



Changing Lives, Minds, and
Communities through Jesus Christ

A Heart for Marriage

By Jennifer Ferranti

Even in so-called normal circumstances, one out of every two marriages in America ends in divorce. So what chance does a marriage have when one spouse is incarcerated? Steve and Donna Varnam are proof that not only can marriages survive prison, but they can also grow stronger and better than ever.

It isn't easy to adjust

The Varnams had been married for only five years when Steve was sentenced to five years at Eglin Federal Prison Camp in Ft. Walton Beach, Florida. At first, he was so busy feeling sorry for himself that he didn't stop to realize just how drastically his incarceration affected Donna's life, too. "All I could think about was how unfair it was that *I* was in prison," he admitted.

Initially, Steve's demands on Donna were highly unrealistic. "I expected her to be my attorney, community advocate, and everything else." His conversations with her consisted of questions like, "Why haven't you done this yet?" and "Why can't you get that done?"

Meanwhile, it was all that Donna could do just to survive. She and the four children lived more than 10 hours away in North Carolina. And it was not easy for her to keep their home and family together all by herself.

"At first, you go through a denial emotion," Donna said. "I kept cleaning the house like I was expecting Steve to come home at night." Then you go through a grieving process, much like your spouse has died, Donna explained.

But as her grief subsided, Donna said, she finally grew a "backbone."

"I had been so totally dependent on Steve. I had not realized how much. And then I realized I had to learn to be dependent on me. So I became very independent and began to get tough."

But Donna didn't get tough with Steve. Instead, "I began to create my own prison by protecting Steve from things that were going on at home." She didn't tell Steve how the children were acting up, how bad his father's Alzheimer's disease had

become, or that their insurance had been canceled. "I had a tendency to keep it all to myself. I figured I'd take care of it. He doesn't need to worry about it. He's got troubles of his own."

Eventually, Donna realized that just because Steve was in prison didn't mean he no longer had responsibilities as a husband and parent. She and Steve wrote to each other every day and talked on the phone twice a week. Over time, they began to learn to communicate honestly and openly with each other.

Steve admitted he sometimes doubted Donna. "The worst kind of images run through your mind when you're in prison. It didn't help when I'd see other prisoners receive 'Dear John' letters or learn that their wives were having affairs."

But he finally realized, "You either believe in somebody and have a lot of confidence and trust in them or you don't. And that's not predicated on whether you can see them every day or not."

For Donna, weekends were the hardest. The loneliness is like an "emotional cancer," she said. "Trying to visit Steve once a month just wasn't enough." So after a year and a half, Donna quit the job she loved and moved her family to Ft. Walton Beach to be closer to Steve.

Marriage after prison

After almost four years, Steve was released. But the Varnams were shocked to learn that the joy of reuniting didn't last very long.

"We got through the honeymoon and then reality hit," Steve remembered. "After a few days, Steve was probably ready to go back to prison and I was ready to send him back," Donna joked. The Varnams discovered that they had to get to know each other all over again. They also had to learn new roles.

"Donna had, by necessity, become independent, and she was really running things now," Steve explained. "Here I come back in and suddenly start stepping into that territory."

"You have to deal with major adjustments after

prison," he warned. "Most people don't realize that, and so they aren't prepared for it."

He said

Steve lists many things a husband in prison can do to strengthen his marriage:

- Get over your self-pity and take responsibility for the actions that put you in prison. Only then can you restart your life—and your marriage.
- Learn to communicate with your wife honestly. You have undoubtedly damaged her trust and confidence in you, and only complete honesty will help restore it.
- Be sensitive to what your wife is going through. She has been forced to assume a lot of new responsibilities, and she, too, feels very alone.
- Use any opportunity you have to communicate with your wife (letters, phone calls, and visits) to encourage her, not tear her down.
- Build a strong relationship with Christ and a firm spiritual foundation for your marriage.

She said

Donna adds her own insights to the list:

- Tell your wife you're sorry and ask for her forgiveness. It will mean so much to her.
- Don't relinquish your role as a husband or father. Make it easy for your wife to tell you about the things that are happening at home. Discuss family decisions with her as much as possible.
- Trust your wife. Don't let others plant suspicions in your mind. Don't let the disappointing experiences of other prisoners make you doubt your wife's faithfulness and commitment to you.
- Take spiritual charge of your marriage. Ask Christ to guide your life—and encourage your wife to do the same. A marriage is divorce-proof only when you're both committed to the Lord.

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