Serena’s Story: Letting Go and Making Room

by Emily Andrews

Serena Steenholdt was 10 years old the first time she landed in a juvenile center. Growing up biracial in a mostly white South Dakota town, she experienced major racism—even from her own half-siblings and other white relatives. She never knew her father. She also suffered abuse from her uncle. But it took going to prison for her to finally find hope and healing.

After a painful childhood, Serena became a young mom to three kids she struggled to support. “I always believed in God, but … whenever I needed prayer, I’d ask them to pray,” says Serena. “I didn’t know if God would hear me, but I felt like He heard them.”

Serena’s life kept spiraling out of control. By her mid-20s, she had three daughters with two different men, and one of the dads wound up in prison. Struggling to make ends meet, she became desperate to support her kids financially. She tried several things but still came up short. As a last resort, Serena turned to drug trafficking. She soon found herself in handcuffs and headed to prison at age 27.

In prison, Serena felt she was younger. In prison, she wondered if their connection to God was something she needed for herself, now more than ever. One day in the prison chapel, she heard a lady sing, “Jesus, lover of my soul …” “That just grasped me, and it broke me down,” remembers Serena.

After that day, she began her own personal relationship with Jesus, finally seeing God through her own eyes instead of through the elderly couple’s eyes. She started reading the Bible and spending time with other women in the prison who shared her new interest in living life God’s way. “That support kept me grounded, and in prison, God really breathed life back into me,” she says.

The gift of connection

Serena was finally taking care of herself physically, emotionally, and spiritually like never before. As she discovered her value as a child of God, she still thought about her own children every day. They meant the world to her. Each birthday, she scrounged up what she could send a gift, even if it meant spending months of her own half-siblings and other white relatives. She never knew her father. She also suffered abuse from her uncle. But it took going to prison for her to finally find hope and healing.

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Serena’s children were split up, with her mother and sister as caretakers.

Getting less than six to eight hours of sleep can negatively affect your body, mind, and spirit. Sleep deprivation is also downright dangerous. According to the National Sleep Foundation, extremely sleepy people are 70 percent more likely to have a workplace accident. Studies show a long-term sleep loss can cause weight gain, memory problems, a lowered immune system, high blood pressure, and an increased risk for diabetes, depression, irritability, and more.

7 Tips for Better Sleep Behind Bars

by Stacia Ray

Don’t go to jail if you want a good night’s sleep,” jokes Chad, a former Louisiana prisoner.

Inside Journal asked former and current prisoners about their sleeping experiences. The majority had trouble sleeping, especially their first weeks, thanks to uncomfortable mattresses, a snoring cellie, the noise of officers’ keys, banging doors, screaming or loud talking.

TO HELP YOU SLEEP:

1) Make your sleep area more comfortable.
2) Watch what you eat, drink, and view.
3) Pray and read Scripture.
4) Journal/write out your worries.
5) Find your “mental safe place.”
6) Do breathing and counting exercises.
7) Try a simple grounding technique.
Serena's Story

Continued from page 1

wages. She didn't want them to ever forget how much she loved them.

Then Serena saw a flyer for Angel Tree®, a program of Prison Fellowship® that enables incarcerated parents to sign up their child to receive a Christmas gift.

(See Pages 2 and 3 for more information on Angel Tree.)

As Christmas, all three daughters received a personalized gift from Serena, delivered by Angel Tree. Even though they were physically far apart, Angel Tree connected them in a special way. The program also gave Serena a way to share with her children about her faith in Jesus and the true meaning of Christmas.

“When I went into prison, I felt like such a worthless parent,” admits Serena. “So my whole goal was to not let my daughters suffer like I did. But what could I do now that we were separated? Angel Tree became the answer, and I thank Jesus.”

For the woman who struggled to trust anyone, Angel Tree changed everything. She finally realized that she didn’t have to try to control everything. She could surrender to God, and He could connect her and her family.

After two years in prison, Serena returned home a new woman—and a better mother. In Arizona, she has found a strong church community and has volunteered with Celebrate Recovery, a biblically based recovery group. She volunteers as an assistant to Prison Fellowship field staff regularly.

And Serena and her daughters have served as Angel Tree volunteers, giving back to the program that once gave so much to them.

“Even when money was tight, my daughters would rather do without so that their own, just to get a gift for another child,” Serena explains. “That’s how much Angel Tree matters.”

Serena admits that life and motherhood are still challenging at times. But she faces each day with the hope of joy and peace. Through tears, she says, “God is so much bigger than I ever thought.”

Tips for Better Sleep

Continued from page 1

• Knowing how much sleep your body needs

1) Make your sleeping area as comfortable as possible.

Buy earplugs, a small fan, or a radio with headphones and use them to block out external noises. Also, make sure your body isn’t too warm or cold. Get creative with your blankets and pillows. “My mattress is not conducive to a good night’s sleep, but I fold up a blanket [to put under] my hips,” says, a current prisoner, about his flat, hard bed.

