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Is Angel Tree for Real?

by Ron Humphrey

It was count time, and Michigan inmate Doug Cupery wondered what the flurry down the line was about. Prisoners were receiving some kind of papers to fill out. When the CO reached Doug's cell, someone told him it was for Angel Tree. Fill out the application, he was told, and strangers would buy and deliver Christmas gifts to his two young children. It sounded like some kind of prison scam, but Doug was determined to find out for himself.

Doug was born into a good home in western Michigan. But tragedy struck when he was just four years old. His father, a Marine pilot, died in a plane crash. Doug's mother, left to raise the family alone, did her best but turned to alcoholism. Without discipline and accountability, Doug also became involved in substance abuse from his teens to his 20s.

But Doug made it to adult-

hood, studying to become a paramedic and a registered nurse. He married his girlfriend, and they settled down to raise two great kids. The American Dream was well within his reach, but the past still dogged Doug, and his inability to handle accountability led him into trouble with the law. In 1998, he was arrested, convicted, and faced with the possibility of some significant prison time.

Walking a Different Path

While he was awaiting sentencing, some past friends with church connections began showing up to offer Doug support and advice. They explained how Doug could not continue living on his own terms but needed stability in his life. He needed a firm anchor, and Jesus could become what he was missing.

In 1998, Doug entered Chippewa Prison on the Upper Peninsula in Michigan, where he would spend the next three years. Conditions were often

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Through an Angel Tree in-prison sign-up initiative like the one shown above, Doug Cupery learned how he could provide Christmas presents for his two young children.

Prison Fellowship archival photo.

Prison Bus Crash Claims 10 Lives

by A.R. Quinn

ODESSA, TX – On Jan. 14, 2015, a prison transport bus in Texas skidded off an overpass and crashed into a moving train. The deadly accident has led to calls for better safety procedures when moving prisoners between facilities.

At the time of the accident, the bus was headed west between the John Middleton Transfer Facility in Abilene, Texas, and Rogelio Sanchez State Jail in El Paso, Texas, via Interstate 20. The road was icy, and according to a report by the National Transportation Safety Board, there was debris on the road from an earlier car crash. The bus hit the debris, veered off the road, and flew down the embankment before striking a Union Pacific train. The prisoners were handcuffed in pairs and were not wearing seatbelts. Some were thrown out of the bus.



A routine prison transport in Texas turned to tragedy for everyone aboard.

Eight prisoners and two correctional officers were killed in the crash. Five other people—including four prisoners and one staff person—were sent to nearby hospitals with serious injuries.

Calls for Safety Review

The deadly crash left prisoners, families, and state officials in grief and shock.

"We have had other accidents, but I can tell you nothing like this where we have lost this many

officers and offenders," Jason Clark, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, told the *Odessa American*.

After the accident, several members of the Texas House of Representatives, along with

advocates for criminal justice reform, called for safer prison transportation.

According to the *El Paso Times*, Rep. Senfronia Thomp-

"There are some good people in the prison system, and I'm sure there were some on the bus that day."

son, a Democrat representing Houston, said that she does not want to "point fingers." Instead she wants a review of the way the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, which moves 2,000 prisoners each weekday, gets them from place to place.

For example, she pointed out that prisoners who are handcuffed and chained together have a hard time protecting

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Let Freedom Ring

Guest Column: Jesse Wiese



The first time I stood up for religious liberty, I was still in prison. I was participating in a faith-based program that was being sued by Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and I was asked to testify in favor of the program. Unfortunately, we lost the case and the program closed, but I left that experience with a desire to learn more about our constitutional right to religious freedom and, more importantly, how that right could be protected.

I worked hard to “redeem the time” while I was in prison, taking advantage of opportunities that would help me on a path to success. Following my release, I graduated from law school and

was able to work for several organizations that defend religious freedom.

This past October, I had the opportunity to be at the Supreme Court to hear arguments in *Holt v. Hobbs*, a religious freedom case involving a man imprisoned in Arkansas. I submitted a “Brief of Reformed Prisoners,” arguing for the importance of religious liberty behind bars, as part of my work with Justice Fellowship. As I walked out of the courtroom and stood on the steps overlooking our nation’s capital, I couldn’t help but think about the path that led me there. I was overcome with gratitude, awe, and a desire to continue fighting for justice.

