



ANGEL TREE®

A Program of Prison Fellowship

NEVER FORGOTTEN

.....
*Challenges and Triumphs of Children
With a Parent in Prison*



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THE HIDDEN CONSEQUENCES OF PARENTS IN PRISON: AN INTRODUCTION

With the world's largest incarcerated population, the United States is home to approximately **2.7 million children** with a mom or dad behind bars. That's **one in 28**, or one desk in every classroom.

Do you know their stories?

When a parent goes to prison, the child serves a sentence, too, at no fault of their own. For young children, a parent's sudden departure often leads to separation anxiety, anger, sadness, and feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Older children may exhibit more antisocial behavior, conduct disorders, and signs of depression. Recognized by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), parental incarceration is distinguished from other ACEs by a unique combination of trauma, stigma, and shame (Youth.gov).

Some children may even be unaware of their parent's incarceration. Meaning to spare them from the painful truth, caregivers sometimes tell children that their parent is out of town on business, attending college, helping an out-of-town relative, or serving in the military, though most experts agree that withholding the truth is ultimately unhelpful. No matter which explanation is given, a parent's absence can cause children to feel confused, devastated, and forgotten.

Influenced by frightening images of prison in media, some children may fear for their parent's safety and well-being. It's not unheard of for children with an incarcerated parent to get into trouble on purpose, hoping to be arrested and be near to their parent.

Sometimes, contact with the incarcerated parent is not appropriate or healthy. But even when both parent and child want to maintain their relationship, it can be hard. Phone calls to prisons are expensive, and travel can be costly and difficult to arrange. Understandably, a caregiver often influences the amount of contact a child has with an incarcerated parent. A child's sense of betrayal and loss of trust can also inhibit regular contact and sever the family relationship over time.

The Massive Toll of Parental Incarceration



Hope for the Hurting

Children of prisoners are some of America's most at-risk kids, but there is hope. Each child of an incarcerated parent is created in the image of God. Jesus sees these children for who they are: loved, valued, and known by their Heavenly Father. They are not doomed to become statistics. Instead, simple steps can help children of prisoners realize their full potential.

Improving parent-child relationships is critical. In situations where contact is appropriate, children benefit greatly from a renewed, restored relationship with their mom or dad. Children who can remain in touch with their parent in prison are more likely to feel loved and remembered, and their anxiety about their parent's safety is reduced. Contact also gives hope, motivation, and a sense of connection to incarcerated parents, and studies have shown that a strong relationship between parent and child can reduce the likelihood that the parent will reoffend after release.

Prisoners' children and their caregivers, who are often under enormous emotional and financial pressure, also benefit from being connected to a supportive, accepting community. Local churches, community organizations, and mentoring organizations are ideally positioned to provide this support. For example, Angel Tree®, a program of Prison Fellowship®, mobilizes thousands of caring volunteers nationwide to help connect incarcerated moms and dads with their children—reminding their children that they have not forgotten them and that they love them even if they cannot be together.

Children are put at risk when a parent goes to prison, but, like the boys and girls whose stories we share in this booklet, they are valuable and full of potential. Let's take the time to see them, care for them, and help them toward a bright future. We hope you enjoy these true, inspiring accounts of hardship, hope, and the joy of connection in the lives of children growing up with a parent in prison.





STORIES OF HOPE

Just One Wish: Justin's Story

When Justin was in the fourth grade, he wrote down a far-fetched Christmas wish. He stuffed it in an envelope and addressed it not to Santa Claus, but to his father, John, in prison. Part of him was hopeful. Part of him didn't know if he even had reason to be.

"As a kid, you don't know how to embrace the feelings you have," explains Justin, now in his late 20s. "There would be certain things—your first sports game, or a graduation—that really you don't know how to deal with. ... It's not like your parent is deceased, but they aren't there, and it's hard to find someone who can relate to exactly what you're going through. It was hard not to internalize anger and frustration."

