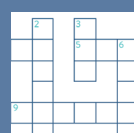


IN THIS ISSUE:



Forgiveness
p.2



**Crossword
Puzzle** p.3



**Second
Chances** p.4

Looking for Love—and Finding It

by Emily Andrews

For a while, Rena McConaha had a job and a car and was pursuing an education. But under a mask of having her life together, she longed for a sense of wholeness she had never known.

Growing up in an abusive family made it easy to put up with mistreatment from boyfriends later. “He would lock me in a trailer,” Rena remembers of one boyfriend. “I thought these things were normal. I thought this was OK, because I didn’t know any different.”

The father of her four kids drank heavily and used drugs. Before long, Rena tried some—and became addicted. She sank deeper into addiction after she was in a car accident that left her brother dead.

Searching anywhere for hope, Rena turned to the Bible. She realized how much

“He would lock me in a trailer. I thought these things were normal. I thought this was OK, because I didn’t know any different.”

she longed for a friend like Jesus. “I just wanted somebody to tell me that I had value,” says Rena, “and tell me to stop sticking a needle in my arm.” “After reading the Bible for a year, I knew God was

telling me to live more like Jesus,” she adds. “I heard His voice, and I felt His Spirit with me. But ... I still chose to be disobedient to Him.”

Rena’s troubles escalated when she picked up a new habit: shoplifting. She went to jail more than a dozen times throughout her 20s. The final straw was the day she went to steal a fifth of vodka from the store.

“I felt something inside me telling me, ‘No,’” Rena says. But she didn’t listen, and it landed her in prison.

Desperate for hope

Rena’s eyes brimmed with tears as she stepped onto the yard at Arizona State Prison Complex–Perryville. She thought of the little ones she had put up for adoption. She thought of how long she’d been shackled to addiction, desiring freedom, love, and hope. She was desperate for anything that might turn her



Photo by Diana Elizabeth

Rena was looking for love but only finding low self-worth, abusive relationships, and crime ... until one love showed her what she was missing.

life around.

Who’s going to love a prisoner? Rena thought. Who would want me? Who would accept me?

When she heard about the Prison Fellowship

Academy™, an intensive life-transformation program, she eagerly applied and was accepted. Over several months, caring staff and volunteers

Continued on page 2

What to Do When Relapse Threatens

by Stacia Ray

You’re in addiction recovery, when suddenly, something goes wrong. You’ve got a foot on the slippery slope, and you’re close to backsliding. *What do you do now?*

Can you stop yourself from slipping? What even

counts as a relapse? It can depend on your addiction. Jeannine Hale, a group leader in the Celebrate Recovery program for people with “hurts, habits, and hang-ups,” says, “Determine whether your addiction requires total avoidance or healthy moderation.”

For things like drugs and self-harm, the goal is to cut

them out completely. “But,” she adds, “an addiction to something like food or exercise isn’t resolved by vowing to never eat again or never work out.” Understanding your addiction will help you know what your recovery plan should look like and how to avoid relapse.

Are relapses avoidable?

Most people relapse at some point during recovery. But generally, the longer you go without relapses, the less likely they become. Dr. Timothy B. Walsh, vice president of Minnesota Adult and Teen Challenge, says people with addictions are most vulnerable to withdrawal and relapse during the first few months of recovery, but at 18 months without a relapse, two-thirds of people will stay clean. At three years, 86 percent will stay clean.

Think of addiction as a fire, and recovery as water. “Even if you think you’ve extinguished a fire, there are still a few embers, or triggers,

TIPS FOR REGAINING YOUR FOOTING

- Determine what recovery and relapse look like for you.
- Keep a recovery inventory, writing down what did or didn’t work each day.
- Identify your triggers and make a positive plan to avoid or deal with them.
- Learn from your backslides, and avoid all-or-nothing thinking.
- Surrender control (to God/a higher power) to help heal from addiction.
- When in doubt, ask for help and remember the importance of forgiveness.

that have the potential to reignite the fire,” Walsh says.

Look at your pattern of use closely and see what prompted you to turn toward your addiction. Your trigger might be boredom, loneliness, conflict, or something else. Stay away from triggering situations when possible, and develop a plan for a healthy way to deal with the trigger if you run into it.

