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‘It Had Me at Hello’

by Emily Andrews and Stacia Ray

Amber Bigelow’s grandmother told her she grew up too fast. Amber’s parents divorced when she was a baby, and she was raised by her alcoholic mother. “I took care of her more than she took care of me,” Amber recalls, explaining that addiction ran in the family.

Growing up poor, Amber struggled to make friends and mostly bonded with older kids. “I never really fit in anywhere,” says Amber. “I always got good grades in school, but ... I was picked on a lot. I was kind of bullied.”

In middle school, she babysat for a woman who paid her in cigarettes and pot, which Amber then smoked—she was only 12. At 13, Amber was sent to live with her grandma in Arkansas.

Grandma’s house had three rules. “She said you’ve got to get good grades, you can’t do drugs, and you can’t have sex,” explained Amber. “[But] I migrated towards a group of people that smoked weed,

started partying with them, ended up losing my virginity.” Her grades dropped. When Amber was 15, her grandma sent her back to Minnesota to live with her mom.

One day, Amber told an older friend, “Let’s smoke some dope,” Amber recalls. “But I meant weed, and she thought I meant meth.” She tried it that day and was hooked. “It had me at ‘hello,” says Amber.

By 16, Amber was pregnant and using. After giving birth, she tried juggling school and getting high. But the stress of teen motherhood led her to get high even more. She often left her daughter with her mom so she could hang out with older guys—sometimes being away for weeks at a time.

When her baby’s father tried to reduce his child support, Amber showed up to court high. Her daughter was removed from her custody. “After that, I ran the streets hard,” she says.

For the next couple years, Amber was stuck in a pattern of jail, treatment, sobriety, and relapse. To avoid prison, she went to drug court.



Photo by Jeannette Appold

After growing up too fast, Amber needed prison to slow her life down and bring her to true peace.

An unhealthy new beginning

She graduated from drug court, met a great guy, got married, bought a house, went to college, received a four-year degree in criminal justice, and stayed off meth for eight years.

Life was looking up—until she started drinking. After college, she worked long nights in a juvenile detention center. “I would get home at 7 a.m. and drink. I would be

annihilated by 9 a.m.,” says Amber. The daytime drinking lasted about a year, and then she started using meth again.

“Once I relapsed, I was like, ‘I’ll just do this once in a while, not a big deal.’ But it had me at ‘hello,’ just like it did when I was a teenager.”

Soon, she was selling drugs, cheating on her husband, running with unhealthy crowds, doing whatever it took to get

high. By the time she arrived at the women’s state prison in Minnesota, she had left her husband and was exhausted from chasing her addiction.

She was scared and nervous about going to prison after years of avoiding it. “But there was also a peace,” she says, “which I know now came from God—a peace of, it’s finally over. I can finally change my life and start over and build something that I can be proud of again.”

Early in Amber’s prison stay, a girl named Lisa came to share how Prison Fellowship Academy®—an intensive, biblically based program—changed her life. “Once I heard her speak, I knew,” says Amber. “That’s where I’m going.” She filled out the paperwork right after.

A healthy new beginning

Amber knew about God as a kid and even attended church and Bible studies. But she never had a relationship with Jesus—until the Academy. The program gave her a deeper relationship with God, along with a sense of community she hadn’t felt before.

“You could feel a presence of serenity,” remembers Amber. “I started crying, and everyone was there to comfort me and give me words of

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5 Creative Ways to Connect During the COVID-19 Holidays

by Stacia 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/Getty Images



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 day or week (coordinate this

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Letters to the Editor

Kayla in Georgia

I have given my life to Jesus Christ and in desperate need of a Bible that I can understand. The [Inside Journal] Life Recovery Bible y'all have is amazing, and I am a recovering addict also so I love how it incorporates the 12 steps. I am asking and praying that y'all could send me one free of charge please.

Michelle in Virginia

I just wanted to thank God the Father for blessing your ministry. I truly enjoy your Inside Journal newspaper for women. I am currently incarcerated and need, need,

need a Bible, one that I can read in large print. May I receive the [Inside Journal Life] Recovery Bible? This will indeed bless my Spirit.

Dear Kayla and Michelle:

We're so glad you're enjoying Inside Journal! As for information on how to receive a free Inside Journal Life Recovery Bible in large print, please see the ad below. We pray this Bible will bring you peace and guide your daily life. God bless you both!

Tiara in Florida

I recently read a summer 2019 Inside Journal, and I found

it beautiful. The stories were heartwarming, and the tips on better sleeping were helpful. I would like if you could send me a newer Journal.

Dear Tiara:

We at Prison Fellowship are so glad you're enjoying Inside Journal. If you aren't receiving copies of Inside Journal in March, June, September, and December, you may want to ask your chaplain if your facility has a regular subscription to this quarterly newspaper (for more information, see the gray box to the right). ■

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

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.

