

INSIDE Journal®

PRISON FELLOWSHIP'S NEWSPAPER FOR AMERICA'S PRISONS VOLUME 25, NO. 1 WINTER 2016

Petty Thief Snatched by Grace

by Zoe Erler

Pauline Rogers' first experience in a court room was testifying about her father's murder.

Then just 9 years old, Pauline had watched her mother shoot him.

"I helped her put him in the car," she admits. "He died *en route* to the hospital."

The court ruled it a case of self-defense, and Pauline's mother wasn't convicted.

After that, "my mother became a workaholic ... she was never around," Pauline remembers. And as a young girl growing up on Mississippi's Gulf Coast, Pauline began taking responsibility for her 10 younger siblings.

They were so poor, she explains, that she would look in the newspaper to find out which churches were having funerals. She would dress up her siblings and take them to the church, where they would always find a meal.

It wasn't long before she



Photo by Ron Blaylock

Pauline felt responsible for her many younger siblings.

began stealing simple things to help provide for her family, like a bag of rice, meat, or hair bands.

"I stole from department stores, dollar stores, grocery stores ... if it was in walking distance from me, it was a target."

She was 11 the first time she was caught. At that point, the police officer just pulled her aside, explained that she shouldn't steal, paid for the stolen goods, and drove her home. But that wasn't enough to wake Pauline up. She was arrested a couple more times after that without facing serious consequences. But in her late twenties, her behavior finally caught up with her, and she landed a six-year prison sentence.

"I was not the Savior"

But sitting in county jail, even before she went to prison, Pauline met a Prison Fellowship volunteer who introduced her to Jesus.

That turned everything around, Pauline explains. The volunteer helped her realize that it was not her responsibility to take

care of her siblings.

"I knew that I could depend on God. I was not the Savior ... it freed me," she says.

By the time she got to prison Central Mississippi Correctional Facility, Pauline was intent on taking advantage of every opportunity she could—particularly the programs offered by Prison Fellowship: life-skills training, discipleship, and mentoring opportunities. She also worked for the chaplain, a woman named Wendy Hatcher, who continued to mentor Pauline along her journey as a follower of Jesus.

Wendy said she noticed something special after meeting Pauline at a Bible study.

"I liked her a lot. I felt like I could trust her. She was intelligent and able to assist me in a lot of things."

Pauline helped Wendy with standard chaplain assistant tasks like paperwork, but Wendy also called upon her for assistance with more nuanced chaplain duties, like ministering to other prisoners.

Continued on page 2

News of Note

KY Gov. Restores Voting Rights

FRANKFORT, KY—Before he left office in late 2015, Steven L. Beshear, a Democrat and the outgoing governor of Kentucky, signed an executive order restoring voting rights to 140,000 people who had finished their sentences for nonviolent offenses.

Historically, in the Bluegrass State, anyone with a felony conviction lost their voting rights for a lifetime, unless a governor made a special, individual exception. Among the 50 states, only Florida and Iowa still share that policy. Other states are following a trend toward relaxing voting restrictions for former prisoners.

At a press conference, Beshear said in defense of his decision, "Once an individual has served his or her time and paid all restitution, society expects them to reintegrate into their communities and become law-

abiding and productive citizens. A key part of that transition is the right to vote."

Advocates for progressive voting policies in Kentucky are still pushing for an amendment to the state constitution, which would have broader effects.

In addition to the 140,000 people who can now register as

voters, the executive order will eventually cover an estimated 30,000 people who are currently in prison or on probation. However, the order excludes those convicted of violent crimes, bribery, sex crimes, or treason, and those with new or pending charges. Those who are excluded may still apply for an exception from Kentucky's newly elected governor, Matthew Bevin.

Prison Debaters Trump Harvard

NAPANOCH, NY—Men from a maximum-security facility in New York made international headlines when they defeated a debating team from Harvard University.