One year, John sent a letter home explaining he had taken the initiative to sign Justin up for Angel Tree, a Prison Fellowship program that gives incarcerated parents a way to strengthen and restore their relationships with their children through a Christmas gift and a personal message of love.

Justin wrote down his one Christmas wish, at his mother's suggestion. He asked for a scooter. At Christmastime, Justin got a gift and a note. The present was a scooter, and the note was a message reminding him of his father's love.

"I was shocked," says Justin. "I remember the gift had my dad's name on it. To see my mom's face ... I felt love from both of my parents at the same time, and that had never really happened up until that point."

Later Justin learned that church volunteers, who didn't even know him, had made this delivery possible. "I understood they were giving from their heart," Justin shares.

Angel Tree volunteers gave Justin and his father John a special way to maintain a close relationship, despite their physical separation throughout Justin's childhood. Though they have had their ups and downs through the years, today they usually talk on the phone every Saturday.

"The kids that are affected by the Angel Tree program—they're innocent," Justin says. "Regardless of what their parents have done to land in that situation, the kid is innocent, and they deserve that love and attention and support that their parent may not be able to give them."

Years after his own Angel Tree experience, Justin volunteered with Angel Tree Sports Clinic to help other prisoners' kids feel like champions for a day. He jumped at the chance to be a role model

for Alex, a 7-year-old boy who came to the football clinic where Justin volunteered. Other kids were laughing and playing on the field as Alex waited on the sidelines. Like Justin, he'd never thrown a football with his dad, who was in prison. He'd never learned the basics of the game and was hesitant to join in the fun. Justin noticed.

Over lunch, Justin told Alex about his own experience having a father in prison. Alex started to realize that he wasn't alone—and that he had more potential than he'd ever realized. If Justin had overcome the struggles of parental incarceration, so could Alex.

“That was a touching moment ... a way for him to realize, ‘This guy has a similar story that I did, and look at him now,’” recalls Justin. “He started calling me ‘Coach Justin’ all day and hugged me before he left.”

Justin earned his bachelor's degree in marketing in 2012 and went on to earn his post-graduate degree in nonprofit management in 2016. Today, he lives in California and works as a website content category manager. He plans to continue serving and mentoring children of prisoners.



Running Toward Hope: Isis' Story

One of Isis' dreams as a young girl was for her mom to give her a quinceañera—a special 15th-birthday celebration. That dream disappeared when Isis' mom, Paulina, was sentenced to serve time in prison.

Before her arrest, Paulina had never even received a speeding ticket. She was hardworking, but she had a drinking problem. Her marriage to Isis' stepfather was her third, and physical abuse infected the home. There were bruises on Paulina's arms the day she shot and killed her husband, resulting in her arrest and incarceration.

"We'd had family members in jail for misdemeanors," explains Isis, "but when your mom goes to prison, it transforms your whole life."

Isis and her sisters went to live with their biological father and his large family in a two-bedroom apartment. The tiny home was five or six hours from where Paulina was serving her sentence at Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla. Isis visited her mother twice a year, and they wrote letters to each other at least once a month.

Isis was a gifted athlete and one of the fastest runners in her age group, but she couldn't outrun the pain she felt being without her mom. She'd lost count of the holidays they celebrated without her. The longer Paulina was away, the angrier Isis became. That anger began to turn into hate. Her 15th birthday would be nothing like what she dreamed.

But that Christmas, Paulina was there—not in person, but in spirit. Through an Angel Tree volunteer, gifts were delivered to their home—a purple tie-dye shirt for Isis, and accessories and a Barbie doll for her sisters. Paulina had signed her children up for the Angel Tree program, so she could be with them during the holidays.

"Angel Tree helped me to see my mom in a different light," says Isis. "I realized she really was thinking about us at a time as important as Christmas. I could appreciate how much she loved us, and how sorry she was. And I believed God was working on her heart."