The Supreme Court unanimously ruled in favor of Mr. Holt in January 2015, and I am

proud that the cause of religious freedom emerged victorious. But I am convinced that the more important outcome is what you will do with your religious freedom. Have you thought deeply about why you’re alive? Have you investigated who God is and what He wants? How will you exercise your religious freedom with the time you have right now?

I found true freedom in Christ alone. All of you reading this are of great worth and value, and I believe that if you embrace that freedom, you will accomplish great things.

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Your Letters

‘Taking the Hill’

I read in the *IJ* Winter 2015 edition the article ‘Taking the Hill’ and I was impressed. Thank you for not forgetting the war veterans who for whatever reason are in prison. I am a 16-year Army infantry veteran with two tours in Iraq. ... We saw action and plenty of it. I came home a different person. In fact, my wife said I had changed so much she wanted me to go back to Iraq and bring her husband home. I went to the vet center and was diagnosed with combat PTSD. ... I committed a crime in 2012 that I still don’t understand why ... I am sorry for what I did and I often wonder if I hadn’t gone to war in 2005, would I be in here today? I was once thought by all who knew me as a hero for serving my country faithfully, but now I am looked on by all as a convict that society wants to throw away. There are days I would prefer to have died a hero in Iraq than to be remembered, or better yet forgotten, as a convict. We need more people to reach out to veterans in prison and not forget us. All of us put our lives on the line for our country only

to be forgotten when we need help the most! ... I still love my country, with all her mistakes. I just wish my country loved me in spite of mine.

– C.H., Mississippi

Rarely do I ever see anything about incarcerated female veterans ... whose crimes may have direct links to their service experiences. Many female veterans have experienced not only the trauma or conflicts, wars, and injuries, but many of them, especially those of us who served 10, 15, 20, or more years ago suffer from trauma that resulted from rape, sexual, emotional, and physical abuse perpetrated by our fellow soldiers and officers—abuse that we never reported. ... Many of us are incarcerated because we couldn’t handle society or found ourselves unable to cope in our jobs and relationships. We are not bad people, we served our country honorably and yet we are forgotten, locked away, when with just a little help, we could return to society as productive citizens.

– D.G., West Virginia

Is Angel Tree for Real? *Continued from p.1*



Doug Cupery

freezing cold. “I saw snowflakes in June,” he recalls. But Doug’s hard heart was melting. He vowed to leave prison as a different man, one his family could depend on.

Photo courtesy of Ridge Point Community Church

walls of a prison.”

About that time, Doug saw Angel Tree applications passed out and asked the other men about it. Could Angel Tree be real? Would strangers really go out and spend their own money to buy Christmas gifts for his children? Or was it just another prison scam? He had a daughter, 3, and a son, 5, back home, and they faced a difficult Christmas season with Doug gone.

A friend assured him it was all true, that Prison Fellowship’s Angel Tree program had been buying and delivering gifts to the children of prisoners since 1982. In wonderment, Doug sat down and completed the application. And sure enough, shortly before Christmas, Angel Tree volunteers showed up at his home with the gifts Doug had suggested for his two children. And they included the Christmas wishes that Doug had asked the volunteers to convey to his children on his behalf.

Doug notes, “I participated in Angel Tree for two years and was very thankful to be part not only for my children, but because it allowed me to be their dad even though I was away from them.”

Challenges and Dreams

Coming home from prison is never easy for anyone. Doug had the support of the church that had cared for his family, but obstacles remained.

“I tried to put my past behind me, but my prison years and background would often pop to the forefront. Whether it was related to finding a job or just getting my head together,



Angel Tree volunteers purchase and distribute gifts for hundreds of thousands of prisoners’ children each year.

Prison Fellowship archival photo.

that past experience was always present.”

Soon Doug began to run into other former prisoners who were experiencing the same challenges he was.

“I started looking into this and wondering what could be done to change the course of individuals’ lives—men and women—who had completed their prison sentences, yet struggled with the unexpected consequences that followed release.”

Doug began to see how God had changed his own life, and he wanted to help other ex-prisoners do the same. As good-hearted and caring Christians in his community saw men and women returning home from prison as no different from

them, doors opened. And Doug was able to move forward with a new dream, creating a prison

ministry and reentry program within his own church. That ministry has reached out to many people returning from prison in Michigan.

