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How Russ Kloskin Walked Free

by Zoe S. Erler

In the last issue of Inside Journal, we shared the story of Russ Kloskin, a man raised on the streets who grew up to become a leader in a notorious prison gang. After years of anger and violence, Russ cried out to Jesus while in solitary confinement. This is the rest of his story.

The moment Russ asked God to heal his heart, all the shackles of rage, the years of stored-up loneliness—were gone in a moment.

“He healed me that very day,” Russ says. That was January 6, 2000.

Every day, for the next three years in solitary, Russ did exactly the same thing. He would read his Bible for 14 to 16 hours a day. And every week, he would chat with a chaplain who would come by for a visit.

“I would share with him what I read. [I came with] a fresh, clean mind, wrapping



Photo by Brandon Alexander

Once chained to the burdens of a rough childhood, a violent prison gang, and several years in solitary, Russ now has freedom ... along with a job he loves and a new sense of purpose.

itself around all of this great stuff that’s in the Bible,” says Russ. “I was just overflowing.”

“I really grew fond of him,” says Hal Howell, who served as a volunteer chaplain at Russ’ unit at the time. “By the time I met him ... the transformation had already

begun. ... It was obvious that he was taking his decision to follow Christ very seriously.”

Eventually, Russ was transferred back to his old unit, but still in confinement. He shared with the members of his gang that he was stepping down.

“Some didn’t believe me,” he admits.

Becoming human

On March 3, 2003, Russ left Ad-Seg and returned to general population. It was one of the most terrifying things he had faced yet.

“It was scary,” he explains. “Being in a box for seven years, you get comfortable with you. You don’t have to have compassion and understanding for the idiosyncrasies of human beings ... Coming out, you lack social skills, empathy, seeing things from other people’s eyes.”

“Being in a box for seven years, you get comfortable with you.”

But Russ knew that the only way he could adjust to the larger prison context was to make time serve him. He got involved with Christian groups, signed up for college classes, and earned a bachelor’s degree in ministry, a master’s in theology, and a Ph.D. in

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Making the Most of Holiday Visits

by A.R. Quinn

Christmas comes but once a year—and for some people, visits and phone calls from

loved ones happen even less often than that. Even if you plan to have contact with family this holiday season, there’s no guarantee of smooth sailing. Calls and visits can bring a lot of pressure, baggage from the past, and opportunities for conflict. But they can also strengthen family ties and lift spirits.

Here are some strategies to help you make the most of your holiday heart-to-hearts.

Obey regulations.

To visit with you, your loved ones are probably making significant personal sacrifices of time, effort, and money. You can honor these sacrifices by making choices in the days

beforehand that won’t put your visitation privileges or phone privileges in jeopardy. Of course, it’s just as important to follow the rules when you’re finally in the visiting room or on the call.

Prepare your visitors.

A prison’s security and contact rules can be scary, confusing, or disappointing. Will your visitors be allowed to hug you, or will you be separated by Plexiglas? Will it be a virtual visit on a monitor? Going over these details ahead of time can help reduce anxiety, especially in children.

Also make sure your visitors know the dress code, so no one gets turned away for wearing something inappropriate. Let them know how many people will be allowed to visit you at a time. Finally, make sure everyone is on the visiting list.

Look your best.

For a chance to see you in

person, your visitors may have made a long, tiring trip. After that comes a wait at the prison entrance, followed by invasive security procedures. Looking clean and pressed is one gesture of appreciation you can give your visitors. Without you ever saying a word, it sends the message that their visit means a lot to you.

Give the gift of attention.

Eye contact and good body posture communicate that you value what’s being said—and the person saying it. Whether you are sitting at a table or on the phone, you can also give attention by asking follow-up questions and listening more than you speak.

Be understanding.

Even when everyone’s doing their best, there is nothing “normal” about these visits and calls. It’s natural for you or your family to feel stress or sadness just because of the



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Phone calls and visits with loved ones can make the holidays brighter, if you have the tools to make the most of them.

circumstances. Young children might cry or ask to go home. Older children might give you one-word answers. Instead of getting angry that your expectations aren’t being met, you might try acknowledging

that the situation is difficult, and express appreciation that your visitors are making an effort.