And if your triggers include certain people, like drug dealers or enabling family members, says Walsh, “you should cut off communications

from those unhealthy connections.” Hale agrees, adding, “A clear no-visit boundary should be set in place if the family member is actively abusing drugs.” And before entering potentially triggering situations, set a time limit on how long you’ll stay, adds Walsh.

Since you can’t always just walk away from certain triggers and temptations while behind bars, you need a plan for handling them. Hale recommends, “Ask yourself,

Continued on page 2



canatani/Stock

Relapses are often part of recovery. If you’re starting to slip, walk away from triggers, and don’t be afraid to ask for help.

A Future of Forgiveness

by Annie Goebel

Just before I went to prison, I gave my heart to Jesus. My life up until then was based on three main lies I had believed to be truths since I was a little girl: I was unloved, I had no value, and I was alone. These lies led me to become a “loner,” never sharing the secrets of my heart or asking for help. The Devil loved keeping me in that alone place because it set me up for repeated failure.

As soon as I was released from prison, I was so afraid I would relapse into my old way of living that I ran straight to a church. While my daughters attended children’s classes, I joined a group for women. Over time, these Christian women became my sisters in Jesus. They mentored me and taught me how to be a wiser, more caring mom. We prayed together and shared with each



Photo by Taralyn Quigley

other. I felt safe. Loved. They were my family.

With the help of these women, I finally learned the power of Christ’s forgiveness. I finally replaced the lies I had believed with the truth that I was loved, I was valued, and I wasn’t alone! God used that church and those ladies to help me grow and stand against the lies of my past.

He wants that for you, too. I strongly encourage you to get connected to the acceptance and fresh start that come with being part of God’s family—behind bars and back on the outside. Seek His truths and His forgiveness. And remember to give yourself—and others—a second chance.

This issue of Inside Journal is all about second chances.

Read about how Rena McConaha found second chances, both behind bars and after release (page 1). Get tips from experts about the best ways to handle a relapse (page 1). Explore how God specializes in second chances—for you and for others (page 3). Read the Q&A with a former prisoner, Della Hall, who has found forgiveness, freedom, and restored relationships with her family (page 4), and learn about Prison Fellowship’s efforts to declare April Second Chance Month, celebrating the worth of people with a criminal history (also on page 4).

To share your thoughts on the content, write to: Editor, Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

Annie Goebel is the director of programs and special events at Prison Fellowship. ■

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Looking for Love

Continued from page 1

patiently walked Rena and a community of other women through the process of tackling the motivations behind their criminal behavior. These mentors helped Rena process difficult questions about identity and purpose. For the first time in a long time, she started to feel hopeful.

“It’s amazing to see the support,” says Rena. “[Volunteers] cared and showed they sincerely love me.” That helped give her a new identity and sense of value as an individual.

Through it all, she experienced something bigger than herself, which would change her forever: “(God’s love) ... that’s what saves us,” says Rena. “My heart changed. I had struggled with pride before. I grew to be humble, letting the Spirit move in my life, learning it’s not about me anymore.”

Rena’s new beginning

After two and a half years in prison, Rena was released to a Christian halfway house. She continued her recovery and met regularly with her mentor, Brenda, who guided her through the challenges of reentry. Brenda’s daughter and son-in-law even gave Rena her first car.

“She’s very responsible,” shares Brenda. “I’m just really proud of what she’s become. She’s very humble and trustworthy.”

Rena learned to rely on God during the challenges of reentry, and she saw His grace in so many ways. When someone T-boned her car, she received a replacement from a generous local church. When she wondered how her children were doing, she learned through their adopted mother that they were well and even knew Christ as their Savior. When she was ready to date, she found a Christian man who

loves, values, and respects her.

