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Walking Out of the Past and Into the Future

by Grayson Pope

As a master electrician and craftsman, Phil Bratcher is skilled at working with his hands to solve complex problems—which made him a great crystal meth cook.

Phil had a steady upbringing in a small town called Prosser, Washington. His parents were good people, he says. But he and his closest high school friends smoked pot, drank alcohol, and tried any other drugs they could get their hands on. After completing high school in 1978, Phil graduated to crank.

Jobs were hard to come by in Prosser back then. Phil found work as a carpenter for nine years, but the work eventually dried up. At age 27, Phil headed to Arizona, where he attended electrical school and began an apprenticeship. He made new friends, who introduced him to a purer version of the crank he used back home.

Descent into darkness

Phil started finding himself going in and out of county jail on drug-

related misdemeanors. When his company started random drug screenings, Phil managed to stay clean for about a year. But in 1992, Phil found out his dad had pancreatic cancer. He moved back home and started caring for his dad, who unfortunately died within months.

His father's death sent Phil into a tailspin for the next 20 years. He relapsed and reconnected with his buddies who used, cooked, and sold crystal meth. Telling himself his addiction was under control, Phil continued to work during many of those years, even managing teams of people and million-dollar projects.

By his late 40s, Phil had spiraled into darkness. He stopped working and started cooking meth. He became a shut-in and would only associate with other users and dealers. Phil justified his actions by telling himself he was more than just a drug dealer—he was a skilled craftsman again.

But he got busted for distributing methamphetamine and was sentenced to 40 months in



Photo by Phil Bratcher

Phil once used his craftsman skills for criminal activity. But he turned his life around, and now he uses those same skills for helping others.

prison. His first state prison stint was at the age of 52. “It was an eye opener for me to be punished,” he says. “I never expected to pay for my decisions.”

After shivering through withdrawals in his cell, Phil was angry with himself. He decided that once he got out of prison, he was never going back. That’s when he

met some Christian guys in a Celebrate Recovery group, a Christ-centered 12-step program. They gave him hope and shared the Gospel with him.

A light in the darkness

In the darkest time of Phil’s life, the light of Christ found him. “Without prison, I never would have found the Lord,” Phil says. Phil became a believer in Jesus Christ about a year into his sentence.

Later that same year, Phil heard about the Prison Fellowship Academy®—an intensive, biblically based, year-long program of transformation.

Phil had no background in Christianity when he accepted Jesus as his Savior, so the Academy gave him focus and direction. Through the program, he learned how to live in healthy community and socialize again. He learned about the destructive patterns of thinking that led to his incarceration. Through the Academy’s partnership with Celebrate Recovery, he learned how Christ can help anyone with hurts, habits,

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5 Creative Ways to Connect During the COVID-19 Holidays

by S.L. Ray

As the world is now fast approaching the one-year mark of the COVID-19 pandemic, many prisons are still on some sort of lockdown or restricted visitation. And most of the free world is dealing with a “new normal” of some kind.

Even in a regular non-pandemic year, the separation from family and from the outside world can impact the mental health of men and women behind bars during the holidays. This is especially rough on people with seasonal depression. And those who are normally positive around the holidays may experience more sadness

and loneliness than usual this year because of all the changes the pandemic has brought.

So how can you keep away the holiday depression and stay connected to your friends and family?

Inside Journal researched some easy and affordable ways to connect with loved ones during the holidays in these unusual times:

1) If you have younger children, start a “connection coloring project” with them, taking turns coloring something together and mailing it back and forth. You can even mail them the coloring activity from page 2 of this Inside Journal and ask them to color it and mail it back. Or you can color half of it and ask them to finish the other half.

Photo by gustavofraza/GettyImages



2) Create a memory book of your favorite family memories from your holidays before or during prison and share it with them. Or if your memories were mostly negative, create a “vision board”-style notebook that describes what you think an ideal holiday would look like, using drawings or magazine cutouts, and share that instead.