Sometimes, loved ones aren’t willing or available to have contact during the holidays. Maybe the person

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The Priceless Gift of Joy

by Mike Dunavant

I know an intelligent guy serving a life sentence. A young man when he got locked up, he has already served decades behind bars. He has been up for parole something like 17 times. Because of the nature of his crime, he needs five out of five votes to make parole. One of his last times up, he got four out of five. He was so close to freedom he could almost taste it, but he still came up short.

After that last set-off, my friend was feeling down. One day, he and I got to talking about how he could shake off the funk he was in. I asked him how he could use his skills and his college education to help others.

He chose to look beyond his own situation and became a tutor for other prisoners. So far, he has helped hundreds of men better themselves. He still prays he'll get a chance to make a difference in the world outside the prison walls, but he has found a purpose in serving others right where he is. He's looking forward.

Like my friend, you might be feeling down this time of year. There's not much to look forward to besides whatever gift package or special food the state provides. It's better than nothing, but it's still institutional. If you've got young kids, they're home wondering, "Where's



GenNealPhoto/iStock

Daddy?", while you pay your debt to society. It's easy to feel weighed down if you focus on your own situation.

In this issue of Inside Journal, we're exploring ways to fight those dark feelings during the holidays by reaching out to others. On the cover, you'll find a story about Russ—a guy who spent seven years in solitary and still found hope and a desire to serve (to read the first half of his story, pick up our September 2017 edition). You'll also find practical tips for recognizing

and dealing with depression, inspiration for creating your own holiday cheer, a guide for making the most of holiday visits or calls with loved ones, and a 2018 calendar to help keep you looking forward.

Finally, we hope you'll check out the story of the first Christmas (it's different from what you might have heard!)—and why it gives you a reason to be hopeful today.

Mike Dunavant is the program manager of a Prison Fellowship Academy™ in Virginia. ■

Subscription Info

At Inside Journal® (IJ), we receive many letters each week from prisoners asking for subscriptions to our newspaper. We are grateful for the interest and support of our readers—however, because of limitations on our staff and budget, IJ is only available in bulk shipments to your chaplain, programming coordinator, or a volunteer who visits your facility. Chaplains, to set up these shipments for free, please contact our editorial staff at P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790 or insidejournal@pfm.org.

Walked Free

Continued from page 1

Christian administration. He also served as chaplain's clerk and then picked up carpentry by working in the craft shop.

It was 10 years of good, hard work. Ten years of learning to be human again.

In 2013, he was up for parole after being denied many times. This time, the officer took a hard look at his report, noticing a pattern of write-ups and offenses—followed by nothing.

"What happened to you in 2000?" she asked.

Russ told her his story, and the officer decided to give him a chance at freedom. But, at Russ' request, he took a trip to the Prison Fellowship Academy at the Carol Vance Unit in Texas first. He didn't know much about the program, but he knew he needed it.

Training for freedom

"I knew that they were preparing men to go home ... I didn't know how to use a computer, how to operate a modern gas pump," he explains. "I had the inside down. I could be a man of God in there every day, but the obstacles and temptations that would happen on the outside, I needed preparation for."

Once at Vance, he delved into life-skills classes, Bible study, and courses on healing from early wounds. It was 18 months of rich fellowship and mentoring relationships with men like Darryl Brooks—an African-American

man who had served time in prison himself. The old Russ would have hated Darryl, but the new Russ counted him as a friend and mentor.

In August 2013, at age 46, Russ finally walked free in every sense of the word. A mentor from Prison Fellowship helped him get back on his feet and navigate roadblocks like obtaining his social security card and driver's license.

"Without Christ, it would have been 'game on' for me."

"Without Christ, it would have been 'game on' for me," he explains. "I would have just gone back to doing what I used to do."

But, with his Christian brothers at his side, he got involved with church and found a job at a car dealership. He even met the woman he would marry, a God-loving woman he encountered while doing ministry. And in 2017, he accepted the position of reentry specialist for Prison Fellowship—a job helping other men leaving the Prison Fellowship Academy and reentering society.