Doug has never forgotten the lessons he learned from friends behind bars, including the ones who told him about Angel Tree.

He says, “I have never forgotten the impact Angel Tree had on me and my family. I work together now with my ministry and Prison Fellowship, not only on a personal level, but also on a professional level. [...] We are working on ways to [...] walk alongside prisoners’ children not just at Christmas but throughout the year.”

Doug, whose children are now grown up and attending college, adds, “Through Angel Tree, my own children received many opportunities to grow while I was absent.”

To learn more about Angel Tree, talk to your chaplain and see the ad on page 4 of this newspaper. ■

“[Angel Tree] allowed me to be their dad even though I was away from them.”

He says, “I found some men within the prison who helped me to not only learn how to ‘do prison,’ but they also helped me to walk a different path. Looking back, I found the first lessons of what it means to be a real Christian, a man, a husband and father, within the

PRAYER WARRIORS CORNER



- Pray for the safety of persecuted Christians and other religious minorities in North Africa and the Middle East.

- Pray for the reformation of the American criminal justice system so that true life transformation will be possible.

- Pray for the healing of relationships between law enforcement and communities, particularly those divided by race.

- Pray for the growth of Prison Fellowship and other organizations ministering to prisoners and ex-prisoners.

The Hardest Call to Make

by Johnathan Kana

I stared at the phone for a long time before dialing. This would be the hardest call of my life, but I had no choice.

“Johnathan?” My father’s voice was strangely calm.

“Hey, Dad.” My own voice was anything but calm. I was literally shaking with fear, and not just because I was placing the call from a holding cell at the county jail.

“Sounds like you’ve had a rough day,” he said. His signature humor made this both easier and more difficult.

“Yeah, I think you could say that,” I replied, desperately choking back the tears. “Listen, Dad, I have no right to ask, but I could really use your help right now.”

I couldn’t help it. Broken and humiliated, I sobbed quietly. Had it not been my first arrest, I might have known the danger of displaying such weakness in front of the haggard men in the cell with me that night. But in that moment, all I really cared about was what my father would say next.

Nowhere to Turn

In the hours I spent waiting for my “one phone call,” I’d mentally rehearsed the arrest over and over again. I relived the sheer panic of staring down the officer’s pistol, heard the deafening thump of my heartbeat as I hugged the side of the car to be cuffed and searched. Never before had I been so painfully conscious of the evil inside of me. My life as I knew it was over; from that point on I would always be labeled a criminal.

Still, none of that compared to the thought of facing my parents. They had every right to be angry with me, even to disown me as their son. Waiting breathlessly for my father’s response on the other end of the line, I could sense the gulf of emptiness I had created between us. With cold realization, I anticipated having to face the



Author Johnathan Kana agonized over what his father would say when he called from jail.

devastating consequences of my crime all alone.

That’s the position all of us are in before God, too. Our rebellion and lawlessness have driven us away from Him, and we’re left alone to face the consequences. We may not all be guilty of a serious crime like murder or rape, but that doesn’t matter. The Bible says, “We were born with an evil nature, and we [are] under God’s wrath just like everyone else” (Ephesians 2:3, NLT). That’s because anything we think, say, or do that falls short of God’s perfection is sin; and according to the Bible, “You may be sure that your sin will find you out”

(Numbers 32:23).

We weren’t created to live this way, and we can’t run forever. Eventually, we have to face God and answer for the evil in us. In our hearts, we know we deserve to be disowned by Him.

Finding Grace

My father’s words finally came through. “Johnathan, God’s love is unconditional. Mine is, too. We’re going to do anything we can to help.”

I remember feeling invincible at that statement. For just a moment, it didn’t matter whether I bonded out that same night or spent the next 20 years in prison.

I already had the knowledge that would sustain me through the sentence: my father still loved me, and though I didn’t deserve it, my parents would stand beside me in spite of my crime. But their love came at a price. I could never repay the financial and emotional burdens my parents have shouldered for me since that night. All I can do is live in a way that, I hope, honors their sacrifice.