On September 18, 2015, members of the Bard Debate Union at Eastern Correctional Facility in the Catskills squared off against three undergraduate

debaters from Harvard University. The Bard team, coached by David Register, spent countless hours preparing and practicing for the head-to-head debate about whether public schools should have the right to keep out undocumented children. Although they cannot use the Internet and must wait long periods for resources, the Bard team built a strong case for their side.

After the fast-paced, hour-long verbal battle, an independent panel of judges decided the winner. One judge noted that although both teams did an excellent job, the team from Harvard failed to respond to Bard's argument that because some public schools become "dropout factories" for undocumented students, denying them admission might encourage private and wealthier schools to pick up the slack and educate them better.

Though it was close, the panel of judges gave the win to the prison debaters. Register chalked the victory up to his

Continued on page 2
1



hermosawave/iStock

Thanks to an executive order, many people with a criminal record in Kentucky may now register to vote.

A Fond Farewell

Guest Column: Jim Liske

On paper, my nephew should never have become addicted to drugs. He was a bright young man raised in a wonderful home by solid parents. And yet, he traded it all in for his substance abuse, leaving his heartbroken family behind when he went to prison.

My nephew's prison sentence changed his life and mine. In prison, he realized the severity of his situation. He was visited by a Prison Fellowship field director, and he learned to truly receive forgiveness for his past actions, grace for the present, and hope for the future.

My nephew's addiction and incarceration also led me into prison ministry. I learned firsthand how to empathize with the grieving families shattered by the fallout of a loved one's bad choices. I discovered what it means for parents of a prisoner to spend the holidays haunted by a child's absence, and for the first time in years of pastoral ministry, I took to heart Jesus' calling to visit those in prison.

My nephew has been out of prison for four years now. He

is sober, thriving at work, and continuing to grow spiritually. He is a husband and father.

I strongly believe that my nephew needed to go to prison. While it cost him a few years of physical freedom, it gave him a lifetime to celebrate God's grace, forgiveness, and restoration. And without his incarceration, I might never have known the tremendous joy of helping to bring men and women home from prison redeemed and renewed for God's purposes.

My time at Prison Fellowship has now drawn to a close as God calls me to serve people in other ways, but all of you and your families remain close to my heart. I am grateful for each of you that I had the opportunity to meet, serve, or learn from in some way. I will keep on praying for you.

I encourage you to make the most of this time. Though it may be difficult, it need not be a waste. As my nephew and countless other people have shown, a prison sentence can be a gift in disguise—a chance to begin again right where you are. God has created you with enormous value and purpose—to know Him, to be loved by Him, and to grow to be more and more like His Son Jesus. That's something you can do anytime, anywhere.

For His Kingdom,



Jim Liske

Jim Liske served as the CEO of Prison Fellowship from 2011 to 2015.

Subscription Info

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Petty Thief

Continued from page 1

"If there was a death in an inmate's family, I would take her with me," Wendy says, so that Pauline could meet with the grieving prisoner to comfort them and help them through the process.

Daughter Becomes Mother to Many

Pauline did three years on a six-year term, and when she was released in 1987, Wendy allowed her to come and live with her in Jackson. Over time, Wendy had come to see Pauline as her daughter and wanted to provide a temporary home for her.



Photo by Ron Blaylock

With a new identity and a new purpose, Pauline has been giving back ever since she left prison.

Over the next four years, while she was living with Wendy, Pauline was hired by a doctor—a volunteer whom Pauline had met when she was in prison—to work as a janitor in her office. As Pauline proved herself, the office staff realized her potential to do more, and her responsibilities grew as she continued to work there for the next 27 years.

She also got involved with a church—New Horizon Church International—and married Fred,

also a former prisoner whom she had met while incarcerated. She began volunteering with Prison Fellowship, going back into prison to minister and organizing Angel Tree. Under Pauline's leadership, New Horizon provides gifts to hundreds of children every Christmas through Prison Fellowship's Angel Tree program.