"Every day is a growing experience in how to be the man of God I know He's calling me to be." ■



PRISON
FELLOWSHIP

2018

"For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light!" -Ephesians 5:8 (New Living Translation)

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A Not-So-Merry Christmas

by Stacia Ray

The situation was bleak. A young man had just learned his fiancée was pregnant—and he was not the father of her child. He was having doubts about staying with her. They lived in a small town, and this scandalous situation was sure to turn them into social outcasts.

The couple’s country was experiencing political unrest, and they were ordered to make a difficult journey to a faraway city. It was almost time for the man’s fiancée to give birth, yet despite the risks, they had no choice but to travel for days. When they reached the young man’s hometown, they couldn’t find lodgings. But his partner was already in labor. With nowhere else to go, she delivered her baby in an unfamiliar place, with

no doctors, no sterilized equipment, no newborn clothing, and no crib. She wrapped the baby in cloths and used a manger for a crib.

By now, it’s probably obvious that the unnamed family here is Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus. It’s a familiar story. We’ve heard how Jesus had a virgin mother and a manger for a crib, but do we ever stop and really think about how scary and overwhelming this must have been for the new parents? This wasn’t a fancy situation. This was a young man and woman, with zero experience as parents, placing the Son of God in a manger—a feeding trough for dirty, smelly farm animals.

The relatable birth

The situation surrounding Jesus’ birth was messy, but God intended it that way. If

Jesus’ birth story involved a palace, a solid gold crib, and celebrity doctors, would we feel like we could connect to it at all? Instead, this King of Kings entered this world in a humble, simple way we can all relate to.

He came into the world as a baby (just like we do) through a young couple struggling with real-world problems (just like we have). His birth story was filled with difficulties and obstacles (just like our lives are). He arrived in the middle of disgraceful circumstances (literally—Mary was considered a disgrace, and you can imagine how many people thought she was a liar when she explained she was a pregnant virgin).

God could have chosen a wealthy, experienced married woman to carry His Son, and a well-respected man to help raise that Son. But He chose a poor, unmarried, unremarkable couple—two virtual “nobodies.” God could have even sent His Son as a strong, grown adult, not reliant upon anyone else. But He chose a tiny, helpless newborn who needed feeding and nurturing.

God’s perfect light

Even the timing of Jesus’ arrival was perfectly planned. This was a dark period in this history of God’s people, but Jesus’ birth meant an end to “that time of darkness and despair ...” (Isaiah 9:1, NLT). Jesus came during darkness in order to bring light. After all, the darker the environment, the easier it is to see light. It’s hard to see a flashlight on a sunny day.

ARE YOU FUMBLING IN THE DARK?

The Bible says we can, and should, draw near to God during our times of darkness. He can turn the darkest struggles into joy. Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. If you follow Me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life” (John 8:12). No matter how dark your world seems, God can shine light into your life if you come to Him.

If you don’t even know where to begin, you can start with this prayer:

“Dear God, I am surrounded by darkness and need Your help. You sent Your Son to bring hope and light to the world at a time of darkness. I want to follow Jesus. Please show me how to draw closer to You. Light my path and shine joy into my life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

To discover how Jesus can light your way, sign up for a free correspondence Bible study and request a free Bible, both available through one of our trusted partner organizations, by writing to “Fumbling in the Dark,” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

Before the Christmas story, people had no way to heal from the consequences of their bad choices, no hope of ending their separation from God. They were trapped and needed a rescuer. So God sent His Son—not for His benefit, but for ours, because He cares about us. Matthew 20:28 says, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve others and to give His life as a ransom for many.” He paid our ransom through His death on the cross. Simply put, Jesus was born to die. John, an eyewitness to many of the events in Jesus’ life, adds, “God sent his Son into the world not to judge the

world, but to save the world through Him” (John 3:17).

Jesus arrived at a dark time and in difficult conditions. Prison feels dark and difficult sometimes, too—especially around the holidays, when loneliness and sadness are at their worst. It can be very hard to find a reason to celebrate, and you may feel totally disconnected from all the talk about love, joy, and peace. But even if your Christmas seems anything but merry and bright, God can still shine light into your life.

