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Walking in New Light

by Emily Andrews

Anh Vo remembers stepping through the gates of Central California

Women's Facility for the first time in March of 1999. She was in her mid-20s and facing 25 years to life. It felt like the end of a long, dark road—a search for love that left her empty.

Raised in a Catholic family, Anh was shy as a little girl but craved attention. Her mother and father worked hard to put food on the table for their large family. As a result, her parents were often away from home. Anh began acting out in middle school, ditching classes and trying alcohol.

After a relative molested her, Anh began drinking even more to numb the pain and confusion. She surrounded herself with people who had the same habits. "I don't know how I graduated, because most of the time, I was drinking," Anh says, looking back. "I slept around ... I wanted to feel loved, and to me, that was love."



Photo by Samantha May

Anh was stuck in the darkness, feeling numb and hopeless. But then she found a new sense of purpose and hope, like nothing she had ever felt before.

One toxic relationship led Anh to gambling and deeper addiction. Soon she had gambled most of her money away. She ended up borrowing cash that she couldn't pay back fast enough. In desperation, Anh and her boyfriend got involved in

criminal activity to make ends meet. Then one deal went horribly wrong.

Looking for light

Anh was convicted for her involvement in a run-in that left one man dead. She walked into prison hopeless

and ashamed. For the first several years of her sentence, Anh was "just existing." She found distraction in reading books, going to therapy, and journaling. But she wasn't eating enough. Her self-esteem was at an all-time low. And she grew more depressed

when she lost her sister to cancer and her mom began battling a serious illness.

Sometimes, kind cellmates offered bits of encouragement, but Anh still felt discouraged. "When somebody told me that there's a light at the end of the tunnel, I told them, 'I've never seen a light at the end of the tunnel. All I see is darkness.'"

"I've never seen a light at the end of the tunnel. All I see is darkness."

Anh continued to feel hopeless, until she attended a four-day church event in prison. Speakers shared about Jesus like she'd never heard before. She was stunned when a visiting pastor reminded her that her name means "light" in Vietnamese.

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Breaking Bad Habits

by Stacia Ray

You can't teach an old dog new tricks. A leopard never changes its spots. Old habits die

hard. You've heard it before: breaking bad habits is difficult. But what better time than the New Year to break a bad habit and start a new one? The calendar starts fresh in January, and so can you!

If our brain knows something is bad for us and we try to resist, what overpowers our good intentions? It all boils down to what is known as the cue-routine-reward "habit

loop." A cue signals your brain, which causes you to take action (routine) and rewards you with a sense of temporary pleasure. Then the cycle repeats, and eventually our brains become wired to follow habits without much thought or effort.

So how do you break a bad habit?

1. Create a plan.

Make a list of triggers and avoid them whenever possible. If your triggers include people, like family members or other prisoners, avoiding them may mean stopping visits and phone calls or putting unhealthy friendships on

hold. When you can't avoid triggers, set a time limit for that triggering situation or ask a trustworthy prisoner to hold you accountable. Before entering the triggering situation, get calm (through things like prayer or meditation) and then stay calm (through things like deep breathing or rubbing a soft piece of clothing) while you're there. Keep an ongoing journal, writing down things that worked or didn't work.

2. Change your routine.

Shake up your habit loop by altering your schedule. We can actually "override" brain messages by changing up



Photo by gustavofraza/GettyImages

the routines accompanying a habit. Eventually the brain's signal pathways will change. Whenever possible, break up habit rituals, like doing a habit at the same time or location, in the same emotional state,

or around the same people. For example, smokers have had more success quitting when they've stopped going to the same designated

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A New Makeover for the New Year

by Annie Goebel

After my release from prison, I realized that I still had some of my “before Christ” vices—bad habits from before I accepted Jesus. I needed a holy makeover! On the top of my list was my addiction to cigarettes. Not only were they killing me, but the secondhand smoke was bad for my little girls. So, I made it my New Year’s resolution to quit. But how I was going to accomplish this, I had no idea. I had tried before and failed.

Little did I know this time would be different, with the Holy Spirit now guiding me and giving me the strength to overcome. With my new life as a Christian, I spent a lot of time at church attending women’s Bible studies, children’s programs, and Sunday services. There, we sometimes talked

about letting go of control—“letting go and letting God.”