Today Rena is living proof of second chances. She rents her own apartment, works for a newspaper company, and is actively involved in her church. In addition, she works part-time at Along Side Ministries, helping other women return to society after incarceration. She also plans to go back to college to become a Christian counselor or chaplain. And she’s not shy about sharing her new hope and identity in Christ:

“I’ve lived a life of poverty and nothingness. A life of alcoholism and addiction. A life of being abused ... watching my own brother dying in my arms, having my children taken away from me, feeling unwanted and unworthy. God opened up a new beginning for me, saying, ‘That is not you. Your identity is so much more. I love you.’” ■

When Relapse Threatens

Continued from page 1

“What do I do, not if the temptation comes, but when? What tools do I have to handle the temptation?”

Hale also suggests keeping a daily inventory journal. First, she says, list “What has been done to me? What have I done to myself and others? And what are some of the good things I’ve done?” Then write in it every day, tracking what helped and what was a relapse risk, and looking for the actual reasons you are self-medicating in the first place.

‘Success is asking for help’

Relapses are about finding the things you missed last time so you can address them next time. Multiple relapses are common. Before they reach sobriety, “addicts have an average of six treatment episodes in their background,” says Walsh. “Recovery is an ongoing process, and every single time you relapse, you learn something, your motivation gets greater, and your emotions get stronger.”

A relapse doesn’t mean all the progress you’ve made is suddenly gone.

A relapse doesn’t mean all the progress you’ve made is suddenly gone. Walsh says, “Don’t say, ‘Since I slipped, I might as well

go all the way now.’ All-or-nothing thinking is dangerous. ‘Abstinence equals success, and relapse equals failure’ is not true. Success is asking for help.”

Faith is also an important part of avoiding and getting past a relapse. Walsh explains that research shows many spiritual practices help minds and bodies to heal. “Prayer and meditation, mindfulness, Scripture reading, and other spiritual practices are highly effective at transforming our bodies and brains,” she says.

Dr. David Larson of the National Institute for Healthcare Research and Dr. Dale Matthews of Georgetown University found higher religious commitment had a beneficial effect in 16 of 18 studies on alcoholism recovery and 12 of 12 studies on drug addiction recovery. Even programs without a specific faith foundation, such as 12-step programs, emphasize the importance of surrendering yourself to a higher power and admitting you are powerless.

In the end, it’s about forgiveness. “We all make mistakes, but we need to let go of the unforgiveness and the offense,” says Hale. “If you don’t give yourself over to God’s grace and forgiveness, you will sit in your guilt and self-loathing for a long time.”

Relapses are like any slip-up in life—you need to learn from your mistakes and move forward. Before you can be truly free, you might just need to give yourself a second (or third, or even thirtieth) chance. ■



Photo by Diana Elizabeth

With a new understanding of love and forgiveness, Rena has now found her identity and her self-worth.

The Dangers of the Blame Game

by Stan Guthrie

My birth on August 1, 1961, was touch-and-go. Though I weighed only three pounds and 11 ounces, I beat the odds and survived. But my brain had been damaged during the delivery, and I was destined to go through life with cerebral palsy.

While an operation at age 6 allowed me to walk (pretty unsteadily) on my own, I would never be able to play competitive sports or do other activities that most people took for granted. My romantic prospects would be, I thought, severely limited. And while I did well in school and was raised in a loving family, my disappointment never quite left me. I often felt like an outsider who made others uncomfortable.



PeopleImages/Stock

Do you feel guilt and shame? Or do you blame others for an unfair life? Stop finding fault, and start finding forgiveness.

Most people around me probably didn't feel that way, but I did. And this made me embarrassed, angry, and sad. I often asked God—if He existed—"Why me?" In my most jealous moments, as I watched others do things I never could, the question became "Why me and not them?"

Whose fault is it?

Many of us blame ourselves or others for what happens to us. Many a mother will blame herself for a handicapped child. Maybe, she thinks, she did something wrong during the pregnancy. Many a disabled person will question whether she somehow deserves it. Perhaps the condition is proof that God does not love or accept her. *Maybe I sinned.* In chapter 9 of the New Testament book of John, we see something similar

happening. Jesus saw a blind man, and not just any blind man. The story says that the man was "blind from birth." This would have been a terrifying way to live, particularly in that time and place. Unable to work and earn a living, the blind had to beg.