God paid an unimaginable price to save us, too. He let his only Son, Jesus, become human and live among us. Both fully God and fully human, Jesus lived the perfect life we never could, only to suffer and die a criminal’s death so that we wouldn’t have to. When He breathed His last on a cross outside Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago, the debt we owed to Him was paid off in full. Then, when God brought Him back to life three days later, Jesus put an end to death’s power over

us—forever.

My father’s words gave me new life that night, and any time I think of that phone call from the county jail, I’m reminded of the One who gave everything to stand beside me in my sin. Like my earthly father, Jesus took my call when no one else would—“even while [I was] dead because of [my] sins” (Ephesians 2:5). No one deserves that kind of love, but God can’t help showering us with it anyway. And now, thanks to Him, I have a new life.

Jesus wants to share that new life with anyone willing to call out to Him. When the evil in our lives catches up with us, we can rest assured that He’s prepared to take our “one phone call.” ■

Ex-prisoner Johnathan Kana completed advanced degrees in biblical studies during his time in prison and on parole. He lives with his family in central Texas.

It’s Your Call

The phone at the county jail only allowed collect calls. Someone on the other end had to accept the charges, and many of the guys there had no one who would pay to hear from them under those circumstances. God isn’t like that. His Son has already accepted the charges so that we can get through to Him. It’s the most expensive call we can ever make, but thanks to Him we don’t have to pay anything to place it.

If you’re ready, it only takes a simple prayer, like this:

God, I don't deserve to call myself Your child, yet I know You still love me. I believe Your Son Jesus died in my place, and right now I'm asking You to come into my life and save me. Teach me to live in a way that honors You.

If you prayed those words from a sincere heart, then you’re on the road to new life, and *Inside Journal* wants to help. You can enroll in a free correspondence Bible study available through one of our partner organizations—and get a Bible, if you don’t have access to one through your facility—by writing to “**It’s Your Call,**” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

Prison Bus Crash

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themselves in the event of a crash, and those without seatbelts are more likely to be thrown out of the vehicle.

Future improvements might save lives, the advocates claimed.

“There are some good people in the prison system and I’m sure there were some on the bus that day,” said Rep. Alma Allen, another Houston Democrat.

Time Is Precious

The Texas bus accident is a powerful reminder for all of us that life is short and unpredictable. Most of the prisoners on the bus were young—in their 20s and 30s—and being held for relatively minor offenses. When they got on the bus that January morning, they had no way of knowing that their time

on earth was about to be cut short. They wouldn’t be getting any more second chances.

It’s a painful truth that not many of us like to dwell on, whether we’re young or old, behind bars or in the free world: tomorrow is never guaranteed. That fact can be depressing, or it can motivate us to make the most of every day.

Here are some things worth considering:

- “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you” are powerful phrases.

Who in your life needs to know that you’re sorry, and who needs your forgiveness? Pride can often stop us from giving and receiving pardon, but we all need to do both things in order to have peace in our lives. It might be time to put down this newspaper and go write the letter you’ve been



Time is your most precious asset. What will you do with it?

putting off sending to someone who needs to hear from you, whether it’s a parent, a spouse, a child, or a friend.

- **Do you know where you stand with God?** There are

people who promise God they’ll do whatever He wants ... eventually, and as long as they get to do whatever they want for a while first. That’s a bad game plan for life when you

never know how much time is left on the clock.

• **Life doesn’t stop while you’re in prison.** Your time doesn’t get less valuable while you’re incarcerated. There may be limits on what you can do, but you can still be the person you’re supposed to be right now, and not at some vague point in the future. Seek out opportunities to improve your mind. Become a positive leader for others around you. If you’re a parent, you can encourage your kids to do well in school. Sign them up for Angel Tree (see page 4 for details). You might not consider yourself the best role model, but even then, you can reassure them of your love, and help them understand what lessons they can learn from your mistakes. ■

Great Prisoners of the Bible

This article originally appeared in the May/June 1994 edition of Inside Journal.

Zedekiah: His Weak Will Did Him In

Zedekiah is hardly a household name. He was the last king of Judah (the southern part of Israel), and he lived nearly 600 years before Christ. He became king at age 21 and reigned for 11 years in Jerusalem.

His story is mainly found in the Old Testament books of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. A quick summary is found in Jeremiah 52:1-11.

