Former Addict Finds New Highs
by Taylor Harris

Freddy Cooper had tried everything. He had checked into rehab, gone through detox, and served a four-year sentence for cocaine use. He had moved from city to city in North Carolina. Every time he crossed a new city limit line, he hoped he could break free from the oppressive addiction that limited his future hopes. Nothing worked.

“They say if you get away from your surroundings, you might change,” says Freddy. “But after a while, I’d just fall back into that old habit.”

Whether he relocated to Wilmington, Goldsboro, Greensboro, or Kinston, Freddy couldn’t find the man he wanted to be.

Rock Bottom

Instead, he found crack cocaine, a newer form of the powder cocaine he’d used. Crack, which promised a powerful high, brought him to an all-time low.

Nothing worked.

“I had to make a change from the inside out, not the outside in,” says Freddy. “That’s when I had made up my mind what I was going to do,” he says. “That I was going to seek God.”

He started hanging around inmates who talked about the Bible. For a few hours at a time, they gathered in North Carolina’s Wake County Jail to read Scripture and pray. “I had to make a change from the inside out, not the outside in,” says Freddy. When he was transferred from jail to a correctionalfacility in 2004, Freddy was arrested again.

“The Best Thing”

As soon as the handcuffs clicked onto his wrists, Freddy knew there was only one move left to make.

“That’s when I had made up my mind what I was going to do,” he says. “That I was going to seek God.”

He started hanging around inmates who talked about the Bible. For a few hours at a time, they gathered in North Carolina’s Wake County Jail to read Scripture and pray. “I had to make a change from the inside out, not the outside in,” says Freddy. When he was transferred from jail to a correctionalfacility in 2004, Freddy was arrested again.

How to Brighten the Holidays
by Rev. Keith Smith

S pending the holidays in prison can be downright miserable, and Christmas can be the worst of all. Most of us, if granted one wish on Christmas Day, would simply want to be with our loved ones enjoying a meal, giving and receiving gifts, and having a fun time together. But for the vast majority of us, that is not going to happen this year. So, what can we do to brighten our days during the Advent season?

First, we can remember “the reason for the season.” The time of Advent (the four weeks before Christmas) is a time to think about what Christmas truly means and what we are actually celebrating.

Although many people associate Christmas with Santa Claus, turkey dinners, and expensive gifts, Christmas is really about celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Son of God who came to earth and lived among us. And we are also celebrating the expectation that this Jesus who was born in Bethlehem will someday come again. We celebrate God’s great gift to us, Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of John says that “the light (Jesus) came into the darkness of the world, and the darkness will never put the light out.” Prisons can be dark places, not because the lights are bad, but because so much misery, loneliness, and sin has been gathered into one place.

But prison life, as dark as it can sometimes be, can never, ever put out God’s light that comes in Jesus Christ. This light shines wherever you are, even in the darkest prison. Now that is really something to celebrate!

We give gifts at Christmas as tokens of God’s great gift of Jesus Christ to us. If you think that Christmas gifts are about how big something is, or how much something cost, you might have it all wrong. A gift is only as valuable as the amount of love with which it has been given. A hand-drawn Christmas card from my child might be better than a Rolex watch. The baby Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem was a tiny gift, completely unnoticed by some, but it came with more love than the world has ever known.

And what an impact that gift has had! Jesus’ coming has influenced the entire course of history and brought hope into millions of lives.

It’s pretty hard to give Christmas gifts to our loved ones while we’re in prison. But there is a gift you can give that requires no money and doesn’t have to make its way through the mail room. It doesn’t cost anything to mail and it’s faster than FedEx. It is the gift of prayer.

You can give a wonderful and precious gift to your children,
Letters to the Editor

‘Remembering Chuck’

“My name is [T.J.] and I’m a Christian of six years. I would like to say I truly appreciate Prison Fellowship, and all the services that is offered not only me but for my kids. Praise God for someone like our late brother Chuck C. May his legacy live on! We love you Brother Chuck!!! One of the things I appreciate is the Inside Journal … I thank you, Prison Fellowship, for not forgetting about people like me.”

– T.J., Arizona

“I got arrested and caught many cases … If I didn’t come here, I would most likely have been found dead somewhere by now … Being here, I built a relationship with God, as did Chuck … Literally, a few days now I’ve been so worried about what I’m going to do when I released and how I’m going to make it, I have so much to look forward to yet so much holding me back. But reading this story has really put me at ease and let me know that anything is possible. At the end of your article, it was written that his daughter Emily spoke at his service and said ‘follow his example.’ I’ve been asking God to tell me how to make it when I’m put back into the community and while I read that part my eyes filled with tears and I understood His message.”