He came that Christmas night as the light of the world to free people from their sin and darkness. And not just other people ... *you*. ■



justinkendra/iStock

Can you imagine putting your newborn baby down for a nap in this?

Give Christmas to Someone Else

by Zoe S. Erler

Prison is probably the last place you want to celebrate the holidays. Perhaps missing your family has you wanting to skip the holidays altogether. Perhaps you are hoping a loved one will visit, but don’t know if they’ll make it.

Even if the approaching holiday fills you with dread, there is something you can do to ensure that this Christmas will be a joyful one: *Find someone else to bless.*

You probably know the saying, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” It’s true! By focusing on making Christmas special for those around you, you can take your mind off your troubles and inject some joy into the holiday.

We’ve gathered a list of ideas inspired by men and

women in correctional facilities across the country who have found ways to make the season brighter. While facility rules vary, and some of these ideas might not be possible at your institution, they might jumpstart your own creativity.

Host a card or gift exchange. Invite others from your unit to each purchase or make a gift and bring it to the exchange. Do not label the gifts, so that anyone can feel comfortable taking any item.

Donate to an indigent fund if your facility has one. Consider donating a portion of your financial support to your facility’s indigent fund (if one exists). Knowing you’ll be brightening someone else’s holiday might just lift your spirits and cause a chain reaction.

Donate a skill. If you have a special skill, giving your time and talent can help bless other prisoners. Offer free services, such as a hair appointment, legal research, or tutor in a subject that you have already mastered.

Make Christmas cards. Spend a little money at the commissary on items (poster board, colored pencils, etc.) to make Christmas cards. Mail them to loved ones and give them to friends in your unit. Especially consider giving cards to those who may not receive a lot of mail from the outside.

Donate items from the canteen. Rally a group of prisoners to purchase socks or toiletry items to donate to a local homeless shelter or relief organization.

Go caroling. Form a group from your



Photo courtesy of Prison Fellowship

Prisoners celebrate Christmas together at the Prison Fellowship Academy at the Carol Vance Unit. Getting outside yourself can help you deal with the holiday blues.

unit and walk around the yard singing Christmas carols, or go cell to cell with favorites like “Joy to the World,” “The First Noel,” and “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.”

Christmas isn’t about what you get—it’s about what you give. So give some thought to how you can brighten someone else’s holiday, and you’ll find that your own gets better, too. ■

Depressed? Know the Signs and Solutions

by Stacia Ray

The information in this article is not intended to diagnose or treat any mental health condition. Always seek the advice of a qualified medical professional with any questions you may have about your health or treatment.

For some people, the holidays are a time of joy and celebration. But for others, they bring a sense of loneliness and pain—especially behind bars. It’s common for prisoners to experience depression around the holidays, so it’s important to know the signs and learn the tools to cope.

Dr. Karen Boortz, a psychologist with the Minnesota Department of Corrections, explains that sadness is a normal emotion everyone experiences sometimes, usually in response to a difficult situation. Depression, however, is “an abnormal state.” It makes you feel sad about everything, and it doesn’t even require an outside trigger.

Signs of depression

The normal stresses of adjusting to prison life can look like depression. So how can you tell whether you’re depressed or just a little “off”? In a nutshell, depression symptoms are *abnormal and constant*.

Dr. Sarah Deweese, a psychologist at San Quentin Prison, says if the things that usually make you happy no longer cheer you up, that might be a sign. Also, in men, depression often shows up as anger more than sadness—lashing out at everyone over the slightest thing.

“Look for clues that something doesn’t feel right, that you’re not yourself,” says Deweese. Pay attention if others seem concerned about your state of mind, because depression can distort your sense of reality and make it hard for you to realize that something is wrong.

Other symptoms of depression include: lack of interest (feeling detached or numb); major change in weight or appetite; trouble sleeping or sleeping too much; fatigue or agitation; feelings of worthlessness or shame; trouble concentrating or thinking straight; and thoughts of dying or suicide. Physical symptoms may include headaches, body aches, and digestive problems.

“There are so many commercials on TV showing happy, ‘perfect’ families ... you can feel very alone.”