And while giving to the poor was common among the Jewish people, it probably did little for the self-esteem of those who relied on charity. Beggars probably felt humiliation, frustration, and envy instead of gratitude.

The Bible says that Jesus' disciples went right along in seeking to assign blame. "Who sinned," they asked their teacher, "this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus, however, didn't join them in this blame game. "It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus said. "This happened so the power of God could be seen in him." Then Jesus did three strange things: (1) He made some mud, mixing His own saliva with the dust of the ground; (2) He rubbed the mixture on the man's eyes; and (3) He told the man to wash it off in a nearby pool.

After the man followed Jesus' instructions, the story says he came back able to see. Soon, his spiritual vision would also be clear. The formerly blind man would put his faith in Jesus as his Lord and Savior and have a second chance at life.

A good look in the mirror

I was a lot like that blind man. Though many people thought I was a "good guy" or

FIND YOUR FRESH START

When life goes wrong, who's to blame? We live in a broken world, and in addition to our own wrongdoings, bad things happen we have no control over. The most important question is not who's at fault, but what we should do next. Jesus said that an incredibly difficult situation was an opportunity for God to show His power. All the blind man had to do was trust Jesus, and his sight—physical and spiritual—was restored.

That invitation is open to you today. Putting your trust in Jesus doesn't mean your problems will instantly disappear, but it does mean your sins are forgiven, you are accepted, and God will give you a fresh vision for life. You can start with a prayer like this one:

God, I've been walking around in the dark, blaming others and holding on to shame. Come into my life and take over. Wash my eyes so I can see You, myself, and the world clearly. Help me start afresh. Amen.

If you'd like to learn more about having a relationship with God, Inside Journal wants to connect you with a partner organization that offers a free correspondence Bible study and Bible. Write to "Fresh Start," c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box. 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

even "an inspiration" for the way I made it through life with cerebral palsy, I was becoming more and more aware of my ugly self-pity and bitterness. I figured that if God were real, He was either too busy to care or too weak to help.

Then I started to read the Bible and see who He really was—someone who understands, who opens the eyes of the blind, and who is "full of unfailing love and faithfulness" (John 1:18). Not only that, I saw that Jesus chose to be crucified on a Roman cross to die for my sins. But I also learned that three days later, He rose again, fully alive, proving that my sins were completely paid for.

As with the blind man, Jesus opened my eyes, and I believed. Though all my hateful attitudes didn't disappear right away—and I

am still sometimes extremely hard on myself and others—slowly the scales are falling from my spiritual eyes. Since Jesus, by His death and resurrection, has forgiven and accepted me, I am learning to forgive and accept myself. Little by little, the darkness in my soul is being replaced with His light. Day by day, whatever happens, I am experiencing a peace I never knew before. My eyes have been opened.

But what do you believe about Jesus? Are you ready to really see and receive the second chance He offers?

Stan Guthrie is the author of "God's Story in 66 Verses: Understand the Entire Bible by Focusing on Just One Verse in Each Book." He and Christine, his wife of 30 years, have three children. ■

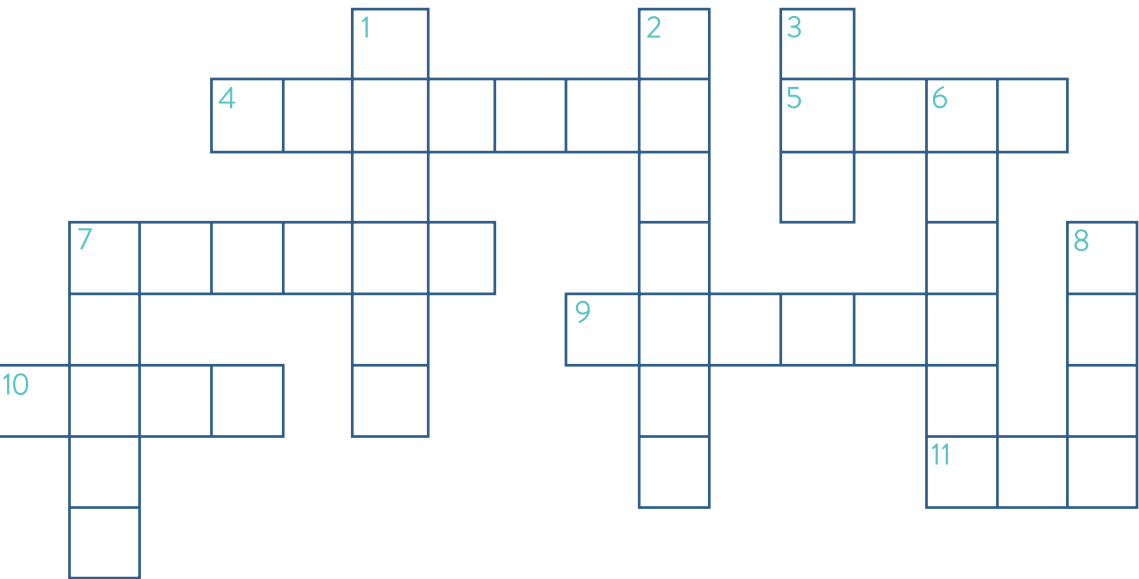
Can You Find a Second Chance?

