Is Angel Tree for Real?

by Ron Humphrey

It was count time, and Michigan inmate Doug Cupery wondered what the flurry down the line was about. Prisoners were receiving some kind of papers to fill out. When the CO reached Doug's cell, someone told him it was for Angel Tree. Fill out the application, he was told, and strangers would buy and deliver Christmas gifts to his two young children. It sounded like some kind of prison scam, but Doug was determined to find out for himself.

Doug was born into a good home in western Michigan. But tragedy struck when he was just four years old. His father, a Marine pilot, died in a plane crash. Doug's mother, left to raise the family alone, did her best but turned to alcoholism. Without discipline and accountability, Doug also became involved in substance abuse from his teens to his 20s. But Doug made it to adulthood, studying to become a paramedic and a registered nurse. He married his girlfriend, and they settled down to raise two great kids. The American Dream was well within his reach, but the past still dogged Doug, and his inability to handle accountability led him into trouble with the law. In 1998, he was arrested, convicted, and faced with the possibility of some significant prison time.

Walking a Different Path

While he was awaiting sentencing, some past friends with church connections began showing up to offer Doug support and advice. They explained how Doug could not continue living on his own terms but needed stability in his life. He needed a firm anchor, and Jesus could become what he was missing.

In 1998, Doug entered Chippewa Prison on the Upper Peninsula in Michigan, where he would spend the next three years.

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Prison Bus Crash Claims 10 Lives

by A.R. Quinn

DESSA, TX - On Jan. 14, 2015, a prison transport bus in Texas skidded off an overpass and crashed into a moving train. The deadly accident has led to calls for better safety procedures when moving prisoners between facilities.

At the time of the accident, the bus was headed west between the John Middleton Transfer Facility in Abilene, Texas, and Rogelio Sanchez State Jail in El Paso, Texas, via Interstate 20. The road was icy, and according to a report by the National Transportation Safety Board, there was debris on the road from an earlier car crash. The bus hit the debris, veered off the road, and flew down the embankment before striking a Union Pacific train. The prisoners were handcuffed in pairs and were not wearing seatbelts. Some were thrown out of the bus.

Eight prisoners and two correctional officers were killed in the crash. Five other people—including four prisoners and one staff person—were sent to nearby hospitals with serious injuries.

Calls for Safety Review

The deadly crash left prisoners, families, and state officials in grief and shock. "We have had other accidents, but I can tell you nothing like this where we have lost this many officers and offenders," Jason Clark, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, told the Odessa American. After the accident, several members of the Texas House of Representatives, along with advocates for criminal justice reform, called for safer prison transportation.

According to the El Paso Times, Rep. Senfronia Thomp-
**Guest Column: Jesse Wiese**

The first time I stood up for religious liberty, I was still in prison. I was participating in a faith-based program that was being sued by Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and I was asked to testify in favor of the program. Unfortunately, we lost the case and the program closed, but I left that experience with a desire to learn more about our constitutional right to religious freedom and, more importantly, how that right could be protected.

I worked hard to “redeem the time” while I was in prison, taking advantage of opportunities that would help me on a path to success. Following my release, I graduated from law school and was able to work for several organizations that defend religious freedom.

This past October, I had the opportunity to be at the Supreme Court to hear arguments in Holt v. Hobbs, a religious freedom case involving a man imprisoned in Tennessee. I submitted a “Brief of Reformatted Prisoner,” arguing for the importance of religious liberty behind bars, as part of my work with Justice Fellowship. As I walked out of the courtroom and stood on the steps overlooking our nation’s capital, I couldn’t help but think about the path that led me there. I was overcome with gratitude, awe, and a desire to continue fighting for justice. The Supreme Court unanimously ruled in favor of Mr. Holt in January 2015, and I am proud that the cause of religious freedom emerged victorious. But I am convinced that the more important outcome is what you will do with your religious freedom. Have you thought deeply about why you’re alive? Have you investigated who God is and what He wants? How will you exercise your religious freedom with the time you have right now?

I found true freedom in Christ alone. All of you reading this are of great worth and value, and I believe that if you embrace that freedom, you will accomplish great things. Justice Fellowship advocates for state and national reforms and does not provide legal advice or assistance to individuals. Please do not write to Inside Journal to seek legal help in a specific case.

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**Let Freedom Ring**

**Is Angel Tree for Real? Continued from p.1**

Doug Cupery

freezing cold. “I saw snowflakes in June,” he recalls. But Doug’s hard heart was melting. He vowed to leave prison as a different man, one his family could depend on.