– Emily, Connecticut

“I found your summer 2012 (Vol. 21, No. 3) Inside Journal in my dorm and read it. The cover caught my attention because Chuck Colson is a part of my life. I so happen to be involved in a very intense study on Christian worldview through Crossroad Bible Institute. The book of study is Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey’s How Now Shall We Live? I find your article of Chuck to be very true in my mind and belief. He, as his daughter said, was quite a role model!”

– Hank, Florida

‘Bank Robber to King’

“One story in particular touched my soul and gave me hope. It was the story of John Jennings, written by Beth Reid. It made me think to myself that if a man like John can change like that, then there is still hope for me … I came into these gates a liar, thief, and a drug addict, and am walking out a Christian, a loving mother, and a high school graduate. All thanks to the Lord Jesus. Keep up the good work on your Journal. It sure helped me!”

– Crystal, Illinois

Editor’s Note

At Inside Journal (IJ), we receive many letters each week from inmates asking for subscriptions to our newspaper. We are grateful for the interest and support of our readers—we, however, because of limitations on our staff and budget, Inside Journal 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 PO Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790 or inside_journal@pfm.org.

Former Addict Finds New Highs

Continued from page 1

center, Freddy joined Project Nehemiah, a faith-based reentry program. The inmates who attended Sunday classes received Christ-centered books and worksheets on everything from creating a budget to strengthening a marriage. “They teach you how to put God first in everything that you do,” Freddy explains.

“Every time I’m home, I’d get my crack cocaine, and I’d get my money, that crack cocaine would just overpower me.”

Don Fulford, the program chairman of Project Nehemiah, has long worked closely with Prison Fellowship staff in the field to develop effective in-prison programming. He became Freddy’s personal mentor. Using Freddy’s “CV” or “civilian volunteer” passes earned with good behavior, the two were able to attend church and eat meals together outside prison walls.

“It was the best thing that had happened to me in a long time,” Freddy recalls, “cause I really didn’t have anyone who really cared other than my family.”

Having served in prison ministry for over 20 years, Don knew Freddy needed his support. He listened to Freddy talk about his difficult past without letting that past define him. “The really important thing is to encourage and to let them know that they are better than what they have been,” says Don.

Life Renewed

Five years have passed since Freddy was released from prison, and even though he’s always on the move, now it’s for his job. He drives a cab in Raleigh, where he attends his brother-in-law’s church and still keeps in touch with Don.

Freddy chuckles as he describes his new life: “I come to work, go home, study, read my Bible, go to church, go to Bible study, go to Sunday school. That’s all I do now.”

While he credits God and the lessons he learned in reentry unit with a smooth transition to life outside prison, he has experienced personal loss. Two years after his release, he separated from his wife when she refused to stop using drugs. Still, he’s careful not to condemn old friends struggling with addictions. “I don’t disassociate myself with those people because I have to show them what the Lord’s doing for me. If I didn’t… then they wouldn’t know the Lord could do that for them.” Freddy is returning the favor. While he was incarcerated, his family—which includes his two adult children and several siblings—never shunned him. They kept in touch through letters and, eventually, witnessed God’s stunning transformation of this man on the move.

“In his letters, he was talking about what he wanted to do, and he was trying to get things together for when he came home,” says Vernon Spinks, Freddy’s pastor and brother-in-law, “and when he came home, that’s exactly what he did.”

Freddy Cooper, the same man who once struggled to stay in one place, is now anchored to his church, where he serves as an usher and transports members to and from services. And while he’s come a long way, he hasn’t stopped looking forward. “I hope that my daughters will one day realize that God is the only way to go,” says Freddy. “Other than that, I just want to live for the Lord.”

Ways to Pray for Children

– Pray for children’s physical safety, that they would be well-nourished and protected from violence and threats.
– Pray for children’s emotional safety, that their caregivers would be patient, consistent, and loving.
– Pray for children’s spiritual safety, that God would put positive role models in their lives to point them towards Jesus.

‘Pray for yourself, that God would help you become a positive influence for others, including children.”
Are You Missing the Feast?

by A. R. Quinn

In 2010 I talked with Reginald “Reggie” Crenshaw, then an inmate at Bibb Correctional Facility in Alabama with one day of his sentence left to serve. He talked about his plans for after he was released. He couldn’t wait to hug his mother for the first time in 16 years — and he was eager to eat her down-home cooking. Dreamily, he looked forward to the taste of her southern fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and sweet potato pie.