Isis started attending church with her cousin the year before Angel Tree came knocking. She thinks God was preparing her heart for a restored relationship with her mom way back then. Her mom also came to know the Lord through Prison Fellowship and its programs. Soon, she was preaching and singing regularly throughout her incarceration. She also helped lead a Spanish-speaking ministry there. Other women even started calling Paulina "Mom."

"When I would visit [the prison], and the ladies asked if I was her daughter, I was so proud to tell them yes," says Isis.

When track season came, Isis would wear the purple tie-dye shirt from her mom—the one she received at Christmas—to feel closer to her.

Paulina was released in April 2017 and upon her release helped start a new church called Fe y Esperanza—Faith and Hope.

"I love my mom and I've forgiven her," says Isis. "Now I serve as an Angel Tree volunteer with my church so that other families can experience healing through Christ. I want them to know God is ready to walk with them, just like He has walked with me all these years."

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important as Christmas. — Isis



What It Takes to Be Strong: Jamie's Story

Jamie didn't know where his father was. He was young. But he was old enough to notice that Dad wasn't around.

"I felt a void in my life, and my brother did too," shares Jamie. "My brother, George, was having a hard-enough time getting picked on because he had a learning disability."

When Jamie went to prison, Michele, Jamie's mom, was left to raise the two boys alone. Alcohol, drugs, and men became her outlet—a distraction from the pain and loneliness.

George, her son, had a teacher who attended Calvary Church. When the boy disclosed that his dad was in jail, his teacher decided to pay the family a visit and see how they were coping. When the teacher showed up with some members from her church, they found a living room furnished with nothing but lawn chairs and an old projector; a man Michele dated had just left and taken all the other furniture, magnifying the family's sense of loss. The volunteers came in, sat in the lawn chairs, and shared the love of Christ with Michele.

When Jamie and George's dad signed up for Angel Tree by filling out an application in prison, the gifts arrived with the same friendly faces from Calvary Church. Their trunk full of gifts was a welcome surprise. "These are from your father," they said. Eight-year-old Jamie stood in disbelief until he unwrapped a new shirt and a basketball. To Jamie, from Dad.

"Our lives completely turned around after that night," says Jamie, recounting the story and choking back tears. "I guarantee you I would not have made it past ninth grade if my dad hadn't found Angel Tree that year. We would have lost our house. I would have

probably been doing drugs just to feel better, and I could have been a terrible kid. But God came into the picture and made me feel special and loved."

Michele and her boys became a part of the family at Calvary Church. She didn't know much about the Bible, but she knew she would never forget the love she'd been shown at the Angel Tree delivery. One of the women who made that delivery would become her mentor. With the help of supportive church members, Michele fell in love with God's Word, grew closer to Christ, and learned how to be a better parent. Now she serves as the Angel Tree coordinator for her church, helping to share the hope of the Gospel with other prisoners' families.

"A mother that is strong is going to make her children strong," says Jamie. "And even though [my dad] still has his struggles to this day, he tries to be there for me. I'm thankful to have a relationship with my dad today. And I know I wouldn't be who I am today if it weren't for the program that brought me that Christmas gift and introduced me to Christ."

Michele adds, "God came down through Angel Tree [volunteers] and changed our lives forever."

Today Jamie lives in South Florida and works as an A/C mechanic. He enjoys volunteering for the Angel Tree program with Calvary Church in Jupiter, Florida, where his mom, Michele, has served as the program coordinator for more than a decade. In June 2018, they both volunteered at an Angel Tree Sports Clinic at King's Academy in West Palm Beach, helping children of prisoners to have fun, gain confidence, and learn about God's love.





Finding Normal: Kaylee's Story

It's been years since Kaylee went to summer camp as a kid in Iowa, but she still remembers how it made her feel: normal.

Her father, Quovadis, was incarcerated, just like his father before him. Though she was not the only child in a single-parent household, Kaylee struggled to relate to her peers. Their parents were divorced. Hers were married yet miles apart, separated by prison bars.