I couldn’t stand the thought of my children inhaling the smoke or smelling it on me. I was also hiding my smoking habit from church friends. Not because they would judge me—in fact, I’m betting they would have accepted me and even helped me quit if I asked. But I was ashamed, because I hadn’t really tried to give this over to God. I felt a bit like a hypocrite to talk the talk of “letting go and letting God” but not walk the walk.

Funny enough, in keeping my habit hidden from others,



Photo by Taralyn Quigley

I stopped doing it as often. I started hanging around people who inspired me to be a nonsmoker, and I stayed distracted in positive activities that took my mind off it.

One day, I suddenly realized it had been two months since I had the opportunity to sneak a cigarette. “I guess I quit,” I told myself. Because I had focused on Jesus, I no longer felt the desire to smoke!

I had finally understood the truth: The way to keep from carrying out the desires of the flesh is to walk in the Spirit. The Bible tells us, “So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won’t be doing what your sinful nature craves” (Galatians 5:16).

This edition of Inside Journal is all about a new focus for the new year, about letting go and letting God. Follow the tips on page 1 for breaking bad habits and starting new healthy ones. Use the 2020 calendar on page 3 to mark off the days when you remember to do something positive, like pray or journal or read the Bible. Discover the only New Year’s resolution that matters on page 4. I hope you enjoy this edition of Inside Journal! ■

Breaking Bad Habits Continued from page 1

smoking area at the same time each day and stopped hanging around their smoking buddies. Also, if you’re more likely to act on your habit when you’re tired or bored, get more sleep or find more hobbies. With commitment and consistency, these simple steps make a big difference.

3. Create new healthy habits.

When temptation arises, try a healthy activity instead. For example, if your habit is nail biting, then any time you’re tempted to bite your nails, quickly stop and do 25 sit-ups instead. Fill typical “triggering” moments of your day with activities requiring extra focus, like learning a foreign language or doing crossword puzzles. Find creative outlets, like journaling or drawing, for the nervous energy that surrounds a habit. Also, try to repeat the healthy behavior in the same situation until it becomes routine. According to a University College London (UCL) study on habits, performing the new behavior in a consistent setting can cue that behavior in the future. So in the example of exercising instead of nail biting, you’ll need to exercise consistently every time the nail-biting temptation kicks in. The UCL study found that missing one opportunity to perform the new behavior didn’t prevent the habit from forming, but people who were “very inconsistent” about doing the new behavior in the same setting failed to form the new habit.

4. Work on only one habit.

When we get on a self-improvement kick, we can start to analyze everything

wrong with us and want to change it all. We often set multiple New Year’s resolutions. But our brains are most productive when we focus on one thing at a time. Dave Crenshaw, a professional organizer who has overcome severe ADHD, gives lectures on the myths of multitasking, explaining that when we think we’re multitasking, we’re really “switch-tasking,” or going back and forth from one activity to another, one at a time. Trying to multitask actually takes more time and is less productive than focusing on one thing at a time.

5. Don’t give up.

If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. The UCL study found it took actively trying for 66 days on average before the new habit was formed. For some study participants, it took as long as 254 days or 8.5 months. People who have a strong ability to remember upcoming events without reminders and people who establish routines easily tend to break and create habits more easily. But for people who are impulsive or used to a chaotic life, creating and breaking habits will be harder. Dr. Timothy Walsh of a renowned addiction recovery center says the average person goes through six treatment episodes before finally reaching sobriety. And even minor habits like nail biting can be so engrained that breaking them can take months of extreme focus and effort.

It takes a long time for the brain to reset, but it can be done. Bad habits can be broken, and healthy new habits can be formed. So what are you waiting for? ■

Need a Bible?

To get a FREE Inside Journal NLT Life Recovery Bible, write to: Tyndale House Publishers, Attn: Inside Journal Bible, 351 Executive Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188. Please include your name and prison ID number, your facility name, your facility address, and whether you want English or Spanish. Limit one Bible per person.



Subscription Info

At Inside Journal® (IJ), we receive many letters each week from prisoners asking for subscriptions to our newspaper. We are grateful for the interest and support of our readers—however, because of limitations on our staff and budget, IJ is only available in bulk shipments to your chaplain, programming coordinator, or a volunteer who visits your facility. Chaplains, to set up these shipments for free, please contact our editorial staff at P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790 or insidejournal@pfm.org.