3) Bond over the same Christmas music or other media. Based on what’s available in your prison library, choose one song, movie, or Bible verse to be your special “family bond” selection. Then, agree to listen to, watch, or read it at the same time every

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Letters to the Editor

Joel in Virginia

I have ... enjoyed the articles inside your publication especially about "Finding Your Tribe Behind Bars." That was the most touching article to me due to being always in the wrong tribe while trying to do the right things. It was inspiration in picking the right individuals to have in my circle. I would like to receive more of your publications. ... Thanks for creating the Inside Journal and I will ask for all of your prayers concerning my health, family, forgiveness, and upcoming trial.

Dear Joel:

If you aren't receiving Inside Journal regularly, you may

want to ask your chaplain if your facility has a quarterly subscription (see box on right). Meanwhile, we at Prison Fellowship have been praying for your trial, family, and health and will continue to pray for you and your fellow prisoners.

Matthew in Tennessee

I'm trying to turn my life around. I'm wanting a new life. My grandma told me to try to get a Bible. I'm asking for help to get a Bible and studies. Is there a wrong way to read the Bible? How do you study the Bible? Is all you do pick it up? I want—I need—to change my life. I would like it if you would pray for me please. ... Well, I'm

asking for help to be put on the right path. I need the Lord in my life. Thank you.

Dear Matthew:

We will pray for your situation. As for studying God's Word, there's no wrong way to read a Bible. But if you aren't sure where to begin, the books of John and Romans in the New Testament or Psalms and Proverbs in the Old Testament are great places to start. If you'd like a free correspondence Bible study, see the blue box on page 4. If you'd like a free Inside Journal Life Recovery Bible, see ad below. ■

Subscription Info

At Inside Journal® (IJ), we receive many letters each week from prisoners asking for subscriptions to our newspaper. 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.

5 Creative Ways to Connect Continued from page 1

day or week (coordinate this time/day with your loved ones). Just knowing you're all doing something at the same time, even from miles apart, will make you feel closer together.

4) Start a book club with your loved ones. Find a book in your prison library and ask your loved ones to check it out from their library. Choose a few chapters at a time and discuss them in your next phone call or email (or in-person visit, if your facility has returned to those).

5) Collaborate on a social distancing story. Choose the topic or genre. Then write the opening sentence or paragraph and mail (or email) it to your loved ones, asking them to reply with the next paragraph. Go back and forth a pre-chosen number of times or until a certain date. When the story is finished, it'll be a great memento to always remember this crazy pandemic year.

General tips for connecting:

If you're planning to call around the holidays, it might be helpful to write a letter or email in advance, letting the loved one know when you plan to call. "I know you normally go to Grandma's the evening of New Year's Eve, but I'll try calling you that morning at 10."

Whenever you talk to your loved ones, whether in an email, phone call, or in-person visit, be sure to keep things positive, rather than venting or complaining.

If you're struggling with depression, carve out time for prayer and/or journaling, and if possible, speak to a mental health counselor in your facility. ■

Find the 10 differences between the two pictures.