Whether your mother’s (or grandmother’s) cooking was fried chicken, tomatoes, or lo mein, many inmates fantasize about a post-release feast with all the trimmings. That’s not to say that inmates don’t also do the best they can while behind bars; in fact, many inmates come up with innovative versions of their favorite recipes using just the items available in the commissary. A Missouri inmate named Adam gave U a recipe for “prison pizza” that called for a crust made out of crushed ramen noodles, topped with cheese whiz and slices of dried salami.

The in-prison versions of inmates’ favorite recipes are proof that when their creativity and talents are channeled in a positive direction; still, with the limited ingredients and equipment available, most would jump at the chance for a good, home-cooked meal. It’s a basic desire that cuts across boundaries of race, age, or gender.

Food for the Spirit

Our bodies can’t live without food. If you skip one meal, you can expect hunger pangs. If you skip two, you can get a headache and suffer dizzy spells. This is your body’s way of sending you a message: “Put food in your stomach! You need nourishment!” You’re familiar with your body’s hunger signals and how to respond to them (eat!). But can you tell when your spirit is hungry? Like your body, your spirit needs to be fed, and when you’re spiritually starving, there will usually be signs, like despair, loneliness, or a sense of longing and emptiness that can never be filled.

When your body is hungry, you give it food. You wouldn’t expect to satisfy your craving by digging into a bowlful of trash or munching on the corner of your mattress. Yet many of us don’t know how to feed our souls. When we feel empty, we try to fill ourselves up with drugs, alcohol, pornography, television, or even positive things like education, work, and friendships. These things fill us up for a little while — just like gravel or mattress stuffing would fill up your stomach, technically speaking — but they don’t nourish our souls. As soon as we come down off the high of an experience, we’re left aching and empty again, because we tried and failed to fill our spirits with something that wasn’t spiritual food. So what will fill the emptiness in your spirit? What is the true “soul food”?

Come to the Feast

When Jesus was on earth — about 2,000 years ago - He spent a lot of time telling people parables, or stories that explain spiritual truths. Once He told a story about a master who was giving a wedding feast. In Jesus’ day, weddings were the party of a lifetime. Everybody in town would come to eat and drink as much as they could. The master sent invitations to all his neighbors, but they all turned him down. They all had reasons for why they were just too busy to come. So the man sent his servants into the street and told them to round up everyone they could find on the street corners and in the alleys. The master wanted his house to be full for the party to end all parties. God is like the master in the parable. He is getting ready to give an unbelievable party, and He wants everyone to be His guest, so that He can fill them with spiritual food and drink that will satisfy their souls forever.

The Bread of Life

What is the spiritual food and drink that God offers? Before Jesus was put to death for a crime He didn’t commit, He served His followers a meal of bread and wine. He told them that the bread and wine symbolized His body and blood, which He was about to offer as a ransom to set people free from the power of sin in their lives. Jesus is the spiritual food and drink God offers us. When we set aside all the junk we’ve been using to fill our souls, when we offer Jesus control of our lives and ask Him to fill us up, our souls will be nourished. Our cravings will be satisfied. God has invited you to His feast. Like the neighbors in the story, will you tell Him you’re too busy, or will you come in and eat the food He’s prepared just for you?
Changing the World from a Chair

A Q&A with Joni Eareckson Tada by Zoe S. Erler

In 1967, a dive into too shallow water left 17-year-old Joni Eareckson paralyzed from the neck down. Since her tragic accident, Joni has become a world-renowned writer and speaker, and—along with her husband Ken Tada—founded Joni and Friends, a global outreach to the disabled community. Recently, Joni fought a successful fight against breast cancer and found new opportunity to trust God. And earlier this year, Joni was awarded the Wilberforce Award for her vigorous advocacy for the sanctity of life, particularly for those with disabilities.

In this issue of IJ, writer Zoe Erler chats with Joni about the secret behind her remarkable fortitude in the face of her trials.

I: After your accident, you were stuck in a hospital bed for about a year. You’ve often spoken about what happened emotionally and spiritually for you during that time. In a nutshell, can you give us a little peek into some of your thoughts, emotions, and what you learned about God during that time?

Joni: I was very athletic, outgoing, active. And suddenly to be lying flat on my back and hear the doctors say you’ll never use your hands again, never walk again—I felt like I’d been given a prison sentence. I felt claustrophobic. Many nights I would lie on my bed and fight panic attacks because of the claustrophobia. I couldn’t even think about the future—couldn’t even think about the next day. It was so terrifying to be that confined.

