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# Alone in a Box with a Bible

By Zoe S. Erler

**R**uss Kloskin's 6-by-8-foot cell took him back to memories of when his mother would lock him in a coal bin while she roamed the streets looking for a fix.

"The way I was raised, I just wanted to be alone," Russ says about his childhood, pain in his eyes as he searches for the words. "I didn't mind when [my mother] was gone. I learned how to be self-sufficient, how to feed myself ... probably a lot of things a child shouldn't know how to do."

**Whatever, to survive**

When you first meet him, Russ' gentle attitude makes it hard to imagine him as a former leader of a notorious prison gang. But his life started out hard and got harder in a hurry.

Growing up neglected, Russ would steal clothes off clotheslines, nab groceries—anything to avoid the

next foster care placement or children's home. By the time his mom moved him from the Midwest to Houston, the drugs and violence were constant—inside and out of the home. Russ turned to the streets to escape an abusive stepfather and soon joined the ranks of the city's homeless youth. Then it was on to juvenile facilities, reform school, and ultimately prison, at age 15, for an armed robbery.

**Prison or 'house of pain'?**

In 1983 Russ entered a particularly violent prison that was referred to as a "gladiator school."

For the next two years, he figured out how to survive, becoming more aggressive and violent. When he was transferred to another prison, Russ was put in a cell with Joe, a "big biker guy," who mentored him in the ways of a violent, race-based prison gang.

*Continued on page 2*



Photo by Chad Prince

After a childhood of neglect and abuse, Russ thought he would find a family by joining a notorious prison gang. He wound up stewing in solitary—until someone put a mysterious book through the slot in his door.

# Iowa Prison Choir Models Social Healing

**Editor's Note:** In this issue, we're talking a lot about integrity—making sure that our actions are in harmony with the values we want to live by. It's helpful to pursue integrity at an individual level, but it can also be a collective goal, acted out in group efforts that embody positive values. Read how a choir in Iowa is doing just that.

By Johnathan Kana

**I** was both nervous and excited this past spring as I pulled into the parking lot for the Iowa Medical and Classification Center (IMCC). I had been looking forward to this night for months, but it was also my first time to go back inside a prison since my release more than eight years ago.

Known to many simply as Oakdale Prison, the IMCC is a medium-security facility housing some 950 prisoners. Among other things, it's the central intake point for all men entering the Iowa Department of Corrections.

Tonight, however, this prison would become a concert hall. More than 200 free-world guests would soon begin filing through security and making their way toward the prison gym, where they would be treated to a public performance by the Oakdale Community Choir.

I arrived early at the invitation of Dr. Mary Cohen, the group's founder and director. The choir was premiering a new song I had written just for the occasion, and she wanted to introduce me to the singers.

**A Community of Caring**

The choir is made up of both prisoners and community



MCCAIG/Stock

When Johnathan Kana went back into prison for the first time since his release, it was to hear a choir, made up of people from prison and the outside community, perform his original composition.

volunteers—"inside singers" and "outside singers," as they like to call themselves. Some are veteran musicians, while others are learning to sing for the first time. All grow from the experience in their own unique ways.

Dr. Cohen founded the ensemble in 2009, aiming to create a "community of caring" that would bridge the gap between people living on opposite sides of the razor wire. "The symbolism is rich," she explains,

"for a group of people accused of committing crimes against society to sing in unison and harmony with members of that same community."

They meet on Tuesday nights

*Continued on page 2*

# Can You Pass This Test?

By Dan Kingery

I had a friend who was a leader in the prison chapel program. He would speak up front, and he encouraged others. People looked up to him.

It came to my attention that my friend had five different women, all writing to him and



shaun/iStock

putting money on his books. None of the women knew about the others.

When I confronted him, he acted unconcerned. “Don’t worry,” he said. “This doesn’t affect my walk or my leadership in the program.”

My friend still needed to grasp a basic truth about integrity: Honesty starts with yourself.

Whether behind bars or in the free world, we all struggle with this problem. We say one thing but do another. We apply one value system to a certain part of our lives, but live by a completely different set of rules in another area. We compartmentalize.

