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Get Out—And Don't Come Back!

A Quick Guide for Short-Timers

by A.R. Quinn

Jill Clarke* was an accountant when she went to work for a fraudulent gold company. Her boss got federal time; she got state time in Florida. Ready to make a change, she joined a Celebrate Recovery group in prison and found two female Prison Fellowship® volunteers to mentor her.

Still, as her release date approached, her anxiety grew.

“Nervous. Excited. I don’t know, what’s that thing when you’re scared and nervous at the same time. Apprehensive?” Jill asked her mentors.

She wondered how she would find a place to live and a way to pay the bills. With freedom would come greater pressure.

The First Three Hours: Face Your Fears

As much as you might be



Photo by Beth Furgurson

Stephan (L), a mentor who had previously done prison time, helped Reggie (R) navigate life beyond the prison gates.

looking forward to it, the thought of being released can also provoke a lot of fear and insecurity. You’ve probably seen enough friends come back to know it won’t be easy.

Jill tackled her fears by working with her mentors

to make specific, concrete plans. She applied for special transitional housing. She knew how she would get money for food and the medications she took. And on the day she was released, she had supportive people waiting to give her a

ride to her new home.

Despite her anxiety—an emotion you might share—Jill was ready to succeed. She started preparing as early as possible. She sought accountability and good advice. And with a solid plan for her first 24 hours, she managed not to let her fears take her off course.

The First Three Days: Find Your Footing

When you walk from a dark room into sunlight, it takes your eyes a few moments to adjust. The first days out of prison can feel the same: intense, disorienting, and maybe frightening. You’ll have a lot of decisions to make. The world can seem like it’s moving too fast, and if you’ve been down a long time, new technologies might be unfamiliar.

This is when a supportive mentor or community can make all the difference.

Having the right support in place was a big help to Reggie Harris.

Reggie was a young kid when he fell in with a bad crowd and spent a short term in prison. As he prepared for release, he was nervous about meeting with his parole officer. But his mentor, Stephan, took him to Goodwill

FINDING A CAREER

For help finding employment after your release, start with job search websites like [indeed.com](https://www.indeed.com) and [70millionjobs.com](https://www.70millionjobs.com). Also visit prisonfellowship.org/resources and scroll down to the section called “Preparing for Reentry.” There, you will find a lot of resources, including tools for job searching and writing a resume, tips for family, books to check out, a national directory for reentry, and more. Be sure to follow all your release conditions and parole rules.

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Start Your Reentry on the Right Foot

by John Baker

(written for Prison Fellowship a few years before his passing)

I used to look into the bottom of a bottle like I would find all the answers to my problems there. Sure, on the outside, I seemed like a success. I was a vice president of marketing operations, and I had a wife, kids, and a house, but I spent almost two decades as a functional alcoholic. I drank just enough to not ever feel anything. I was emotionally unavailable for my family, like I was living in my own time zone. I was empty inside, and there wasn’t enough alcohol in the world to fill me.

One morning on a business trip I hit my breaking point. I woke up in my hotel room and reached for a beer first thing. But for some reason I couldn’t get enough. Beer wasn’t working any more.

After that I sobered up in an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) group. My wife Sheryl and our kids had been going to Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, and they invited me to go with them on Sundays. I had made a decision when I was younger to follow Jesus, and I knew that now I needed Him to be my Higher Power.

After struggling to talk about my alcoholism in regular Bible study groups, I realized that people like me needed a recovery program that is based on Jesus where we can share our journeys. I approached Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback, and talked to him about my idea. He said, “You do it.” So I did. I took a significant pay cut, but my wife was behind me 100%. And that’s how Celebrate Recovery (CR) was born.

CR is an international, Christ-centered 12-step



Photo provided by John Baker

John Baker co-founded Celebrate Recovery (CR) in 1991 at Saddleback Church in California. He passed away in February of 2021 at age 72, but his efforts live on through CR and its more than 35,000 church partners.

program that’s open to anyone with any hurt, habit, or hang-up. We’ve all been hurt, and we’ve all fallen short, so that means literally everyone is welcome. In the last three decades, CR has expanded to 35,000 churches, 20 languages, and

universities. Through Celebrate Recovery Inside, many men and women behind bars have also joined and become leaders in CR programs.

Staying Sober on the Outside

If you’ve gotten clean on the inside, and you’re looking to

stay that way that for good, I can guarantee your resolve will be tested. The good news is that with support and the right priorities, you can follow in the footsteps of countless others who have traveled the road to recovery. Here’s some advice to help you get started—and stay on the path.