With Fred, she even started her own ministry to others coming out of prison. Over the

News of Note

Continued from page 1

men's tireless efforts. In an op-ed for *The Guardian*, a U.K.-based newspaper, he wrote that the prisoners, who are furthering their education through the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI), "talk debate in their cells, the yard and the mess hall. They verbally spar with BPI students who are not on the debate team, and talk with their families—creating for themselves a group of informal coaches."

In part, the debate program is designed to help people behind bars gain a better understanding of civil society and how they

can help shape it for the better. "Many of our debaters openly express the desire to someday make positive contributions to society," Register wrote. "I have no doubt that they will."

The debaters also hope their story will improve public perceptions of the incarcerated and inspire other people behind bars to continue their education. Quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, Alex Hall, 31, said the morning before the debate, "If we win, it's going to make a lot of people question what goes on in here. We might not be as naturally rhetorically gifted, but we work really hard." ■

INTRODUCING ...

THE SECOND PRISON PROJECT™

Sponsored by Prison Fellowship®

Exposure to the criminal justice system has become a part of life for many Americans. While punishment serves a purpose in creating a safe and security society, it should have clear limits. Those who are released from prison quickly realize how many obstacles still litter the pathway to a second chance. The "second prison" they encounter, made up of stigma, legal restrictions, and lost opportunities instead of concrete and razor wire, is familiar to millions. Even many people who found faith and renewed purpose while incarcerated lose hope a few steps past the prison gates.

In light of this reality, Prison Fellowship has launched The Second Prison Project. Led by Jesse Wiese, a one-time prisoner who graduated from law school, The Second Prison Project is an effort to create a

national network of people who believe in second chances and are committed to ending the second prison through leadership, advocacy, and service, so that those who have completed their formal sentences can make a meaningful contribution to their communities.

Your family and friends can join the Second Chance Network to strengthen the movement and get updates on how to help end the second prison. Sign up at secondprison.org and like the Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/secondprisonproject>.

If you don't have Internet access but want to learn more, you can also write to Jesse Wiese, Director of The Second Prison Project, c/o *Inside Journal*, P.O. Box, 1790, Ashburn, VA 20141-1790. Watch this space in future editions of *Inside Journal* for further updates.

"I stole from department stores, dollar stores, grocery stores ... if it was in walking distance from me, it was a target."

The Story Behind ‘Amazing Grace’

by A.R. Quinn

In the last year of his life, Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship, re-visited Maxwell Federal Prison Camp near Birmingham, Alabama, where he served time in the 1970s. While he was there, he gave a message to the men in the chapel. At the end, they all formed a circle around the edges of the room and joined hands. Chuck asked if they would sing “Amazing Grace” with him. He said that famous hymn was like “the prisoners’ national anthem,” because every time he went behind bars, the incarcerated men or women he visited knew all the words.

Many might be able to sing “Amazing Grace,” but not everyone knows the story behind this beloved song. It was written in 1779 by John Newton, who was one of the most respected preachers in England at the time.

A Long Way Down

Newton wasn’t always a spiritual leader. Born in London in 1725, he was the only child of a sea captain and a churchgoing woman. His mother taught him to read the Bible and go to services, but she died when Newton was seven years old. His father and stepmother did less to keep him on the straight and narrow, and he got into trouble many times, though he never forgot the lessons his mother taught him.

When he was 17, Newton fell hard for a young woman named Mary. He missed out on job opportunities to spend more time with her, and when he was 19, while traveling to see her, he fell victim to a “press gang,” which meant he was forced to join the crew of a ship, where discipline was harsh, the food was bad and scarce, and his spirit was nearly broken. His mother’s God seemed far away and uncaring. When he tried and failed to escape, the ship’s captain had him stripped and flogged.

Later Newton was transferred to another ship, and he became involved in the brutal 18th-century slave trade. The work was horrific and cost many human lives, but at the time it was legal—and lucrative. Newton became known for his wild behavior (he almost drowned after falling off a ship during a party) and for openly mocking faith. He seemed as far away from God as he could get, but God had other ideas.