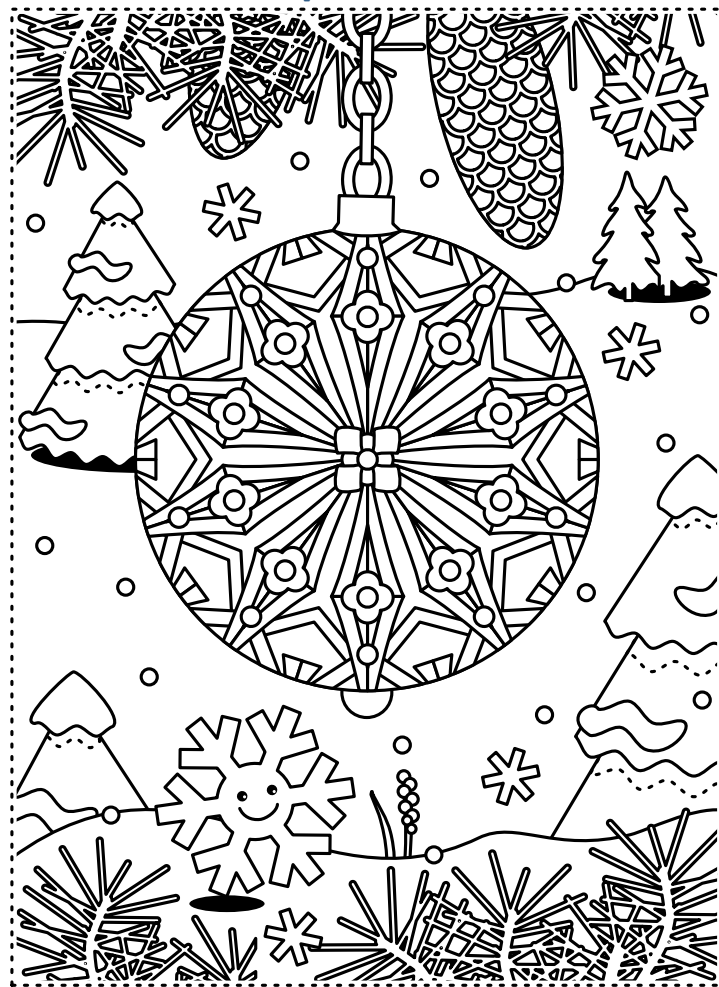
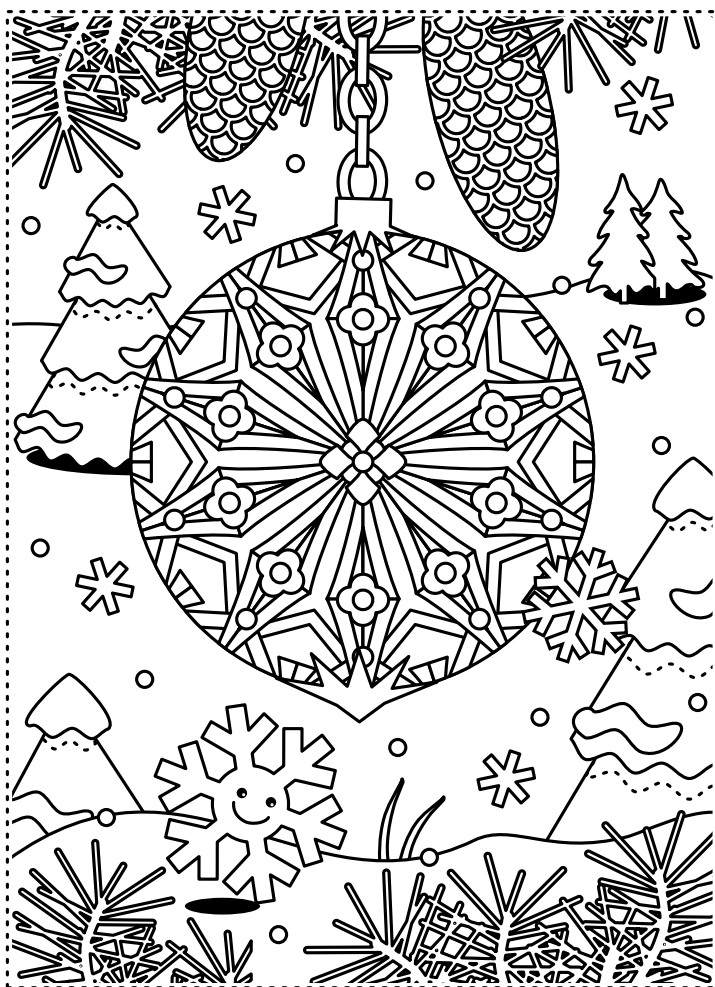


Photo by ratselmeister/Stock

Answers on p.4.

Walking Out of the Past

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and hang-ups. He even learned how to budget.

He struck up a friendship with one of the Prison Fellowship volunteer instructors named Ron Boom. "Phil had the mindset that he was going to succeed, and he didn't deviate from that. He was inspired by the classes," Ron says.

With his new foundation in Christ, Phil was prepared for whatever awaited him outside prison walls.

Phil was released February 11, 2016. With \$12.53 in his pocket, he made his way to Yakima, Washington, and moved into a clean and sober house. Because of Phil's background in electrical work and carpentry, his landlord started paying him to take care of the place.

"You have to walk away from the past and walk into the future."

One of the requirements for living at that house was that Phil would continue attending Celebrate Recovery meetings, which he did happily, knowing

how much he needed the accountability.