- **Know the difference between being clean and being sober.** Being “clean” is about your behavior. Being “sober” is about the state of your mind and heart. If you’re just focused on staying clean, or not making a mistake, any little obstacle can throw you off course. But if you’re focused on the journey of sobriety and building a relationship with God that supports your spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional health, you will have what it takes to make the right choices in hard times.

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How Are You Getting Home?

by Jordan Jeske

As you plan for release, you'll need to decide whom you are going to ask to give you a ride. It might seem like a simple call, but it will have big consequences.

Is it going to be an old girlfriend or boyfriend? Or a so-called friend from the past, mostly there to push a drug, a drink, or a come-up on you?

Or will you go the other way, and find someone strong enough to hold you accountable for all those changes you've been trying to make in your life?

My journey home started long before I was released. The Angel Tree church that brought my son a Christmas gift recommended a safe and structured living environment for me when I would be released. My mom helped me fill out an application, and after a phone interview I knew it was what I needed to help me transition out of prison.

My mom also picked me up. We celebrated with a hug and a Lumberjack Slam from Denny's. When I crossed the threshold into my transitional living home, I was filled with satisfaction, because I knew it would help me meet my goal of never returning to prison.

Choosing someone to give



Getty Images: AleksandarGeorgiev

you a ride is about more than your first few hours. It's about the direction you want to go from here. It's going to take time, thought, and work to establish relationships with a program that will offer you a way to continue rebuilding your future, but if you're willing to commit to this path, people will commit to you.

Recently I got to be someone's ride home. I

took him to the reentry home I now operate, and I'm going to mentor him as he transitions into his new life. Structure your first day out as a reflection of the person you want to be, and one day, maybe, you can be someone's ride and mentor, too! ■

Jordan Jeske is a former prisoner who has worked closely with prison ministries after his release.

INSIDE JOURNAL

Inside Journal is a quarterly newspaper for prisoners. Available in Men's, Women's, and Spanish editions, Inside Journal contains inspiring articles, tips, games, and even Bible studies. Ask your chaplain if your facility receives Inside Journal. 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.

Right Foot
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- **You don't have to go it alone.** If you flip through the Bible, you'll see the phrase "one another" over and over again. We are created to need one another. God heals us and forgives us, but we realize that healing and forgiveness as we live in relationship with other people. We also need others to keep us accountable. I still have a sponsor today, and a whole team of people that keeps me accountable. I still need it, because all of us can slip and go back to our old ways if we're not careful. Making a mistake doesn't mean we don't love Jesus, but it's a crazy world out there. We need people who know our secrets and are free to ask us any questions and encourage us. Your success rate is so much greater in community than trying to do it by yourself.
- **Don't mute your pain.** We know that physical pain tells us to take care of our bodies, but for some reason, when it comes to emotional or psychological pain, we often just look for ways to turn down the volume. Our desire to feel good—or at least to escape the pain—is the source of all kinds of addiction. The substance—whether it's alcohol, drugs, sex, food, adrenaline, or anything else—is just a matter of what

means we choose to help us get there. But if we listen to our pain instead of muting it, it can direct us toward problems that we need to address: sin we need to confess, forgiveness we need to give or to ask for, hurts we need to face, or relationships we need to repair. When you stop running from it, pain can be an ally. The path to recovery and freedom often starts when the pain you're in finally outweighs your fear of changing. ■

How to Find a Celebrate Recovery Group

You need a place to belong, and Celebrate Recovery is waiting to welcome you with open arms!

1. Go to celebraterecovery.com.
2. Using the links at the top of the page, click on "Find a Group."
3. Search by city, state, ZIP code, or even country.
4. Select a location near you, contact the leader, and let them know when to expect you.

Celebrate Recovery has groups for families and kids, so your loved ones can find a chapter to join even before you get home or help you find one for yourself if you don't have internet access.

Get Out
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and helped him find a set of professional clothes. Since the state allowed it, Stephan came along to Reggie's first meeting with the parole officer.

Stephan didn't do anything for Reggie that Reggie could do for himself, but he gave him daily encouragement and accountability as Reggie got his identification, hunted for jobs, and established a new routine.

You might not think you'll need the extra support like Reggie did, but having someone on speed dial will help you manage unexpected setbacks when they come. If your application for

employment gets rejected, or if a drug-using friend from the past returns, you'll be glad to have someone you can turn to.

The First Three Months: Form Positive Relationships

After a decades-long spiral of drugs, despair, and broken relationships, John Kramer sat in prison. He hadn't just wrecked his own life; his three children were under three separate roofs. So he made a promise: he would become the father his children needed, and when he got home, with God's help, he would get his family back together.