New Light

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The next morning, Anh woke up before the sun. She turned on a Christian radio show and tried to pray. “I sat there at that table and invited Jesus into my heart, without knowing anything [about faith],” Anh says. “I just knew that that was the right thing to do at that moment.”

Anh began reading the Bible from cover to cover. She joined a program that was later called the Prison Fellowship Academy®, where she built relationships with caring mentors and worked through deep struggles. Then The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI), a program facilitated by Prison Fellowship volunteers, launched its first site at the prison. Anh enrolled to pursue biblical leadership training.

Just before TUMI classes began, she was diagnosed with a severe skin condition. “I felt like an outcast,” Anh recalls,

“but I knew that’s where I was supposed to be. God gave me the strength to not be embarrassed. I went [to class] like that, with bumps all over.”

Anh attended the TUMI program every Thursday and helped lead service projects behind bars. Classmates helped her learn the beauty of healthy friendships. In turn, she became a mentor to others. “Constantly being involved and fellowshiping with people and praying ... it has been such an amazing experience. To me, they were my family.”

The journey to joy

Even if nothing changed about her outward appearance, Anh knew her heart would never be the same. She finally wanted to live again. “Having that relationship with the Lord is the key to contentment,” says Anh. “It’s the key to peace and joy.”

When Anh was released from prison, she ran straight



Photo by Prison Fellowship

Anh (pictured, far right, with her fellow prisoners) found freedom from pain and darkness while in prison. After her release, she continues to uplift others and share the light of Jesus.

to a church, wanting to grow deeper in her faith and find community with other Christ-followers. She completed her TUMI courses on the outside and joined Celebrate Recovery, a biblically based program for life’s “hurts, habits, and hang-ups.” The days ahead would not be easy,

but through every difficulty, her faith grew.

Recently, Anh completed radiation treatment for cancer—a victory she thanks God for every day.

Today, she works as a counselor near her hometown in California, walking alongside others to help them

find light in the darkness.

“You have to understand what happened to you, in order to heal,” explains Anh. “You’re not just existing here on this earth to take space. I want to be able to share my strength and hope with other people, through what Christ has done for me.” ■

“For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.” –Isaiah 43:19 (NLT)

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HOLIDAYS

- January 1 – New Year’s Day
- January 20 – Martin Luther King Day
- February 14 – Valentine’s Day
- February 17 – Presidents Day
- April 12 – Easter
- May 10 – Mother’s Day
- May 25 – Memorial Day
- June – Ask your chaplain for an Angel Tree prisoner participation form.

- June 21 – Father’s Day
- July 4 – Independence Day
- August – Don’t forget to submit your Angel Tree prisoner participation form!
- September 7 – Labor Day
- November 11 – Veterans Day
- November 26 – Thanksgiving Day
- December 25 – Christmas Day

MY IMPORTANT DATES

The One New Year's Resolution That Matters

by Grayson Pope

Everyone wants a fresh start. That's why we come up with New Year's resolutions—commitments to leave behind our old ways and begin a new chapter. That's no less true for people in prison. A couple years ago, a former prisoner asked his buddies on the inside what New Year's resolutions they planned to make. "I want to eat only health food ... to be as healthy as possible [when I go home]," said one. Another man wanted to get his estranged family back together, and yet another wanted to tap into his true potential. Good resolutions—but for all of us, resolutions are easier to make than keep. Even Paul, the New Testament writer, said, "I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it" (Romans 7:15). He couldn't change his nature.

Neither can I. And neither can you.

The power to change

You might have made resolutions to lose some weight, cut back on TV, or be more productive, but—as anyone who's ever made a New Year's resolution will tell you—your willpower can



Photo by stellalevi/Getty Images

only take you so far. At some point, you realize that your will is not enough, and you need something more.

The Bible talks about this in the book of Hebrews. In a verse that reads like a New Year's resolution, it says, "Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).

What's weighing you down and making your life harder? What's slowing you down and tripping you up? Is it anger? Resentment? Jealousy? You probably know exactly what it is. You'd like to be free from it, to push forward and move on with your life, but how? What do you do?

Fortunately, the Bible tells us more. After the verse above, it says, "We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who perfects

our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). This verse doesn't say to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps or try as hard as you can. Instead, it says to keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

Now, that doesn't mean you just stare at a picture of Jesus. It means you're always thinking of Him, always making sure your actions are in line with His teachings, always working toward the life He calls us to live in the Bible.