ACROSS:

- To pardon an offense, flaw, or mistake
- Girl who pulls the football away from Charlie Brown
- Runner up; ____ place
- "I beg your ____!"
- Released from captivity; costing nothing
- Adam's female partner in the Bible

DOWN:

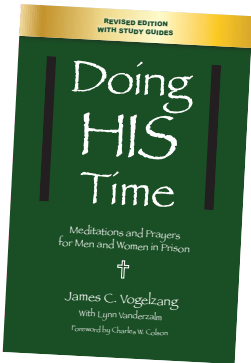
- Two ____ don't make a right
- To begin again
- "____ for one and one for all"
- Opportunity
- Word used in an apology
- Opposite of hate



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Faith Paved Della's Way to New Life

by Jennifer Nelson

In the 1990s, Della Hall served time in a California prison for a drug crime. While behind bars, her life was transformed. Her father, who hadn't spoken to her in years, saw this transformation and invited her to live with him and her mother after Della's release. She was also able to reunite with her husband after being estranged for 20 years. Inside Journal spoke with Della about her transformation, her faith, and second chances.



Photo by Prison Fellowship

IJ: What led to your incarceration?

DH: I was 13, 14, and 15 when I had abortions. The abortions really messed with me. I then had my son just before I turned 18 and my daughter when I turned 19. The reality of being affected by abortions impacted my life immensely. That's what led to my drug use. With addiction, I went through recovery cycles. When I was in my longest point of recovery, I gave my life to the Lord. But then I backslid, and I ended up in prison.

While I was waiting for my sentence, I started reading the Bible again and fellowshiping with the Lord. I made a plea bargain with Him. I said, "If you give me less time, I'll serve you with the rest of my life." I was looking at 10 years. I ended up getting three.

IJ: What was prison like?

DH: I was sent to a rough prison that was a horrible and filthy place. I prayed, "God, is this where You want me to be?" At that time, the department of corrections was getting ready to open a new women's institution. They transferred me there. It was such a blessing. If I had stayed at that first prison, I would have been a repeat offender because the influences there were the same I had on the street.

IJ: What obstacle did you face at the new facility, and how did you overcome it?

DH: Solitude and isolation. There was a small group of women with whom I developed my leadership skills. I have always been a leader, but I was leading in a destructive manner. As I grew in the Word, God began to

bring women into my life that I was able to fellowship with.

IJ: After your release, what challenges did you experience?

DH: Some challenges were finding employment and overcoming the wreckage of my financial past. My parents cared for my children and had received aid to support them. Now I was responsible for paying that back. Also, the bail bondsman was seeking restitution. I was responsible for thousands of dollars. But I took on that responsibility. Thankfully, I didn't have huge housing costs because I was living with my parents.

I eventually found employment through a call center. I didn't know anything about computers. I had dropped out of high school. But I said, "If you give me a chance, I'll be the best

employee you've ever hired." I was up at 3 a.m. for work. I worked there for 10 years and eventually became a supervisor and managed 30 employees.

IJ: How has God given you second chances after your release?