Instead of admitting that we have failed to live up to the ideals we give lip-service to, compartmentalizing—telling ourselves that one area won’t affect another—makes it easier to look ourselves in the mirror.

Compartmentalizing is dangerous for a few reasons. First, lacking integrity sends mixed signals to the people around you, who won’t know whether to believe what you say. If you tell your family you are turning your life around so you can come home, but in reality you are picking fights and disrespecting authority, they will soon lose trust in you. Once

lost, trust is hard to get back.

The second problem with compartmentalizing is that it’s based on the idea that you can isolate one part of your life. That’s just not true. Life is pretty much life a rowboat; if you poke a hole (or lack integrity) in any part of the bottom, the whole thing is eventually going to fill with water and sink.

Finally, integrity is the ultimate test of whether the values and beliefs you claim to hold are sincere. If you say you believe in honesty, but lie whenever the truth could get you in trouble, you don’t really mean it. Without us ever opening our mouths, our lives give daily proof of what we believe.

Does your life pass the integrity test? ■

*Dan Kingery is the senior vice president of field and Academy programs at Prison Fellowship.*

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## Iowa Prison Choir Continued from page 1

to rehearse a diverse program of songs, many of which are written by the choir’s own members. Each season concludes with two performances—one for the inside singers’ fellow prisoners, and one for outside community guests.

As I mingled with the singers before the concert, I learned that participating in this group is about much more than just making music. It’s about growing relationships and changing perspectives.

Andy, one of the outside singers, described how he had begun looking at prisoners differently since joining the choir. “I’ve learned a lot about the challenges many of them face,” he said. “I’ve become a little more activist around some issues, and also not so quick to judge people, as I see that we all make mistakes.”

Many of the inside singers I spoke with expressed gratitude for being treated with dignity. “Being around these people makes me want to do better when I get out,” one told me.

## Life within These Walls

The song I had written for the choir to perform that night, “Life within These Walls,” describes how prison can feel hopeless. But when a stranger offers grace to the prisoner, everything changes. Suddenly, new freedom—inner freedom—dawns upon souls once shackled

by shame and despair.

It’s a dissonant and challenging work, both for the singers and for the audience. In music, dissonance occurs when chords feel like they should “resolve” to something else. It creates tension and suspense.

In “Life within These Walls,” however, some of the dissonances never resolve. Singers have to “lean into” these difficult chord structures and embrace the uncomfortable intervals, even when it feels “wrong” to do so.

Given its difficulty, I worried the choir wouldn’t like the piece. I was relieved and grateful when many of the singers expressed how deeply they had connected with the music and lyrics.

One of the inside singers offered a touching introduction to the song. “Death is everywhere within these walls,” he said. “But piercing the darkness are the unseen graces of the stranger, like what we are nurturing here as a choir. ... Love and compassion restore dignity to lost souls trying to heal where institutions fail.”

As I listened to this unlikely assembly of musicians bring this composition to life there in that Iowa prison, I could tell they had taken my humble offering and made it their own. For a composer, there’s no greater honor than that. ■

*Johnathan Kana is a composer, freelance writer, and former prisoner living in Texas.*

## In a Box Continued from page 1

Russ “earned his bones” by stabbing a man and then spending 45 days in solitary. When he returned to general population, he had secured his place in the gang. He was 18 years old.

## Up the ranks

Released in 1987, Russ spent the next several years serving the gang on the outside. Drugs, women, and robberies filled his days, and he was soon back in prison.

“When you’re a member of the [gang], going to prison is where your family is at,” Russ explains. Still, he says, “I came back in [angrier], more violent than ever. I would daydream about the things I would do to the people who had caused me to be put back in prison.”

Three years later, Russ’ gang went to war with some rivals. Prison officials scattered Russ and other gang leaders to prisons across the state.

## “Whatever He did for that man ...”

“I was sitting in a strip cell, angry, no clothes ... acting crazy, spitting on guards,” Russ says about his days in solitary confinement, where he was sent after the conflict between rival gangs.