A Turning Point

In 1748, Newton was on board a slaving ship called the *Greyhound*. The ship was in bad shape. During a violent storm, it began to fall apart and take on water. A crew member had already been swept overboard. All night long Newton bailed to try to keep the ship from going under. While he did, he thought about the state of his life. He knew he had run from God, hurt other people, and made a wreck out of his own situation. He had even

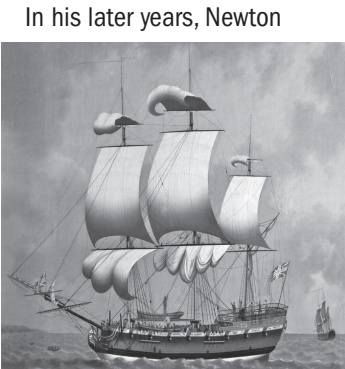
mocked the Gospel. He realized he might die in the storm. Would God still be forgiving, even after Newton had rejected Him?

At last Newton recalled what his mother had taught him from the Bible: God loves to show mercy even to people who feel they are beyond redemption. Newton asked for God’s help for the first time in years. He survived the storm.

Transformed by Grace

It didn’t happen overnight, but Newton’s life began to be transformed. He learned to pray. He found friends who shared his faith and could help him understand how it applied to his life. Eventually he gave up his role in the slave trade and stopped sailing for a living.

Instead, Newton, who had married Mary, studied to become a preacher. In 1764 he became the curate, or pastor, of a small English church. He wrote a widely read biography of his early years, and he also wrote hymns. “Amazing Grace,” the one best known today, describes his very personal journey out of spiritual blindness into the light of God’s grace.



Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now, I see.


‘Twas Grace that taught
my heart to fear.
And Grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear
the hour I first believed.

—John Newton (1779)

became the pastor of a larger church in London, where he helped lead many people to the God he had once mocked. He was also active in the movement to abolish the British slave trade. When the prime minister appointed a committee to investigate the slave trade, Newton was a key witness. He explained the horrors of the “industry” from the inside out, and his compelling testimony helped make the slave trade—and eventually slavery—illegal.

God’s amazing grace is for everyone. Period. It applied to Chuck Colson, who, as Nixon’s “hatchet man,” had the reputation for being willing to “run over his own grandmother” to gain reelection. It applied to John Newton, who mocked God and captained a slave ship. It applies to you.

Jesus said, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners” (Mark 2:17, NLT). If, like John Newton, you wonder whether God could forgive you, the answer is a resounding, “Yes!” He wants you to open your heart to Him so that you can be free from the weight of your past, experience His “amazing grace” for yourself, and realize your part in His plan. If you want to learn more about God’s grace, *Inside Journal* wants to help. Through one of our partners, you can enroll in a free Bible study course by mail. For more information, write to: “Amazing Grace,” *Inside Journal*, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. The course is available in English and Spanish. ■

PRISON FELLOWSHIP

2016

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.”
– John 3:16-17 (New Living Translation)

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Lose an Enemy, Gain a Friend

by W.M. Thompson

Ron Hammer first started using drugs while he was in the U.S. Marine Corps. “It was a stressful time and drugs were an escape,” he recalls. After his military service, Ron married his childhood sweetheart, Sharon, and opened an auto repair shop in Tennessee. While his business thrived, his drug habit also escalated—to the point of addiction.

One day Ron made plans to rob a man to buy about \$5,000 worth of crystal meth. It was November 14, 1986, and Phillip Robinson was working at his father’s grocery store across town. Phillip’s father, Wayne, had gone to the bank to deposit checks and would be returning with \$9,000 in cash.