Obviously I sank into depression, but I knew enough about my situation that I knew I would become suicidally despairing if I was reduced to that kind of fear every day. So that’s when the Bible really began to make a big difference in my life. While I was in the hospital, Christians would come read to me from God’s word. It would bring great peace. I think that was the thing that calmed my troubled heart. For a while, I tried escape—escape into daydreaming, escape into music. But it was the word of God that became such a comfort to me.

II: What are some of the ways you experience your dependence on God on a daily basis?

Joni: Every morning when I wake up, 45 years of quadriplegia, I say, “Lord Jesus, I can’t do this. I am overwhelmed by it. I don’t have a lot of strength for the day, but I can do all things through you as you strengthen me. I can just show up. Get up facing this day with a bright attitude.”

Without Him, I can do nothing anyway. He tells me that I am blessed and are if I come to Him in empty-handed spiritual poverty.

III: If you could go back in time and have a talk with your 17-year-old self, what would you tell her?

Joni: I would say to lean on God more completely, more wholly. Don’t resist. Don’t escape into daydreams. Lean harder into God. That would have saved me a couple of years of depression. Our emotions are so unreliable. So often we tend to live by how we feel. The Bible provides so many anchors, not the least of which is the Psalms, which is a gyroscope for our emotions.

IV: Have you ever met someone in prison or visited a prison?

Joni: I’ve spoken in prison many times, often with Prison Fellowship. Wheels for the World—our ministry which provides free wheelchairs to children and adults around the world—has made— and work good from it.

Wheelchair restoration centers in 14 different prisons across the U.S.

V: Although I’m sure there are differences, I’m guessing there are ways in which those with disabilities can relate to those in prison. Do you have any particular words of wisdom to prisoners?

Joni: In Philippians 1, the Apostle Paul says that his chains helped to advance the Gospel. I see it with that verse. I could put my name and my wheelchair in there. What’s happened to me has really advanced the gospel. If a quadriplegic with chronic pain and breast cancer can advance the gospel, it can encourage those with lesser struggles. I am in chains for Christ.

We all make mistakes. We do stupid stuff. I broke the natural law. I broke the law of gravity. I jumped into the water when it was too shallow. Often prisoners make mistakes they wish they could live over. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve wished I could live that moment over. But God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will. God can take a mistake that a prisoner makes—or the thoughtless decision that I made—and work good from it.

Supreme Court Rules on LWOP for Juveniles

By A.R. Quinn

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Kuntrell Jackson was barely out of middle school when he and two other juveniles went to a video store to rob it. One of the other youngsters killed the store clerk with a gun. Though Kuntrell had stayed outside as a lookout, he was charged as an adult. He was sentenced to life without parole for his part in a robbery.

A recent Supreme Court decision has major implications for offenders like Kuntrell.

On June 25, 2012, the nation’s highest court placed limits on the use of life sentences for offenders who commit murder before they turn 18. In a 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court justices ruled that judges must take into account the defendant’s age and the details of the crime before sentencing them to LWOP. Calling mandatory LWOP sentences for minors “cruel and unusual punishment” — a violation of the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution — the ruling strikes down laws in more than two dozen states that used to require life terms for murderers, regardless of their age.

The Court ruled in the cases of two 14-year-olds — including Kuntrell — who received life sentences for their part in a homicide, but the decision has wider implications. It applies to all whose crimes were committed before they became adults.

It does not, however, call for the immediate release of any inmate sentenced under the old state laws, and judges will still have the freedom to give life sentences to minors when they feel such a punishment is warranted by the crime.

In spite of the limitations, the case is a noteworthy milestone for those who oppose lengthy sentences for youthful criminals. Justice Elena Kagan, who was appointed to the Court in 2010 by President Barack Obama, spoke for the majority, saying, “We . . . hold that mandatory life punishment for parolee under those for one who age of 18 at the time of their crime violates the 8th Amendment’s prohibition on cruel and unusual punishments.”

Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen G. Breyer, Anthony M. Kennedy, and Sonia Sotomayor agreed. The opinion authored by Justice Kagan did not specify whether the ruling will only effect sentences in the future, or whether it might open the door to new hearings for more than 2,000 inmates who are currently serving LWOP for homicides committed while they were minors.

This is the third decision in the last 10 years to change how juveniles are sentenced in the United States. In 2005, the Court outlawed capital punishment for juvenile offenders convicted of murder, and in 2010, it ruled that LWOP sentences for minors for anything less than homicide were unconstitutional.