Zedekiah had access to good advice through the righteous prophet Jeremiah. But he lacked the guts to carry out the advice given him.

He took a sacred oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, the foreign ruler who put him in power, but he was unfaithful to that oath and openly rebelled.

He had a weak will, and in the end it cost him his kingdom, his sons, his eyesight, and his life.



Zedekiah knew where to turn for good advice but lacked the courage to follow through.

Ignoring Good Advice

Read Jeremiah 34:8-22

- What did God tell Zedekiah to do?
- Did he do it?
- What did Zedekiah then allow the people to do?
- What did God say would be the punishment? (34:17)

- What did God say would happen to Zedekiah? (34:21)
- Based on Jeremiah 37:11-21, how did Zedekiah treat God's prophet, Jeremiah?

Going Back on a Promise

- In 2 Chronicles 36:13, what did Nebuchadnezzar have

Zedekiah do?

- What was Zedekiah's response?
- What was the impact of his actions on those who were watching and following him?

Meeting an Awful End

- In the first few verses of Jeremiah 39, what did Nebuchadnezzar's army do to Jerusalem and to Zedekiah?
- When they caught him (verse 5), what did they do to his sons?
- How did Zedekiah spend his final days? (Jeremiah 52:11)

What Can We Learn?

- Zedekiah did the right thing by asking advice of a God-following person (Jeremiah).

But then he didn't have the follow-through to continue doing what was right. What is the best source of advice for you? How can you get good information that will steer you in the right direction?

- Identify your own areas of character weakness. Where do you most often go back on your promises or on doing what's right?
- After you have asked for God's help, what other sources of help can encourage you in doing right, not wrong?
- Was Zedekiah a success or a failure? By what criteria do you think God measures him?
- How will God measure you? How can you avoid the same mistakes Zedekiah made?



Connect with Your Child This Christmas!

What Is Angel Tree?

Maybe you've heard of Prison Fellowship's Angel Tree program, but you're not sure how it works. Angel Tree is a simple way to let your children know that you are thinking about them at Christmas.

Angel Tree works like this: Applications are shipped to the chaplains of participating prisons in early June. You fill out an application asking Angel Tree to give your child a gift from you at Christmas (you can suggest what kind of gift you think your child would like). Your chaplain collects all the applications and sends them to Angel Tree by the deadline. In the fall, Angel Tree volunteers call the person who takes care of your child to verify what gift your child would like to receive. Before Christmas, Angel Tree volunteers will buy and wrap the gift. The gift will be delivered to your child's home or given to your child at an Angel Tree Christmas party along with a presentation of the Gospel. Your child will be told that the gift is from you—their mom or dad who loves them! Plus, your brief, personal message to your child will be written on the gift tag.

A Gift from Your Heart to Theirs ...

This summer is the time to sign your children up to receive a Christmas present from you through Angel Tree. **Applications for Christmas 2015 must be postmarked by September 1, 2015.** Ask your chaplain or program coordinator for an application, and either the chaplain or program coordinator must submit it for you when you are done.

There are some important restrictions to the Angel Tree program, so please read carefully before filling out an application:

- 1) You **must** be the child(ren)'s father, mother, stepfather, or stepmother.
- 2) There **must not be a court order** restricting your contact with the child(ren) or their caregiver(s).
- 3) Your child(ren) must **live in the United States**.
- 4) Your child(ren) must be **18 years old or younger**.
- 5) The form must be filled out **completely and legibly**.
- 6) The form must be **signed**.
- 7) The form must be **postmarked by September 1, 2015**.

Start preparing now to sign up your children by contacting their caregiver to gather the most current information for your application.

Get an application and sign your kids up today! A special gift from you at Christmas will help them know that you love them, and it will connect them with a church that can come alongside your family in your absence. Best of all, it will give them an opportunity to experience the transforming love of Jesus Christ.

Angel Tree makes great efforts to serve every eligible child. Sometimes, however, if we are unable to locate your children's caregiver, if the caregiver refuses to participate, or if there are not enough Angel Tree volunteers in a local area, we may not be able to deliver gifts to your children.

If your facility is not signed up and has not received applications, your chaplain may contact **1-800-55-ANGEL** for more information on how to participate.



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