Seeing through a new lens

But how does that help you get a fresh start? Well, you can draw strength and encouragement through Jesus that leads to lasting change. For example, let's say there are some fellow prisoners giving you a hard time because you are a Christian. Instead of trying to find strength within yourself to fight them or run from them—which will eventually lead to failure—

ARE YOU WHO YOU WANT TO BE?

Use this new year to ask yourself: Are you the best version of yourself you can be? If you want to change this year, there's only one resolution that matters: resolving to fix your eyes on Jesus. Because no matter what you're hoping to change, you're going to need His power to see it through.

So how exactly do you fix your eyes on Jesus? You can start with this simple prayer:

"God, please show me who You are and who You want me to be. Bring me strength to make changes in my life. And teach me how to always focus on Your will, not mine. Amen."

Spend time every day praying and reading your Bible. Prayer is how you talk to Jesus, and reading the Bible is how you hear from Him. The book of John is a good place to start. And the more time you spend with Him, the more strength you'll have to face all that life throws at you.

To discover how to focus on Jesus, sign up for a free correspondence Bible study through one of our trusted partner organizations. Just write to "Fixing My Eyes" 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 the Bible ad on page 2.

Hebrews says, "Think of all the hostility [Jesus] endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up" (Hebrews 13:3).

Hebrews 4:15 adds that Jesus "understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin." Knowing that Jesus faced the same types of struggles and earthly temptations you face can help give you the strength and encouragement you need to persevere.

And because Jesus never failed or sinned, that means He has power we can't even understand—power we could never get from ourselves, no matter how strong our will and determination.

By fixing our eyes on Jesus, we can see life in a new way. Spending time with Him, in prayer and in reading the Bible, strengthens and encourages us to be the best "new you" we can be, this new year and beyond. ■

News + Notes

In-Prison Art Workshops Bring Encouragement

Women behind bars have many struggles unique to them. Through Create: New Beginnings™, restorative art workshops that explore topics like shame, self-doubt, empathy, and forgiveness, program co-authors Martha Ackerman and Stephanie Segel aim to help bring hope and healing to these women.

The newly developed Prison Fellowship program has presented workshops in

Rikers Island Jail, California Institute for Women, Lynwood Correctional, and Chowchilla, the largest women's facility in the world. At Minnesota Correctional Facility-Shakopee, Ackerman and Segel recently led a two-day workshop on the topic of reconciliation.

And nearly every woman who attended that workshop walked away inspired. "For a long time, I wasn't able to do art. I was in a mental block," says one Shakopee resident. "Then [Create: New Beginnings] came, and this



Photo by Jaron Davis

picture? This picture is the first art I've done in five years. It's so amazing."

The workshop revealed some serious talent. But even women who said they weren't good at art still found something beautiful, healing, or eye-opening in their project. "Sometimes they don't even know what they've been feeling until we ask them to express it [through art]," says Segel.

During the workshop, the women were encouraged to dig deep into the topic of reconciling with someone who has hurt them or whom they've hurt. And many of the women found talking about their struggles to be just as healing as the actual art process.



Photo by Jaron Davis

FIRST STEP Act Results in Releases

The FIRST STEP Act (FSA), federal prison reform legislation that passed in late 2018, has resulted in the release of more than 3,100 prisoners. The releases, announced by the Department of Justice in July 2019, are a result of the law's provision for increased good-conduct time. In addition, the law made the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 retroactive, leading to 1,691 sentence reductions.

While not all parts of the law have been fully implemented yet, FSA also will aim to beef up restorative programming for the 180,000 men and women in the nation's federal prisons.

In a recent interview with Prison Fellowship, Matthew Charles, one of the first people released under FSA, had this advice for those still serving their sentences: "Prisoners have the 'I don't care' mentality towards rehabilitation because nobody else really cares for them. They've been locked up, and they've been given a specific amount of time that they have to serve, and it doesn't matter if they better themselves or not.

But with the FIRST STEP Act now available to them, it allows them to say, 'OK, I'm being given a second chance. Society does care that I better myself, that I learn a trade. I may have siblings or a wife to return to, so I want to be able to show them that I've changed, as well as be able to get a job that allows me to make a living wage so that I can support them upon my return.'" ■



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Editorial Manager:
M.M. White

Managing Editor:
Stacia Ray

Writers:
**Emily Andrews, Annie Goebel,
 Grayson Pope, Stacia Ray**

Graphic Designer:
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