Kaylee's grandmother was around to help, but no one could replace the dad she missed. Kaylee longed for her family to be whole again, cherishing every letter and "Super Kaylee" drawing her father sent her from prison.

"Lacking a parent in the house, whether it's a dad or mom, can really hinder a child's development, sense of self-worth, and what they aspire to," explains Quovadis, who went to prison when Kaylee was 3. He spent seven years and four months behind bars.

Birthdays and holidays passed, and when Kaylee was around 8 years old, her dad found out about Angel Tree. He eagerly signed up his daughter to receive a gift in his name. That Christmas, Kaylee unwrapped an animated movie and a set of checkered pink-and-black pajamas.

"I watched that movie all the time, like, 'My dad sent me this!'" says Kaylee. "And I basically wore those pajamas until they fell off. I always had [Angel Tree] gifts to open at home like a normal Christmas present."

Angel Tree didn't just make Christmas feel normal; it made Kaylee feel like a regular kid. "I didn't feel like an outcast, or that I was different because I had a parent in prison," she explains. "I had a normal childhood, as much as possible, and I felt like my dad cared and wanted to be a part of it. ... Because of the normalcy I

felt, I didn't have a victim mentality."

Quovadis and Kaylee kept in touch through phone calls and visits. They had even more to talk about when Kaylee got the chance to attend that first week of camp on an Angel Tree Camping™ scholarship. Camp was a safe place for Kaylee to learn about God and His love for her.

"That's what helped me, getting her connected with people who could relate," says Kaylee's mom, Angela. "It was such a relief as a mom to know my child was cared for."

Kaylee would pack up her sleeping bag and disposable camera for camp, ready for a week of games and new activities like archery. Caring counselors taught her the Bible. She made friends her age who understood her story, including one girl who ended up living in the same town of Waterloo, Iowa.

"She came to my birthday party," says Kaylee. "We were probably 12 ... We were friends for a really important season of my life."

Quovadis was released from prison when Kaylee was 11. Things weren't perfect right away, Kaylee says—in fact, there were many moments of tension in their changing relationship, and the temptation to be resentful crept in. Still, Kaylee says, "We have a good relationship. My 'normal' was really good, thanks to our church and things like Angel Tree."

Now Kaylee works as a counselor at a summer camp. She also has a job at a coffee shop and volunteers in the student ministry at church. In college, she is studying to teach high school history and possibly do mission work in the Middle East. And her bond with Quovadis is stronger than ever. They share the same sense of humor, love going to church together, and serve their community with the Angel Tree program that once served them.

Growing Up in a Prison Visiting Room: Dulce's Story

Dulce's first memory of her father Gilberto was when she was four—when she and her mother moved from Mexico to California to live with him. Before that, nothing. He had gone to prison when she was 10 days old.

"I didn't like him, because I did not know him," she says. She's only lived three of her 22 years in the same house as her father.

Confused by her father's incarceration, a young Dulce had to mature quickly. Her mother, an immigrant, didn't have more than a middle-school education and had previously depended on her husband for financial support. They survived on welfare and the little money Dulce's mother could earn by babysitting, cleaning houses, and selling beauty products. Dulce remembers the family had to drive far to get a visit with Dad at whatever prison he was currently in.

When Gilberto came out of prison the next time, Dulce was 11: "One day I just came home from school, and my dad was sitting there."

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I didn't know how to express myself ... and I felt like by acting out, I was getting that attention. I was just angry.

Initially, she was happy to see him, but after a month, when he started telling her what she should and shouldn't do, the pre-teen pushed back.

"Who are you to tell me what to do? You haven't been here!" she would yell at him.

A year later, Gilberto was back in prison. But in the middle of the anger, bewilderment, and loneliness, there was a recurring bright spot in Dulce's holiday season. Back when Dulce was 6 years old, she, her mother, and her little sister were invited to an Angel Tree Christmas party at a local church. Her dad had signed her up to receive a gift from him.