Other Celebrate Recovery groups in the area asked him to share his testimony. After Phil talked with one of those groups, a man introduced himself as the facility manager of a drug and alcohol addiction treatment center in Yakima. The facility manager said he could use someone with Phil's handyman skill set on the maintenance staff at the center.

Phil accepted the job at the treatment center. While working there, he saw people detoxing, which reminded of the life he left behind. "You have to walk away from the past and walk into the future," he says.

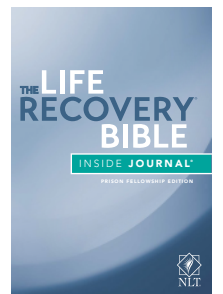
Today, he and his wife continue to be active in Celebrate Recovery and look forward to whatever God has in store for their future. ■

NEED A BIBLE?

Get a free *Inside Journal Life Recovery Bible!*

Write to:

Tyndale House Publishers
Attn: Inside Journal Bible
351 Executive Drive
Carol Stream, IL 60188



DON'T FORGET!

Include this information to make sure your Bible gets delivered:

- ✓ Your complete name and prison ID number
- ✓ 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.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. –Proverbs 3:5–6 (NLT)

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31																				

HOLIDAYS	
January 1 – New Year’s Day	June 20 – Father’s Day
January 18 – Martin Luther King Jr. Day	July 4 – Independence Day
February 14 – Valentine’s Day	August – Don’t forget to submit your Angel Tree prisoner participation form!
February 15 – Presidents Day	September 6 – Labor Day
April 4 – Easter	November 11 – Veterans Day
May 9 – Mother’s Day	November 25 – Thanksgiving Day
May 31 – Memorial Day	December 25 – Christmas Day
June – Ask your chaplain for an Angel Tree prisoner participation form.	

IMPORTANT DATES

Turning Bad Things to Good

by Chaplain John Cherico

I was born and raised in the New York City area. As an adult, I got offered a job as a church pastor in Minnesota. I felt guilty about leaving my mom, since she had serious health issues. My mom died unexpectedly on Monday, September 10, 2001.

I made plans to fly out Wednesday, September 12, since the funeral was scheduled for Thursday.

But then, the unthinkable happened. On Tuesday, September 11, the World Trade Center was attacked by airplanes that caused the twin towers to collapse. This sent shock waves throughout the nation. The New York City airports were closed for many days, preventing me from attending my mom's funeral.

The 9/11 disaster and missing my mom's funeral became connected in my mind and filled me with guilt and anger. They made no sense and seemed to serve no purpose, except to cause me emotional pain and spiritual confusion.

However, decades later, I became a chaplain. I now frequently sit down with inmates who are grieving the loss of a loved one whose funeral they're not allowed to attend. My experience with not being able to attend my mom's funeral has given me an empathy I never would have had. The Lord has taken my painful experience and

used it for good, giving it purpose by connecting me with those feeling guilty or angry over missing a loved one's funeral.

When something difficult or overwhelmingly painful happens—like the loss of a loved one, or a rough parole hearing, or even a global pandemic—people might ask, “Is this proof there is no God?” And even faithful Christians might have moments where they wonder, “Is God still in control? Is there a silver lining in all this?”

Thankfully, God is not only in control, but God is literally the only One who has the full power and wisdom to turn something tragic into something positive. Perhaps the best example of Him turning “bad” to “good” is what Jesus did on the cross for us. He suffered horrific torture and ridicule, even death (the “bad”) to pay for all our sins, so that whoever believes in Him could have eternal life in perfect, pain-free heaven (the “best!”).

Someone being sent to prison is often another example of God turning bad to good. On a regular basis, inmates will tell me, “I now know that God brought me in here to get my attention.”

Research shows that people who have never turned to God before may suddenly turn to God in a crisis or in suffering. In those cases, a “bad” thing can inspire someone to accept Jesus as Savior, resulting in an

eternity in heaven instead of hell—talk about turning a negative into a positive!

And while it's true that people might turn to God when things are bad, they then might turn back away from God once everything seems good again. But 1 Samuel 12:24 reminds us to faithfully serve the Lord, in good times and in bad, and remember all the wonderful things He has done for us.