DH: I said, "OK, Lord, I'm going to go where you want me to go." When I moved [away from my parents, kids, and grandkids], I had no family, no friends, no job. But I began to meet people in the community. I started volunteering with Prison Fellowship, where I volunteered for nine years. The people I was working with gave me the connections within the community that I needed to make stepping stones.

I received my degree in Christian ministry. I was also reunited with my husband after 20 years apart. We've

now been back together for 10 years. As two felons and two recovering drug addicts, we would have never survived marriage if we hadn't put Christ in the center. God strengthened our relationship with our parents, our children, our grandchildren.

I have now worked as a TUMI program specialist for the past three years. (The Urban Ministry Institute is a national leadership training program through World Impact, available in certain prisons through a partnership with Prison Fellowship.)

IJ: What advice do you have for those who may feel they've messed up too many times to get another chance?

DH: First, don't take your eyes off Christ. Lamentations 3:25 says, "The Lord is good to those who depend on Him, to those who search for Him."

Second, we tend to get ahead of Him because we have needs, and we need them now. Waiting on God is the biggest thing that's going to help someone succeed. Replace those old people, places, and things with the new things that come through a relationship with Christ.

Jennifer Nelson is a freelance writer from Missouri. Her work has been published on the Assemblies of God's Pentecostal Evangel website and Boundless.org, a ministry of Focus on the Family. ■

Second Chance Month Celebrates Dignity

by A.R. Quinn

When does a prison sentence end? Are you ever really "square" with society again after a criminal conviction?

These questions are at the heart of Second Chance Month, a nationwide campaign to celebrate the dignity and potential of those with a criminal record during April. While people like you on the inside are doing the work to be ready for a second chance, people

on the outside are advocating for second chances, and raising awareness of some of the obstacles people face when trying to rebuild their lives after a prison sentence. The coalition supporting Second Chance Month includes Prison Fellowship, the NAACP, the ACLU, and dozens of other groups.

"This is an issue that doesn't just impact conservatives or liberals," said Ngozi Ndulue of the NAACP at an event kicking off Second Chance Month. "It impacts all of us."

Last year, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution



Photo by Prison Fellowship

declaring April 2017 the first nationwide Second Chance Month. It was introduced by Sen. Robert Portman, a Republican from Ohio. It was co-sponsored by Sens. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn.; James Lankford, R-Okla.; and Richard Durbin, D-Ill. Second Chance Month was also declared by the Colorado state legislature, the Maine state legislature, the governor of Michigan, and the mayor of St. Paul, Minnesota.

In 2018, efforts are underway to get even more states and cities to declare Second Chance Month.

Churches, organizations, and individuals are also getting involved, spreading a movement to enable citizens to succeed after they have paid their debt to society.

Some churches are hosting Second Chance Sundays during April, educating their members about returning citizens, and celebrating that the offer of restoration and redemption talked about in the Bible is for everyone—no matter what's in their past. There are also Second Chance Month job fairs, film screenings, and Second Chance 5K run/walk events that bring together people with a criminal history and other members of the community. There's even a virtual 5K that people can join from anywhere in the world, whether they are running on a treadmill or walking around their neighborhood.

You can let your loved ones know that April is Second Chance Month. They can find ideas and resources for

creating a culture of second chances at prisonfellowship.org/secondchances. ■

PAGE 3 CROSSWORD PUZZLE ANSWER KEY:

- ACROSS:**
4. Forgive; 5. Lucy; 7. Second; 9. Pardon; 10. Free; 11. Eve
- DOWN:**
1. Wrongs; 2. Restart; 3. All; 6. Chance; 7. Sorry; 8. Love



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"[The U.S. Senate] Designates April 2017 as Second Chance Month ... Honors the work of communities, governmental entities, nonprofit organizations, congregations, employers, and individuals to remove unnecessary legal and societal barriers that prevent an individual with a criminal record from becoming a productive member of society. ... Calls on the people of the United States to observe Second Chance Month through actions and programs that promote awareness of collateral consequences and provide closure for individuals who have paid their debts." – Senate Resolution Declaring April Second Chance Month