Don't make no difference, man, I gotta get it or die." He nods at the other man who rocks on the bench, head between his knees, moaning loudly. "What about him?"

"Rough, man. He ain't had a fix since midnight."

The younger man shakes his head, wipes his nose on the back of his hand, sniffs and shuffles on.

My mind flashes back to the 16-year-old on the beach who asked me, "What's wrong with drugs?" I wish he were with me now to see the sidewalks of New York. And to see the effects of drugs (they all start with marijuana) on a body and mind created to be the Temple of the Holy Spirit.