2) Be kind to your body and mind.

Avoid anything unhealthy or negative before bed, including junk foods and violent TV shows.

According to many sleep experts, including Dr. Michael Breus, you should avoid caffeine after 2 p.m. and stop eating or exercising several hours before bedtime.

Many prisoners agreed, adding it’s also important to exercise and eat right daily. Joseph, another current prisoner, says he buys melatonin (an over-the-counter sleep aid) at the commissary to help him sleep.

3) Pray and read Scripture.

Prayer has helped many prisoners to get better sleep, like Zane, who says, “Surrender things beyond your control to God or a higher power.”

After struggling with awful sleep, night terrors, and cold sweats, Zane dug into prayer and Scripture. Eventually, he was free of his sleep issues for good.

Michelle, a former prisoner in New York, had a similar experience. “I slept better because I began the process of forgiving myself and starting attending chapel,” she says. “Evening devotionals also help,” adds Joseph.

4) Write out your worries.

Several prisoners we spoke with found journaling to be an effective way of getting thoughts out of their heads for better rest.

“My anxieties, if allowed to go unchecked, will keep me up at night,” explains Marvin. “An unsolved problem will float through my brain until I write it down,” adds Jesse about his incarcerations worry.

5) Find your “happy place.”

James Peasley, a Minnesota therapist, explains that if negative thoughts or worries are running through your mind, you can change your thoughts just like you would change the channel if something bad came on television.

To change your thoughts, he suggests finding your own personal “mental safe place,” somewhere you’ve been that has been a high point in your life, perhaps somewhere you feel safe in nature. Close your eyes and vividly visualize the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of that place that feel “safe.”

“This can actually cause you to get control over troubling emotions,” Peasley says.

“It doesn’t mean the troubling situation won’t happen or doesn’t need attention, but it resets your brain” to stop the obsessive worrying.

6) Breathe and count.

Peasley also suggests placing your hand on your stomach and slowly breathing in through your nose for a count of five and out through your mouth for a count of five, for five minutes total.

Brezu tells people to count backward from 350 by threes, which requires concentration, thereby taking your mind off all other worries, and then slowly counting, thereby putting you to sleep faster.

7) If you’re still anxious, try deep breathing exercises.

Observe your surroundings, including the feel of your body getting heavy on your head, how it feels as your eyes close, and then slowly list, put out, loud things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

Experiment until you find what works for you, and then stick to it, doing the same thing at the same time every night. And remember, sleep habits, like any habits, don’t happen overnight.

“It took me close to a year to calm my mind down and start to embrace the fact that I couldn’t keep feeling so guilty,” says former prisoner Michelle.

In time, restorative sleep behind bars is possible. So rest easy.”
When a Father Really Does Know Best

by M.M. White

I remember when our oldest son received his first vaccines. I took him to the doctor’s office. I carried him in and placed him on the table, while the doctor prepared the shot. My adorable baby boy just cried and smiled up at me. He didn’t even realize I was holding him down for the doctor to insert the needle. So, it was a complete surprise to my baby when he felt pain.

I never left his side, but I did allow him to be pierced by a needle, despite knowing it might not feel good to him. His cries let me know that he did not understand. As a baby, he did not grasp that even though it hurt, it was for his own good. Even though it was painful, and he didn’t like it, it would protect him from disease and help him grow healthy and strong.

As I hugged and consoled him afterward, I knew this was the first of many uncomfortable or painful encounters my son would face. Teachers, coaches, pastors, mentors, Bosses, coworkers. We interact with all of these folks—or some combination of them—and they shape who we are and who we become. We may be a little more independent, but we’re still influenced.

As we get older, we decide just how much we let others influence our lives, for good or for bad. I’m probably not the only one who grew up with a mother who countered peer pressure with this old favorite: “if your friends jumped off a bridge, would you jump, too?” Whether we wanted to admit it or not, or who or what we let influence us can make or break us—and even lead to our freedom or the loss of it. So what does God have to say about our independence?

While the Bible says we all need to act responsibly and carry our share of the load, we also need to take a page from the youngest among us. In Matthew 18:3–4, Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.” In other words, unless we learn how to be dependent on God, we will never experience life as He meant it to be lived.

A Father’s worth your trust

When we trust in God, we become the children of a King (1 John 3:1). He knows what’s best for us and fulfills His promise to provide for us. In return, He asks us to trust Him and follow His guidance. In short, we don’t run our lives anymore. We humble ourselves, which, according to one of my favorite preachers, means not that we think less of ourselves, but we think of ourselves less. We stop “the my way or the highway” approach in relationships. We stop making our freedom or the loss of it.