Reasons for prison depression

The largest factor leading to depression behind bars, Boortz says, is the separation from family, friends, and community—a factor that gets even harder during the holidays. Deweese points out that we’re designed to be social creatures. “The holidays are a reminder that the family system, the bond with people you’re accustomed to being around, has been broken, so it makes sense that prisoners would feel a loss,” she says.

Dr. Lisa Herman, PsyD,

LP, a psychologist, adds that things we see on TV or hear on the radio can also make the holidays harder. “There are so many commercials on TV showing happy, ‘perfect’ families, and traditionally the holidays are a time of the year focused on family togetherness,” so when you don’t have that because you are in prison away from family, “you can feel very alone.”

Other factors that can make depression worse include lack of privacy, too much downtime, and less access to support. Symptoms can be more severe during these winter holidays because the days are darker and shorter.

Ways to cope

Ready for some good news? There are self-care tools you can use when dealing with depression behind bars. Even if you’re not clinically depressed, these tips can help you get through a tough time.

- **Get the right sleep.** Depression might have you up all night or sleeping all day. Going to bed at a decent hour and getting out of bed during the day can help improve your mood.
- **Eat well and exercise—outside if possible.** Be kind to your brain and your body. Stay away from mood-altering substances (including caffeine), which can make things worse. Take a walk in the fresh air; sunshine can boost your mood.
- **Meditate.** Deweese suggests reading and doing relaxing meditations (and even mini-meditations, where you focus on your breathing, feel your heart, and count your heartbeats for 30 seconds). Creative outlets, like playing music or journaling, can help, too.



wsmahar/Stock

- **Set a goal.** Find a daily activity—like memorizing a chapter of the Bible, or walking a certain distance every day; start small (even as simple as doing 10 jumping jacks) and slowly increase the task when ready. Meeting a goal can help fight feelings of worthlessness.
- **Connect.** Isolation tends to make depression worse. If you can, connect with others who are going through the same thing. “Creating a makeshift family and talking with supportive fellow prisoners can help you feel much better,” Deweese says. Join an educational program or religious group. Turning to Jesus by praying and reading Scripture can bring comfort, but it’s important

to note that you can be a Christian and still struggle with depression.

- **Go easy on yourself.** Use extra kindness toward yourself and others, remembering this time—and these feelings—will pass.

There’s no shame in depression. “The brain is an organ, and just like any other body part is susceptible to illness or imbalance, so is our brain,” says Deweese. “It’s not about weakness; sometimes it just means that you played hard enough, or that life threw a hard enough hit at you. And just like there’s no shame in seeing a doctor if you need a cast on your leg, there’s no shame in getting extra help if you’re depressed.” ■

Making the Most

Continued from page 1

caring for your children can’t get time off work, or your children feel a visit will be too upsetting. If you learn you won’t see your family at Christmas, it can be extremely disappointing, but try your best not to let resentment grow. They are likely making the best decision they can in a difficult situation.

Have a plan.

If your call or visit will be divided between multiple children or loved ones, it might help to try to give each person equal one-on-one time, if possible. Since young children often have a hard time waiting for their turn, you might let them go

first. You might also want to plan a seasonal activity, like reading the Christmas story together from the New Testament or a Christmas-themed storybook. Some families find it meaningful to pray together over everyone’s needs.

Be ready for tough questions.

You never know what will come up in a visit or call. Children often want to know when you’re coming home. They might wonder if you’re in danger. No matter what questions are asked, it’s usually best to be honest but

positive. You don’t want to make promises you can’t keep, but you don’t want to cause extra worry, either. If you’re furthering your education, working a job, or participating in religious activities, tell your loved ones in detail about those things, so they can have something positive to interact with you about.

Follow up.

Don’t let the contact you have over the holidays be an isolated event. You can show your care for your loved ones by following up on things you learned during your visit. If your child’s caregiver mentioned a disciplinary issue, call in a few weeks to ask how it’s going. If your children mentioned that they have a book report due, get your hands on a copy of the same

book so you can read it with them. Little gestures can go a long way toward strengthening your family relationships during the holidays—and in the days to come. ■

No matter what questions are asked, it’s usually best to be honest but positive. You don’t want to make promises you can’t keep, but you don’t want to cause extra worry, either.



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