He was so violent that it took a six-man extraction team to escort him from his steel box to the shower.

But one day a female corrections officer—one whom Russ had cussed out repeatedly—asked him if he wanted something to read. Assuming she would bring him a newspaper or something similar, he agreed.



Photo by Chad Prince

Russ’ life changed forever when a CO, one he had often cursed at, asked him if he wanted something to read.

“Later that day,” he says, “I heard my bean chute open up and something clink on the floor. It was a Bible.”

Infuriated, Russ cussed the woman out again.

For the next couple of days, Russ just sat in his cell with that Bible. He rolled it into a tube, tied a sock around it, and then lay on his bunk, tossing it up in the air, up and down, all day long. But, for some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to throw it out. Eventually, he gave in and began flipping through the book.

He came to a story about a demon-possessed man who lived in a cemetery, cutting himself with sharp stones. Jesus met the man and cast out his demons, so that he was completely restored to sanity (Mark 5:1-20).

“When I read that, it just messed me up,” Russ admits, flipping over his forearms to reveal a ladder of tiny scars. He returns to the memory from his childhood.

“When my mother would put me in that coal bin, I would cut myself. And when I read this

story ...” he says, choking up.

He goes on, “I didn’t know nothing about altar calls or special prayers, but I knew for the first time in my life that whatever He had done for that man, I wanted Him to do for me.”

On January 6, 2000, Russ, broken, desperate, and 32 years old cried out to God, “Lord, I can’t do this anymore. I can’t live this way. I need You!” ■

*To be continued in the December edition of Inside Journal ...*

“I was sitting in a strip cell, angry, no clothes ... acting crazy, spitting on guards,” Russ says about his days in solitary confinement.

# The Fruits of Faith

By A.R. Quinn

**W**hen his mother lay dying, Manuel made a promise to God, that if God healed his mother, Manuel would give the rest of his life to Him.

As Manuel shares in a video posted on the website of his church in California, it took

of his gang at a local park to be jumped out. When he got there, Manuel says, the second leader of the gang, asked, “So you believe this Jesus thing is real?”

Manuel said, “Yeah, it’s real man. I’m ready to die for it.”

The leader, a man who never cried, said with tears in his eyes, “The fact that you came here, that you’re here right now, tells us that you’re a man of your word. Don’t disappoint

spouse expects you to do your best to live up to your wedding vows. Manuel’s brothers in the gang expected him to abide by their code.

Likewise, if you make a commitment to follow Jesus, your life should have characteristics that set you apart from people who haven’t made that same decision. In the Gospels, Jesus summed up the Christian lifestyle as “loving God and loving your neighbor.”

But while doing the right thing is important, did you know that it doesn’t actually make someone a Christian?

In the Bible, God makes it clear that none of us can act with integrity all the time. In one of His sermons (Matthew 5), Jesus pointed out that even if we don’t act on our worst impulses, the hatred, lust, or other attitudes we keep in our hearts mean that we have all broken God’s laws. We’re all guilty, and the sentence isn’t pretty: separation forever from Him.

But there’s also great news. Jesus took the penalty we deserve so that we can go free. The Bible explains it this way:

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:16-17, NLT)

Anyone who confesses their need to Jesus, accepts what He did to pay the penalty for sin, and asks Him to be Lord of their lives is welcomed into God’s family. That’s it. So in re-

ality, becoming a Christian isn’t primarily about what you do, but about receiving what Jesus has already done for you.

## Love changes things

God’s love and grace are outrageous. He owed us nothing, but He gave us everything. When we start to understand that love, it changes us forever. Just like Manuel couldn’t go back to his old lifestyle, no matter what it might cost him, accepting Jesus means getting on a new path.

New attitudes and choices aren’t what make someone a Christian, but they are the natural result of God’s presence in our lives. An apple tree grows apples—not oranges. And when God’s Holy Spirit begins to live

in our hearts, old vices fall by the wayside. We develop a deep, active love for Him and the people around us.