“[Angel Tree] allowed me to be their dad even though I was away from them.”

He says, “I found some men within the prison who helped me to not only learn how to ‘do prison,’ but they also helped me to walk a different path.” Looking back, I found the first lessons of what it means to be a real Christian, a man, a husband and father, within the walls of a prison.

About that time, Doug saw Angel Tree applications passed out and asked the other men about it. Could Angel Tree be real? Would strangers really go out and spend their own money to buy Christmas gifts for his children? Or was it just another prison scam? He had a daughter, 3, and a son, 5, back home, and they faced a difficult Christmas season with Doug gone.

A friend assured him it was all true, that Prison Fellowship’s Angel Tree program had been buying and delivering gifts to the children of prisoners since 1982. In wonderment, Doug sat down and completed the application. And sure enough, shortly before Christmas, Angel Tree volunteers showed up at his home with the gifts Doug had suggested for his two children. And they included the Christmas wishes that Doug had asked the volunteers to convey to his children on his behalf.

Doug notes, “I participated in Angel Tree for two years and was very thankful to be part not only for my children, but because it allowed me to be their dad even though I was away from them.”

**Challenges and Dreams**

Coming home from prison is never easy for anyone. Doug had the support of the church that had cared for his family, but obstacles remained.

“I tried to put my past behind me, but my prison years and background would often pop to the forefront. Whether it was related to finding a job or just getting my head together, that past experience was always present.”

Soon Doug began to run into other former prisoners who were experiencing the same challenges he was.

“[Doug began to see how God had changed his own life, and he wanted to help other ex-prisoners do the same.]"

Good-hearted and caring, Christians in his community saw men and women returning home from prison as no different from ministry and reentry program within his own church. That ministry has reached out to many people returning from prison in Michigan.

Doug has never forgotten the lessons he learned from friends behind bars, including the ones who told him about Angel Tree. He says, “I have never forgotten the impact Angel Tree had on me and my family. I work together now with my ministry and Prison Fellowship, not only on a personal level, but also on a professional level. […] We are working on ways to […] walk alongside prisoners’ children not just at Christmas but throughout the year.”

Doug, whose children are now grown up and attending college, adds, “Through Angel Tree, my own children received many opportunities to grow while I was absent.”

To learn more about Angel Tree, talk to your chaplain and see the ad on page 4 of this newspaper.

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**Your Letter’s**

**‘Taking the Hill’**

I read in the Winter 2015 edition of the article ‘Taking the Hill’ and was impressed. Thank you for not forgetting the war veterans who for whatever reason are in prison. I am 16-year Army infantry veteran with two tours in Iraq. … We saw action and plenty of it, I came home a different person. In fact, my wife said I had changed so much she wanted me to go back to Iraq and bring her husband home. I went to the vet center and was diagnosed with combat PTSD.

… I committed a crime in 2012 that still I don’t understand why … I am sorry for what I did and I often wonder if I hadn’t gone to war in 2005, would I be in here today? I was once thought by all who knew me as a hero for serving my country faithfully, but now I am looked on by all as a convict that society wants to throw away. There are days I would prefer to have died a hero in Iraq than to be remembered, or better yet forgotten, as a convict. We need more people to reach out to veterans in prison and not forget us. All of us put our lives on the line for our country only to be forgotten when we need help the most! … I love my country, with all her mistakes. I just wish my country loved me in spite of mine.

– C.H., Mississippi

Rarely do I ever see anything about incarcerated female veterans — whose crimes may have direct links to their service experiences. Many female veterans have experienced not only the trauma of conflict, but also injuries, and many of them, especially those of us who served 10, 15, 20, or more years ago suffer from trauma that resulted from rape, sexual, emotional, and physical abuse perpetrated by our fellow soldiers and officers — abuse that we never reported. … Many of us are incarcerated because we couldn’t handle society or found ourselves unable to cope in our jobs and relationships. We are not bad people. We served our country honorably and yet we are forgotten, locked away, when just a little help, we could return to society as productive citizens.

– D.G., West Virginia

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**Prayer Warriors Corner**

• Pray for the safety of persecuted Christians and other religious minorities in North Africa and the Middle East.

• Pray for the reformation of the American criminal justice system so that true life transformation will be possible.

• Pray for the healing of relationships between law enforcement and communities, particularly those divided by race.