"I received a little doll I had been wanting," she remembers. And that doll helped her feelings toward her dad. "I really thought it was a gift my dad picked out. Those were his presents for me."

For the next 12 years, "I would receive a gift from [my dad through] Angel Tree, and that is what brought hope to me," Dulce says. "That was about the only presents we were receiving."

One Christmas, she remembered that people from a church showed up to sing carols for her family. They brought a huge basket of food with them. Soon her mother began attending that church. It's there that Dulce believes her mother really believed for the first time that God loved her and was there for her.

Although it would take a few more years for Dulce to truly embrace the love of Christ for her personally, the impact of that church lingered with her.

As Dulce transitioned into her teenage years, she began trying to find a release for the confusing feelings that stirred within her.

"I didn't know how to express myself," she explains, "and I felt like by acting out, I was getting that attention. I was just angry."



She would run away or leave the house for hours on end, abandoning her mother to worry. By 15, Dulce had reached a breaking point. She had violated curfew many nights, but on this particular occasion the police were waiting for her when she got home. She got into a confrontation with them, and they drove her to the station. The drive gave her time to process her life choices:

What am I doing? My mom doesn't deserve this. I know I can do better than this ... This is what everyone thinks I'm going to become because my dad is incarcerated. I'm going to be one of those statistics.

At the police station, the officers asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up. "A probation officer," she said. The officers explained that her current behavior could be harmful to her future.



That moment was “life-changing for me,” she says. After that, she set her mind toward a more productive future and ended up graduating from high school with honors.

Since then, life has continued to have its ups and downs, but Dulce has remained on a hopeful path, particularly since she began seeking Christ more earnestly during college. And her relationship with her father, while still rocky at times, has improved.

Dulce graduated from California State University San Marcos with her bachelor’s degree in criminology and justice studies. Shortly afterward, she was hired as a student worker in a probation office and volunteered at the Drug Enforcement Administration—working hard to achieve her lifetime goal of becoming a probation officer. She was also accepted into a program to earn her master’s degree in social work.

And just weeks before she got married in September, her father Gilberto was released from prison after 10 years. Although he had to return to Mexico shortly afterward, Dulce stays in close contact with him, trying to help him with his reentry efforts as much as she can from a distance.

As for Angel Tree, these days Dulce is on the other side, as a volunteer liaison to families impacted by incarceration.

“I continue to volunteer for Angel Tree because it was a program that as a child gave me hope and lightened up the holidays,” says Dulce. “I want to continue doing that for kids with incarcerated parents. I want to be able to serve in giving them the joy of a gift.”



A Broken Heart Made Whole: Kerri's Story

"I never really understood my story until probably about a year ago," Kerri says.

Both of Kerri's parents struggled with drug addiction and her dad spent most of her childhood in and out of prison. She and her siblings were often in foster care—"at least a few times, probably like two or three," she says, "maybe more."

When Kerri was able to live with her parents, the experiences left her feeling neglected and unloved. Her dad would hide in the basement and order the kids to leave him alone. Her mom would be in her room with the door shut. Kerri felt that she was unwanted, even unlovable: "I didn't have someone in my life that truly cared about me."

While incarcerated, Kerri's father heard he could send Christmas presents to his children by signing them up for Angel Tree. Volunteers bought gifts and delivered them in his name.

"My mom opened the door, and [Angel Tree volunteers] brought in these presents," Kerri remembers. "They told us they were from my dad, and he was in prison. And we were like, 'What? How did my dad get us presents if he can't even see us or talk to us?'"

For Kerri, what mattered the most was the knowledge that there were people out there who cared about her. Angel Tree was able to help connect her to her father, reminding her that, despite his poor choices in the past, he loved and valued her. Through Angel Tree, Kerri was also connected to opportunities to help her grow and thrive. Kerri began attending an Angel Tree partner camp on a scholarship provided by donors.