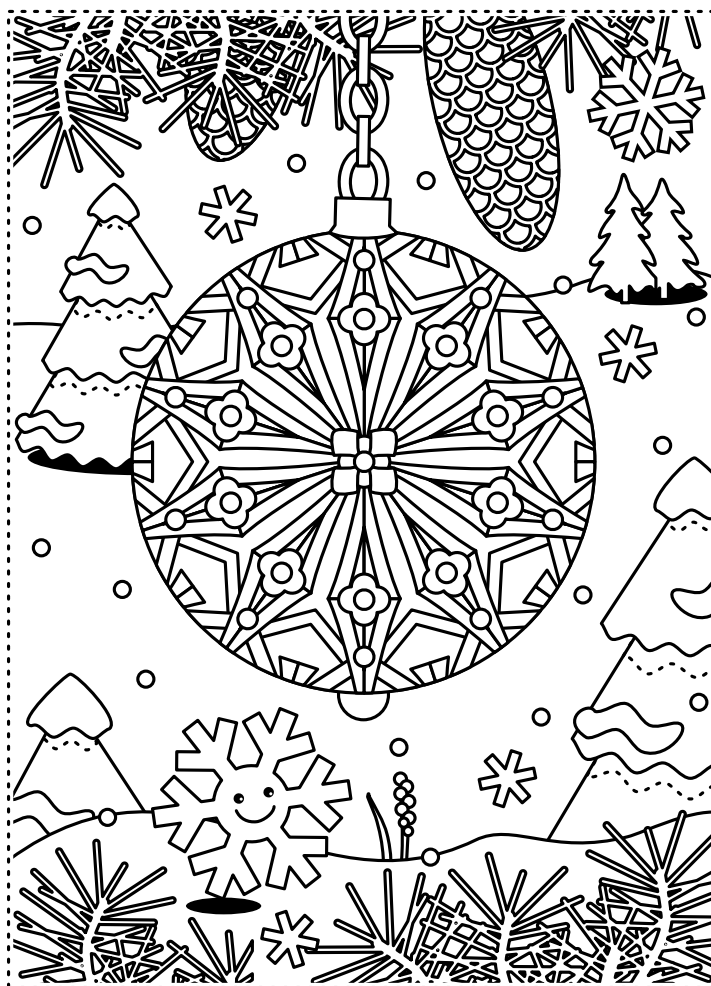
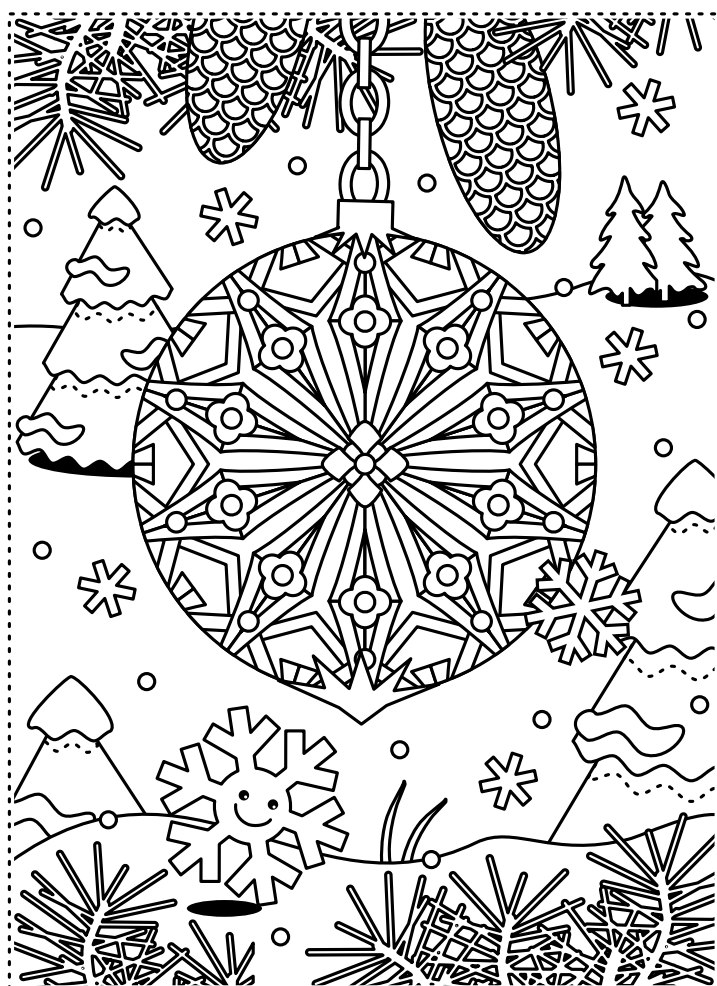


Photo by ratselmeister/Stock

Answers on p.4.

'It Had Me at Hello'

Continued from page 1

encouragement and pray with me. ... I felt accepted." The Academy had her at "hello."

The Academy staff and volunteers made Amber feel like she could be herself. "They make a very dark place very bright."

Amber learned she didn't have to change overnight. "I'm a totally different person than I was, but I'm not who I want to

be yet," she explains.

After her release, Amber stayed busy volunteering at her church and working as a concrete finisher for up to 70 hours a week.

She also reunited with her husband, who was also once incarcerated. They went to marriage counseling and stayed sober. They're about to celebrate eight years of marriage together.

One of Amber's greatest joys is knowing her teenage

stepdaughter, whom she calls "amazing." And Amber prays that someday she can reunite with her biological daughter. But she says she has to trust God's timing on that.

"If God can restore my marriage with all the damage that's been done," Amber notes, "restoration and reconciliation are possible. There is hope for me, and there's hope for anybody that's in a dark place." ■

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.

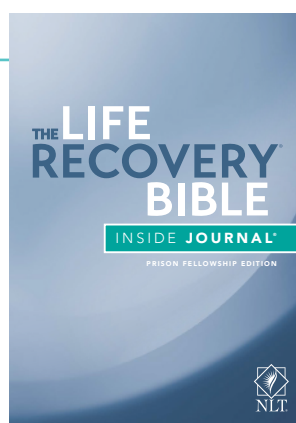


Photo by Jeannette Appold

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)

JANUARY

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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** – 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

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. ■



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ANSWER KEY (from p.2)

Find the 10 differences between the two pictures.