When Wayne came back to the grocery store, Ron and an accomplice approached with guns drawn. Wayne tried to pry the gun out of Ron’s hands, but it fired, loud enough for Phillip to hear. Ron quickly took the money and ran. When Phillip rushed outside to see what was happening, he discovered that his father had been shot. An ambulance took Wayne to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

No Escape

Ron and his accomplice were

arrested for the murder of Wayne Robinson. He posted bail and tried to escape by using drugs, just like he had in the military. Ron even attempted to end his life by shooting himself with a rifle—but the rifle moved when it fired. He was left with severe powder burns on his arms, yet his life remained intact. Undeterred, Ron attempted suicide twice more by crashing his plane and his car. Miraculously, he survived both times.

“I was trying to make a deal with God, ‘Get me out of this, take it away,’” Ron recalls. As a car salesman, he was used to cutting deals. This time, however, Ron couldn’t negotiate himself out of the consequences for his actions. Even though he insisted that he was innocent at trial, Ron was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Stuck behind bars, Ron used smuggled prescription drugs and bucked up to everybody with a bad reputation. “I had nothing to lose,” he says.

Surrendering to God

Meanwhile, Phillip was grieving the loss of his father. Despite Ron’s conviction, Phillip struggled with thoughts of vengeance. “As a Christian I knew I needed to forgive Ron, but the fact that these men had not owned responsibility for the crime kept me stuck,” he says.

Eight years after the murder,



Phillip (left) has formed an unlikely friendship with Ron (right), the man who killed his father in 1986.

Phillip was weary from resisting forgiveness, so he prayed. “I told God, ‘If you want me and Ron to be side by side in heaven forever, that’s O.K. I don’t like the idea, but I surrender to that,’” Phillip recalls. After his prayer, he felt a release and didn’t struggle with anger like he had before.

Ron’s defenses began to crumble too. By 1996, he got sober and accepted Christ. But becoming a Christian didn’t instantly solve all of his problems. He still had recurring nightmares about the murder. Plus, his wife grew tired of visiting him in prison year after year, so the couple divorced, and Sharon remarried.

“Being alone was taking a toll,” Sharon recalls.

Worst of all was Ron’s guilt over taking a man’s life. He prayed for years before he finally heard a voice: *You still haven’t*

confessed to the Robinson family.

An Unlikely Friendship

Desperate to be set free from his guilt, Ron wrote a letter of confession and sent it to Wayne’s widow, Delores. After 21 years of denying the truth, Ron admitted he was the one who had pulled the trigger.

The letter was unsettling for Delores and Phillip. They had believed Ron’s accomplice killed Wayne. However Phillip, at that time a new pastor, felt compassion for Ron.

“I wrote back and thanked him for his courage. I said that as a Christ follower I have been forgiven, so in turn I can forgive him,” he says.

When Ron read Phillip’s letter, he bawled. “I didn’t realize I wanted Phillip’s forgiveness until I received it,” Ron recalls.

From that day forward, Ron was a changed man. His nightmares stopped, and he felt less animosity toward gang members with whom he formerly had conflicts with. “After I received Phillip’s forgiveness, I forgave them,” he says.

Hungry to learn about Jesus, Ron sent Phillip more letters, asking him about the Bible. Soon, through letters, Phillip was mentoring the man who had killed his father. Phillip says that his friendship with Ron is evidence of God at work. “You don’t do that, you don’t pray for people who killed your family,” he says. “It’s extraordinary—a work of God.”

Spreading the Word

In 2014, Delores and Phillip spoke on behalf of Ron at his first parole hearing, explaining that they had forgiven Ron and it was time to move on. Ron was required to undergo a psychological evaluation and attend a second hearing before he was deemed eligible for parole.

Last year Ron was released from prison. Soon after, Phillip visited Ron, and they greeted each other with an embrace. The men have since shared the story of their friendship at churches and conferences. Sharon divorced her second husband and remarried Ron in October. “Honestly, he’s the love of my life,” she says. Currently, Ron and Phillip are writing a book together about the power of forgiveness. ■

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– Willard H.

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