In Isaiah 30:15, the Lord says, “Only in returning to me and resting in me will you be saved.” And James 4:7 says to submit yourself to God. Once you stop trying to be so independent and start relying on God, you’ll feel free, knowing you can just take things as they come. You no longer have to juggle everything alone. You can surrender your life to the Father who knows what you need.

If you don’t know where to begin, start with this prayer:

“Father God, show me how to let go of my controlling ways and seek You instead. Teach me to submit my life to You, so You can guide my actions and relationships each day. Amen.”

To discover how to let go and let God lead you, sign up for a free correspondence Bible study through one of our trusted partner organizations by writing to “Letting Go” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. To request a large-print Inside Journal Life Recovery Bible in English or Spanish, see offer on Page 4.

Frank Sinatra’s biggest hit was our theme song, “I did it myyyyy waaaaay!”

Why? Because if we turn our lives over to Jesus Christ, not only does He forgive us for all that is past, but He also makes us brand new (2 Corinthians 5:17). And in Him we live and move and exist (Acts 17:28). That makes Him worthy of our absolute trust. Sometimes, it takes something traumatic to make us dependent on Christ. It can even be something uncomfortable or painful that our Heavenly Father allows to come our way—just to remind us we are not in control. In those moments, we must trust that even through the pain, we are safe in Jesus.

ARE YOU A “MY WAY OR THE HIGHWAY” PERSON?

Do you try to control everything, including other people, only to end up frustrated or anxious? It’s time to depend on God instead.

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This Christmas, your child can wake up to a gift from you through Angel Tree®, a program of Prison Fellowship®. Ask your chaplain or program coordinator for an application today!

Contact your child(ren)’s caregiver to gather the most current information for your application.

Angel Tree makes great efforts to serve every eligible child. However, if your information is incomplete or inaccurate, if local volunteers are unable to locate your child(ren)’s caregiver, or if the caregiver refuses to participate, we may not be able to deliver gifts to your child(ren).
Coming Full Circle: The Ultimate Journey
by Emily Andrews

Tammy Franklin: Many of the women in the program were at one time my peers. It caused me a great deal of concern in the beginning. People will always have opinions—some good, some not so good. But true integrity is living up to the best of your ability, not according to what others might think. [Thankfully,] I have been treated with nothing but respect from both the staff and women who are incarcerated here. But true integrity is living up to the best of your ability, not according to what others might think. [Thankfully,] I have been treated with nothing but respect from both the staff and women who are incarcerated here.

Second Chance Month Unlocks Opportunity

People across the country are joining together to raise awareness of the barriers men and women face when returning home from prison. In April, more than 300 organizations joined Prison Fellowship to celebrate Second Chance™ Month, which recognizes the potential of people with a criminal record and the importance of removing obstacles that make it harder for them to succeed once released.

On March 30, the White House issued a proclamation, signed by the president, declaring April 2019 as Second Chance Month for the second year in a row. Several states, counties, and cities also declared their support.

Social media campaigns, Second Chance Sunday church services, Road to Second Chances prayer walks, a press conference, a Second Chance Month Gala hosted by Prison Fellowship, and other activities took place around the nation. Supporters participated in the Second Chance 5K in St. Paul on April 13, while Minnesota prisoners ran or walked in similar 5Ks on the yard, coordinated with the permission of the Minnesota DOC. The new Minnesota DOC commissioner even got in on the action, running alongside prisoners in the Stillwater facility.

Second Chance Month participants like Pastor Denise Strothers, National Director of Operations for Healing Communities USA, were proud to show their support. “For the broken, those who feel forgotten, those in prison... we stand in the gap for you,” Pastor Strothers said at the D.C. Prayer Walk on April 6.

Second Chance Month reminds us that there is power in community. We are all stronger when we lift each other up.

Son of Prisoner Nominated for NFL’s ‘Man of the Year’

Kenny Clark, nose tackle for the Green Bay Packers, was nominated for the 2019 Walter Payton Man of the Year Award. Clark, who grew up with an incarcerated father, was one of 32 NFL players considered for the national award that was announced prior to Super Bowl LII.

In 2018, Clark took part in the “My Cause, My Cleats” campaign, wearing specialty cleats to support Prison Fellowship and the Angel Tree program. Clark received Angel Tree gifts for much of his childhood. Having his father gone was hard, says Clark, “but Angel Tree definitely helped that process. He’s still gone... but Angel Tree definitely helped with [softening] the blow.”

When he has time, Clark, who is 23, returns to his hometown of Rialto, Calif., and hosts football clinics for local youth, including children with an incarcerated parent. The Walter Payton Man of the Year Award is given to an NFL player for outstanding community service activities off the field, and excellence on the field.

Need a Bible?

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Your facility name
Your facility address for prisoner parcel delivery
Whether you want English or Spanish*

*Bibles are available in large-print English or large-print Spanish. Limit one Bible per person.