Recently, an incarcerated woman named Trina sent me a message in the form of one question: “Does God really love me?” As an only child, Trina was neglected and abused by her alcoholic parents, who often locked her in a closet for hours as punishment. If she cried or rebelled, her parents would burn her with a lit cigarette, a practice Trina continued into adulthood as a self-harm coping mechanism. Trina came to me in pain. So, I told her about God's love.

Trina was just released in August of 2020. The world is dark and overwhelming, but if she continues to seek God in the darkness, He makes this promise in the Bible: “If you look for Me wholeheartedly, you will find Me” (Jeremiah 29:13).

There are so many broken and hurting people looking for hope. People in pain question their self-worth. They wonder if anyone cares enough to confirm they matter. They wonder, “Can good things happen even in



Photo by stellalevi/Gettyimages

WHERE DO YOU TURN WHEN LIFE IS HARD?

No matter how strong you think you are, God is stronger. He can use your bad situations for good. Philippians 4:13 says, “For I can do everything through Christ, Who gives me strength.” Surrender your cares to Him!

Not sure where to begin? Start with this prayer:

“Lord Jesus, I have troubles, but You are almighty. Help me surrender all my problems to You. Amen.”

To learn more about a relationship with God, sign up for a free correspondence Bible study through one of our trusted partner organizations. Just write to “Bad to Good,” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

bad situations?” They ask, “Does God really care?”

Yes, He does. The Lord God is in the business of changing people, healing them from the inside out. He can take bad things and give them purpose. Romans 8:28 sums it up best: “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.” Yes,

everything. Even the most painful things.

Jesus never promises His followers a pain-free life, and “bad” things seem unfair. But God can turn bad into good, even in the hardest of times. Even in prison during a pandemic.

John Cherico is a jail and prison ministry chaplain in the Minneapolis area. ■

News + Notes

2020 Year In Review: Making Lemonade Out of Lemons

COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions may still be affecting prison visits and programming, but they can't stop corrections staff, prison ministry volunteers, prisoners, and their families from finding creative ways to connect.

In August, Hillsong New York and Hillsong LA churches helped organize and fundraise for Freedom Run, a 280-mile, three-day relay from Manhattan to Washington, D.C., that raised more than \$20,000 for Prison Fellowship's criminal justice reform efforts.

When prisons across the country prevented Prison Fellowship from having

encouraging or evangelical events on the yard, the staff got inventive and started having events just outside the gates where men and women on the yard could still hear and participate.

In September, Grammy Award-winning, platinum-selling artist Lecrae opened the door to the first live prison event since the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns began. He performed at the St. Clair Correctional Facility in Springville, Alabama, on the outside of the fence while attendees participated through social distancing just on the other side of the fence.

When children weren't able to visit their incarcerated parents, new programs cropped up to help people connect across the bars. In several facilities, prisoners were eligible for additional phone minutes or even free minutes. Marcus Bullock, formerly incarcerated founder of Flikshop, partnered with Prison Fellowship, supported by the charitable nonprofit Stand Together, to give families free credits to send photos and messages to incarcerated loved ones through postcards.

In Montana, Connect Adults and Minors through Positive Parenting (CAMPP) organized virtual activities where incarcerated fathers could be on a secured website that allowed them to “visit” with their kids while sharing in activities like coloring together. Caregivers of children with incarcerated parents were mailed boxes that contained the materials for the virtual activities.

Prison Fellowship's Angel Tree® program got creative in finding new ways to connect parents in prison with their kids. Many Angel Tree Camping® families received care packages containing grocery gift cards, athletic equipment to encourage outdoor play, and a Bible.

And Prison Fellowship's Floodlight™—a video-based platform created specifically in response to prisons not being able to access in-person programming during the pandemic—allows corrections staff to download a variety of Christian content to share on prison televisions and devices, where available.

As COVID-19 continues to affect the lives of both

prisoners and their families, Prison Fellowship and other organizations continue to come up with clever ways to stay connected. ■



© 2020 by Prison Fellowship
INSIDE JOURNAL®
 is published four times a year
 by Prison Fellowship,
 P.O. Box 1790,
 Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.
prisonfellowship.org
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A member of the
 Evangelical Council for
 Financial Accountability
 and the American
 Correctional Association.

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ANSWER KEY (from p.2)

Find the 10 differences between the two pictures.

