



PRISON
FELLOWSHIP

FOR WOMEN

INSIDE JOURNAL®

YOUR SOURCE OF INSPIRATION AND INFORMATION

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Theresa's Harbor in the Storm

by Emily Andrews

Theresa Sharpe's life turned upside down when she was 9 years old. "Mom and Dad" revealed they were actually her grandparents. The older "brother" she had been regularly visiting in prison turned out to be her real father.

Her biological parents both struggled with addiction, and Theresa's substitute parents, who experienced abuse growing up, continued that cycle of abuse on Theresa. They moved back and forth between Arizona and California, adding instability to the mix. By junior high, Theresa just wanted a safe place to belong. She fell into a friend group that introduced her to drugs. At 14, she tried crystal meth.

Theresa dove into a cycle of drug use, drinking, and running away from home. When she lost her boyfriend in a car accident, she dealt with the pain through self-harm and more drug use. "I



Photo by Marie Monforte

Theresa's life had gone off the deep end, and she had given up hope. But then a woman invited her to a service that changed her life forever.

didn't want to feel," she says.

Then came her arrest for shoplifting. Her grandparents turned her in to the juvenile facility, where she entered rehab and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Upon her release, Theresa returned to drugs

and committed crimes to support her habit.

Off the deep end

She was 18 and unfazed when she went to prison for the first time, a seven-month stint in the same facility where she visited her father

growing up. Theresa spent the next 10 years on the outside shackled to drug use and abusive relationships. During that time, she had three sons. She would lose them to child protective services.

After that, "I really went off the deep end," Theresa

says. She turned herself in for some previous charges and served another 10 months, believing prison might be her only hope for ever getting clean. Again she was released, and six months later, she was charged again. She realized she could be put away for a very long time.

Sitting in Estrella Jail in Phoenix, Theresa felt defeated. She thought about all the things she'd sworn she'd never do—and yet, she had done them. She didn't have hope.

Then a woman named Maggie invited her to a church service.

Theresa still remembers one song she heard in the jail chapel that night. The words felt like her own—words of someone desperate for redemption. "It hit me like a ton of bricks," she says. "I got down on my knees when they made the altar call, and I cried my eyes out. I said, 'Jesus, please, come into my life. Please.' I had nothing left."

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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 your best 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 circumstances.



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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.

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

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A Cold Christmas in Beulah

by Annie Goebel

Times were hard. Yes, I was now free from prison, but I was dirt poor and raising my three daughters alone, as their dad was still in prison and would be for many years. Living in a trailer in Beulah, Wyoming, in winter was brutal. The water pipes under the trailer had frozen, so every drop had to be carried in from a well deep in the woods. I could barely keep the lights on and food on the table, and Christmas was coming—I wondered how I could provide even one gift for my little girls. Yet, even as I wondered, I couldn’t help but feel the peace and joy of Jesus’ birth as I baked cookies and sang Christmas carols. Just before I went to prison, I had given my heart to Jesus. The moment I surrendered, I felt an unexplainable joy. I wondered where it came from. As I read my Bible, I found the answer. “Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ.” (Philippians 4:7, NLT). I began to understand that whether inside prison walls or outside, my hope was now in Jesus. I was able to rejoice, not because of my daily circumstances, but because of His promises. After my release, I continued my journey with Jesus, reading my Bible and



Photo by Taralyn Quigley

asking for His care. I had found a great church, and I looked forward to taking my girls to the upcoming Christmas service. As we entered the church, I was met by ladies with big smiles. They said, “Annie, we have a surprise for your girls.” We stood before a beautiful Christmas tree, which they explained was an “Angel Tree.” (The program gives gifts to children with a parent in prison.) Under the tree were gifts with my daughters’ names on them—from their dad. Wide-eyed, they jumped for joy! These days I am on staff with Prison Fellowship to reach my sisters, and I know God has been with me. He is also with you. His word says He has a plan for you. Where will He lead you on your journey with Him? Rejoice, it’s gonna be good! *Annie Goebel is the director of programs and special events at Prison Fellowship.* ■

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Harbor in the Storm

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One thing she did have was the New Testament. She read it while she awaited her sentence. The verses made her want to learn more about what it means to start a new life.

Coming up for air

In prison, Theresa heard about the Prison Fellowship Academy™, a long-term, intensive program that guides participants through a holistic process of life transformation. She applied, enrolled, and barely missed a class in all the months of the program. And she learned it’s never too late to start over. Little by little, new thoughts and behaviors “started becoming very real in my life, and I know that it was absolutely, 100 percent, because God was changing my heart, and changing my mind, and changing my way of thinking,” she says. “What stuck out to me the most was where God says that you’re a ‘new creation.’” “I was so drowned out by ... all the distractions of daily life, that it took being in a situation where I was set down, for me to be able to hear God,” Theresa adds. “I would have never been able to dig into the Bible like I was able to, or to learn about Jesus and the promises and what it meant for me, if I had not attended the Academy.” Prison Fellowship volunteers Terry and Denise Dillard answered all her questions with patience. They guided her through what it means to change from the inside

out. “They were absolutely amazing,” says Theresa. Released in early 2015, Theresa would remain in touch with the Dillards and others from Prison Fellowship. While she still faces temptation on the outside, those friends and mentors hold her accountable and pray with her regularly. And she is thankful.



Photo by Marie Monforte

“I thought I was going to use drugs until the day I died,” says Theresa. “To have sustained clean time—I have four and a half years right now—that is completely mind-boggling. It’s all because of Jesus.” Theresa now resides in Southern California with her husband Chris, who was also formerly incarcerated. Together they have faced the challenges of reentry, growing stronger in faith every day. Steadily employed and active in her church, she credits God for her second chance at life, love, and motherhood. “Living right and living for Jesus is not easy. It’s definitely the hard road, but it’s worth it.” ■



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 woman had just learned she was pregnant, and her fiancé—who was not the father of her child—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 young woman to give birth, yet despite the risks, they had no choice but to travel for days. When they reached the fiancé’s hometown, they couldn’t find lodgings. But the woman 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 bed. By now, it’s probably obvious that the unnamed family here is Mary, Joseph, 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 an inexperienced mother 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, how disconnected would we feel from this event? Instead, this King of Kings entered this world in a humble, simple, relatable way. He entered 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). Jesus came to earth in disgraceful conditions (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. But He chose a poor, unmarried, unremarkable teenager—a virtual “nobody.” God could have even sent His Son as a grown adult, physically strong and mighty and 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 the 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. Before the Christmas story,

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.



justinkendra/Stock

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 tutoring 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 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. ■



Photo courtesy of Prison Fellowship

Reaching out to bless other women in your facility during the holidays can lessen the sting of loneliness for everyone.

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

Women with depression are more likely to experience severely low self-esteem, self-harm, anxiety, panic, or eating disorders. But 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. “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,



sdominick/iStock

and count your heartbeats for 30 seconds). Creative outlets, like playing music or journaling, can help, too.

- **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.

Depression is not about weakness. “The brain is an organ, and just like any other body part is susceptible to illness or imbalance, so is our brain,” says Deweese. “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.” ■

Holiday Visits

Continued from page 1

holidays. Maybe the person 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.

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.

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



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Editorial Manager: Alyson R. Quinn
Managing Editor: Stacia Ray

Writers: Emily Andrews, Zoe S. Erler, Annie Goebel, Alyson R. Quinn, Stacia Ray

Graphic Designer: Ashley Pournaras

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