Christians still struggle and make mistakes, especially with deeply ingrained habits. But if we don’t start to see the “fruits” of God’s presence in our lives over time, things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control, then it’s worth asking if we have ever really handed control of our lives over to God, or whether we’re just paying Him lip-service.

If you’re not sure where you stand, don’t despair! He is ready and waiting to welcome you. He has already paid the price to set you free. ■



Querbeet/Stock

him a while to actually give his life to God. Eventually he landed in jail, where someone gave him a copy of “The Sinner’s Prayer” (for a similar prayer, see the box to the right). “I remember falling on my knees and crying like a baby,” he says.

Deeply moved by his encounter with God in the jail cell, Manuel went and told the other members of his gang. The second leader of the gang told Manuel that while he respected his decision, the gang would still need to jump him out.

Manuel met the members

us, because we’re looking up to you now.”

The gang never laid a finger on Manuel that night. But they did make him a promise: If they ever saw him running with another gang or doing drugs again, they would take him out.

“So you wanna talk about accountability, guys ...,” laughs Manuel in the video.

## More than rules

No matter what set of values you try to live by, integrity is something other people expect from you. In a marriage, your

## WHAT MAKES A CHRISTIAN?

Becoming a Christian isn’t about following a list of rules. It’s about what Jesus did on the cross to take the penalty for anything you’ve done wrong—no matter what it is. Because of Jesus, you can know God’s love, have His Spirit living in you, and receive His strength to lead a transformed life. You can begin by saying a prayer like this one.

Dear God,

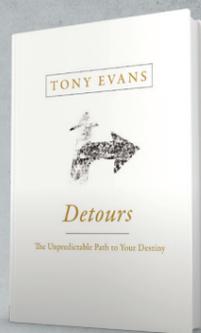
*On my own, I can’t live up to your standards. The penalty I deserve is separation from You. Thank you for sending Jesus to die on the cross so I can be a part of Your family. I joyfully accept Your free gift. Please come into my life and help me know Your love in a personal way, so that I can love You and my neighbors. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

If you want to grow in your new relationship with God, Inside Journal wants to help. You can sign up for a free correspondence Bible study and request a free Bible through one of our trusted partner organizations by writing to “What Makes a Christian,” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

Too often our lives don’t end up the way we planned. But thankfully, God’s Word speaks to us in the midst of our difficulties.

Tony Evans has a message for you straight from God’s Word. He wants you to know that our detours are often the pathway to our true destiny.

If you are interested in learning more about the way God might be using your personal detour in life and receiving a free copy of Tony Evans’ new book, *Detours*, simply fill and tear out the information below and mail to **Attn: Tony Evans Detours Prison Fellowship, 535 Maddox-Simpson Pkwy, Lebanon, TN 37090** for a free copy of *Detours*.



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# A Walk of Integrity

Our interview with a veteran of the Oklahoma prison system

Aaron Cosar served more than two decades in the Oklahoma prison system for a murder he committed before the age of 20. Today, he is a father, a grandfather, and is helping to start Prison Fellowship's first Academy in Oklahoma.

**IJ: How would you describe the first part of your life?**

AC: I started drinking alcohol at age nine. I had great parents but my uncle was an alcoholic, so adapted his personality and behavior. This escalated at the age of 15 to other forms of drugs, then dealing drugs. I got into trouble with law enforcement—stealing, breaking into houses, getting DUIs, getting into severe fights. I then ran away from home and committed a crime of murder at the age of 19, which consequently gave me a life sentence (which was later commuted by the governor).

For the first several years in prison, I adapted the prison mentality: fighting, home brew, shanks, bad attitude. Then, I had an encounter with God through some volunteers. I got involved with Bible studies and seminars, and God just began to change my life through that process. I started working in the chapel as a clerk and worked there for 15 years.

**IJ: You mention integrity. What did it look like to**



Photo courtesy of Aaron Cosar

**walk with integrity in a prison environment?**

AC: I have two boys. At the time, they were probably six and seven. They asked me when I was coming home. I lied to them. I said I was trying to come home and was staying out of trouble. I was actually getting into fights. That's when God began to build my heart, Wait a minute, you're lying to your two boys here. God used that as a tool to teach me how not only not to lie to my children but also to others.

