Walking Out of the Past and Into the Future

by Grayson Pope

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 crack. 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 crack 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 come out for visits. But he got busted for distributing methamphetamine and was sentenced to 40 months in 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 shepherding 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 friends 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.

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

Continued on page 2
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.

Walking Out of the Past
and hang-ups. He even learned how to budget.
He struck up a friendship with one of the Prison Fellowship volunteer instructors named Ron Broom. “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 man 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.

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

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)

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

**IMPORTANT DATES**

**INSIDE JOURNAL | Winter 2021**
**Turning Bad Things to Good**

It 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 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 eagerness 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. And 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 because of 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 one day, and 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 seek 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 ask, if anyone cares enough to confirm they matter. They wonder, “Can good things happen even in bad situations?” They ask, “Does God really care?”

Yes, He does. The Lord 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.

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**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 2.8-mile, three-day relay from Manhattan to 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.

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**ANSWER KEY (from p.2)**

Find the 10 differences between the two pictures.