It was at camp that Kerri first met Jesus.

"I was really angry my first couple of years [at camp] because I didn't feel love at home," Kerri shares. "I didn't know who God was, who Jesus was." Kerri had only ever heard the name of Jesus used as a curse word. "I was really confused. I was like, 'Why am I coming to a place where people are saying God's name in vain all the time? This doesn't make any sense.'"

But Kerri kept participating. And over the years, she began to realize just who this Jesus was that everyone kept talking about. And then one day something clicked.

"I just realized I want to be all in for this Jesus," Kerri says.

It was at camp one summer in high school that Kerri first knew she was loved.

"We were in the chapel," she recalls. "We were all singing ... I had never experienced a moment like that ... just a group of people singing for God and His joy."

She remembers how the camp counselors, her mentors, told her they loved her, and even more importantly, that Jesus loved her, too.

Today, Kerri is an Angel Tree camp counselor. As she approached the end of her time as a camper, God "tugged at her heart" to come back as a staff member. She is now able to use her story to share the love of God with others who are in similar situations to the one she grew up in.

Kerri expresses her thanks to caring people around her "for not only changing my life but changing all these other kids' lives and bringing a broken community together and making it whole."



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I was really angry my first couple of years [at camp] because I didn't feel love at home. —Kerri



ABOUT

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Angel Tree

Angel Tree, a program of Prison Fellowship, provides a pathway for incarcerated parents to restore and strengthen relationships with their children and families. Volunteers, churches, and community partners come together to facilitate programs at Christmas and throughout the year. [Learn More](#)

Angel Tree Christmas

Since 1982, with the help of thousands of churches and volunteers who buy, wrap, and deliver gifts, Angel Tree Christmas has brought more than 10 million gifts and the Gospel message to millions of children on behalf of their incarcerated parents. This simple act lets prisoners' children know that their parent loves them and has not forgotten them. For both the mom or dad in prison and their child, Angel Tree can begin a cycle of redemption that positively impacts the rest of their lives. [Learn More](#)

Angel Tree Camping

Angel Tree Camping enables churches and organizations to continue serving and investing in children with a mom or dad in prison. Every year, scholarships provide a way for thousands of Angel Tree children to attend a week at a Christian camp. It's a one-of-a-kind opportunity for them to experience the love of God in the great outdoors. From rope swings and ziplines to horseback riding and swimming, a week with Angel Tree Camping is a chance for these kids to have fun, fellowship with their peers, build relationships with caring camp counselors, and just "be a kid."

Campers discover a haven from the unique stresses that come with having a parent behind bars. Camp counselors can help them navigate the struggles of parental incarceration, provide encouragement and spiritual guidance, and challenge them to draw near to the God who loves them. Many campers will make a first-time decision to trust in Jesus Christ or deepen their commitment to Him. [Learn More](#)

Angel Tree Sports Clinic

Across the country, Angel Tree hosts sports clinics where children of prisoners gain skills in various sports and learn about God's love. Through lessons, drills, and fun competition, kids who might not otherwise have a chance to attend a day camp are treated like champions. It's a unique opportunity for youth of all ages and abilities to learn from seasoned college players and former professional athletes.

In 2005, Prison Fellowship hosted the first Angel Tree football clinic at Stanford University. Prison Fellowship established a partnership with the NFL Alumni Association in 2014 and continues to expand the Angel Tree Sports Clinic program across the country. Since then, Angel Tree has held events for thousands of children of prisoners who might otherwise not have the chance to go to a sports clinic or a similar camp. At an Angel Tree Sports Clinic, kids don't just build skills in sports like football, ice skating, or cheerleading—they learn valuable lessons about hard work, perseverance, and overcoming difficult circumstances, from caring coaches and mentors who share their own stories of trials and triumphs. Before the day ends, each child has a chance to hear a message of hope and learn about Christ. [Learn More](#)



Learn more at angeltree.org or by calling

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