• Pray for the growth of Prison Fellowship and other organizations ministering to prisoners and ex-prisoners.
The Hardest Call to Make

by Johnathan Kana

I stared at the phone for a long time before dialing. This would be the hardest call of my life, but I had no choice.

“Johnathan?” My father’s voice was strangely calm.

“Hey, Dad.” My own voice was anything but calm. I was literally shaking with fear, and not just because I was placing the call from a holding cell at the county jail.

“Sounds like you’ve had a rough day,” he said. His signature humor made this both easier and more difficult.

“I think you could say that,” I replied, desperately choking back the tears. “Listen, Dad, I have no right to ask, but I could really use your help right now.”

I couldn’t help it. Broken and humiliated, I sobbed quietly. Had it not been my first arrest, I might be labeled a criminal. Never before had I been so pain.

“Father would say next.”

The thought of facing my parents. Waiting breathlessly for their son. Waiting breathlessly for that night. But in that moment, all I really cared about was what my father would say next.

Nowhere to Turn

In the hours I was waiting for my “one phone call,” I’d mentally rehearsed the over and over again. I relived the sheer panic of staring down the officer’s pistol, the deafening thump of my heartbeat as I hugged the side of the haggard men in the cell with that night. But in that moment, all I really cared about was what my father would say next.

Prison Bus Crash

Continued from p.1

There are some good people in the prison system and I’m sure there were some on the bus that day,” said Rep. Alma Allen, another Houston Democrat.

Finding Grace

My father’s words finally came through. “Johnathan, God’s love is unconditional. Mine is, too. We’re going to do anything we can to help.”

We weren’t created to live this way, and we can’t run forever. In our hearts, we know we deserve to be disowned by Him.

It’s Your Call

The phone at the county jail only allowed collect calls. Someone on the other end had to accept the charges, and many of the guys there had no one who would pay to hear from them under those circumstances. God isn’t like that. His Son has already accepted the call and paid for us to ever make it, but thanks to Him we don’t have to pay anything to place it.

If you’re ready, it only takes a simple prayer, like this:

God, I'm asking You to come into my life and save me. Teach me to live

Author Johnathan Kana agonized over what his father would say when he called from jail.
**Great Prisoners of the Bible**

**Zedekiah: His Weak Will Did Him In**

Zedekiah is hardly a household name. He was the last king of Judah (the southern part of Israel), and he lived nearly 600 years before Christ. He became king at age 21 and reigned for 11 years in Jerusalem.

His story is mainly found in the Old Testament books of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. A quick summary is found in Jeremiah 52:1-11.

Zedekiah had access to good advice through the righteous prophet Jeremiah. But he lacked the guts to carry out the advice given him.

He took a sacred oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, the foreign ruler who put him in power, but he was unfaithful to that oath and openly rebelled.

He had a weak will, and in the end it cost him his kingdom, his sons, his eyesight, and his life.

He had a weak will, and in the end it cost him his kingdom, his sons, his eyesight, and his life.

**Meeting an Awful End**

- In the first few verses of Jeremiah 39, what did Nebuchadnezzar’s army do to Jerusalem and to Zedekiah?
- When they caught him (verse 5), what did they do to his sons?
- How did Zedekiah spend his final days? (Jeremiah 52:11)

**What Can We Learn?**

- Zedekiah did the right thing by asking advice of a God-following person (Jeremiah).
- But he didn’t have the follow-through to continue doing what was right. What is the best source of advice for you? How can you get good information that will steer you in the right direction?

- Identify your own areas of character weakness. Where do you most often go back on your promises or on doing what’s right?

- Was Zedekiah a success or a failure? By what criteria do you think God measures him?

- How will God measure you? How can you avoid the same mistakes Zedekiah made?

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**Connect with Your Child This Christmas!**

Get an application and sign your kids up today! A special gift from you at Christmas will help them know that you love them, and it will connect them with a church that can come alongside your family in your absence. Best of all, it will give them an opportunity to experience the transforming love of Jesus Christ.

Angel Tree makes great efforts to serve every eligible child. Sometimes, however, if we are unable to locate your children’s caregiver, if the caregiver refuses to participate, or if there are not enough Angel Tree volunteers in a local area, we may not be able to deliver gifts to your children.

If your facility is not signed up and has not received applications, your chaplain may contact 1-800-55-ANGEL for more information on how to participate.

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**Meet Zedekiah!**

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