From there, I began being responsible to my family and in my role at the chapel. There was a time when I was given a pretty unprecedented level of responsibility in that chapel program for a little under two years. I was being trusted with a lot ... Then it really made an

“They asked me when I was coming home. I lied to them. I said I was trying to come home and was staying out of trouble. I was actually getting into fights.”

impression [on me] that I had changed. ... It felt good that I had not been lying or doing something illegal. ... It became a really important part of my life and I still try to practice that today.

A lot of times, with our history and background, we do things because we want somebody to watch us, like we could get approval from the parole

board. But that wasn't even on my radar. It was at least 8 years before that would even pop up.

**IJ: Now that you've been out for a while, what does your life look like?**

AC: I've been out for seven years, married to the same woman for 19. Between us we have nine grandkids. All of us are close.

After I got home, I went to work as a life skills coach for homeless people and those getting out of work release. Then I became an OSHA instructor, then a forklift trainer. I also went and got my volunteer

program where prisoners develop themselves personally and collectively. Participants will get a sense of what integrity looks like, what it means to be accountable to themselves and their peers and their community, and what it looks like to be productive both on the inside and on the streets. For those who will be released, they will gain some life skills, character transformation, and tools to be better citizens, to be somebody's next-door neighbor, somebody's future employee, somebody's future husband, brother, etc.

**IJ: To be a little less serious for a moment, do you have any pets?**

AC: We have a one-eyed Chihuahua named Samson, and he acts like [the Bible character] Samson.

**IJ: You spent a lot of your life stuck in one place. What's one place you would visit in the world that you haven't yet?**

AC: Alaska. I love the notion of being completely in the woods with bears, and deer, and elk, and the smell of fresh, clean air. ■

To learn if your state offers a Prison Fellowship Academy and how to apply, talk to your case manager.

## Georgia Prisoners Save Officer's Life

By E.G. Andrews

**T**he day a Georgia corrections officer collapsed on duty, any nearby prisoner could have grabbed his gun or simply run off.

Instead, they grabbed the CO's phone and called 911. And those six bold men in bold-striped prison uniforms may have saved his life, according to an article in The Telegraph.

The deputy had been supervising the prisoners' lawn maintenance work—a task spanning seven hours a day, five days a week. The officer had mentioned not feeling well that particular afternoon, basking in the sunshine and high humidity. Then suddenly he was face-down on the ground.

He was barely breathing when they stripped off his bullet-proof vest, a hasty attempt to let him cool down and prepare him for CPR if necessary. Was it heatstroke? Was it a heart attack? The men didn't know, and they didn't have to. They



Photo by ftwitty/iStock

later told reporters they didn't think twice about springing into action.

“In my opinion, it wasn't about who was in jail and who wasn't,” said Greg, one of the men who helped the CO. “It was about a man going down, and we had to help him.”

And it's a good thing they did. In a pivotal moment, it wasn't about who was (or wasn't) watching them. It was about watching out for their officer—a

fellow human being.

Emergency medical personnel arrived at the scene and took care of the ailing officer. Still, the corrections staff saved plenty of praise for their residents' heroic display.

“We all know that Monday could have ended very differently for our officer,” said a spokesman for the Polk County sheriff's office. “We are very proud of the actions of all six

inmates involved.”

“None of them did anything they shouldn't have done,” added the deputy whose life was saved. His family brought pizza, Coca-Cola, and homemade desserts to the six prisoners as a small token of great thanks.

The actions of the prisoners on that Georgia work detail are proof that anyone can act with integrity, choosing to do the right thing even when no one

was looking over their shoulder to hold them accountable. In their case, in addition to worldwide media attention and some treats from the officer's grateful family, their sentences were all reduced by a quarter.

Acting with integrity doesn't always come with an immediate pay-off. Just as often, it can seem to go unnoticed, or even cost you in the short run. But integrity also comes with its own reward—an untroubled conscience and the satisfaction of knowing in your heart you did the right thing. And it's hard to put a price tag on that. ■



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