John worked hard to fulfill his promise. In prison, he stayed connected with his



Pict Rider: Getty Images

children by participating in Prison Fellowship Angel Tree™. When he got out, he remained clean and sober. He found a welcoming church, and he used his new social network to raise funding for a successful coffee-roasting business. The business has helped him build more positive community around him—and support his family. His children are now back under his roof, and he and his wife have a new child.

In the first three months, as the newness of freedom wears off, loneliness may be your enemy. That feeling of isolation may drive you to form relationships with people who don't share your values—and that can spell trouble.

The best thing you can do

is focus on repairing broken relationships and forming positive new ones, like John did.

The First Three Years: Give Back

Diane Diaz was a two-time prisoner. Her second time around, she joined a long-term Prison Fellowship program for women preparing to return to society.

Three years after her release, she has graduated from community college, has a steady job, and plans to start her own HVAC business. She also goes back into prison to help other women.

Bill Smith, a Prison Fellowship staff member, says, "People like her that come from backgrounds where they

should have been dead, all the way now to caring and giving back and working with other women after spending time in prison—they're my heroes."

If, like Diane, you pass the three-year mark without another arrest, you are likely to remain out for good. At that point, you will probably have reached a place of stability and growth in your career and your relationships.

You can also look around and see what you have to contribute. Remember: The goal isn't just to stay out; it's to stay out so that you build a restored life of purpose and hope. ■

**Some last names changed for privacy reasons.*

BEING RELEASED SOON?

Check out the Colson Scholarship started by Charles Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship. The Colson Scholarship is available to eligible returning citizens who want to attend Wheaton College in Illinois (wheaton.edu).

Who is eligible? Applicants must:

- Be a Christian.
- Be a U.S. citizen.
- Have a felony record. (Note: Felonies must NOT include sexual offenses, arson, or repeat violent offenses).
- Be out of jail or prison for at least one full year by April 1 of the application year.
- Be established in a local church.
- Be accepted into Wheaton College undergraduate or graduate school.

To learn more, visit prisoninstitute.com/colson-scholarship.

The Ultimate Second Chance

by Johnathan Kana

It was the call I had been hoping for—and dreading. The voice on the other end of the line was friendly, but my stomach was in knots.

“Mr. Kana, I’ve reviewed your qualifications, and I’m pleased with what I’m seeing here. I’d like to offer you the job, if you’re still interested.”

You bet I was. This was an amazing opportunity: a mid-level management job with a growing company—and for significantly more money than I was earning. I was practically drooling over the offer.

There was just one problem: I hadn’t yet revealed my criminal history.

I knew that what I was about to say could change the whole conversation. My leadership skills and relevant work experience might no longer

matter once this hiring manager heard that I had been to prison for a serious crime. For a moment, I considered saying nothing. Don’t ask, don’t tell—right?

Deep within, I knew that wouldn’t go well for me. Better just get it over with, I decided.

“Thank you very much,” I began. “I’m eager to work with you, too. There’s just one more thing we need to discuss …”

Coming Clean

That conversation is a paraphrase of many I’ve had in the years since my release. No matter how many times I do it, sharing my criminal history never gets any easier. It’s awkward and embarrassing. But it has to be done.

Sometimes the interviewer listens with interest as I share how I’ve grown from my past. Other times, I can sense the interviewer’s discomfort as

he or she abruptly ends the interview. In both cases, I’m more likely to get a form rejection letter than a job offer.

It hurts when someone either can’t or won’t see past my crime, because it’s only a small part of who I really am. Yes, I’m an ex-offender. But I’m also an intelligent, hard-working individual with plenty of valuable skills. All I need is for an employer to give me the chance to prove it.

Unfortunately, not all of them will. For some employers, a felony conviction is an automatic deal-breaker, and that’s their right. I may not think it’s fair, but no amount of pleading on my part is likely to change their hiring criteria.

God’s law is like that, too—and we’re all guilty. Not everyone commits a crime worthy of being sent to prison, but when it comes to God’s standards for our lives, all of us have a “criminal history” we have to answer for. The Bible says, “The person who keeps all the laws except one is as guilty as the person who has broken all of God’s laws” (James 2:10, NLT). It also says, “If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth” (1 John 1:8).

Because we all mess up, all of us are marked as lawbreakers. And that’s an automatic bar from admission to God’s Kingdom.

Landing the Job

“I appreciate your candor, Mr. Kana,” the hiring manager began. “We all make mistakes in life, but not everyone learns from them.”

I waited breathlessly to hear

WHEN CAN YOU START?

Checking that dreaded box on a job application feels like an immediate disqualification. Yet it’s risky to leave that space blank, and even worse to lie. Most employers perform background checks, so honesty remains the best policy.

The same is true if you want to begin a relationship with God through His Son Jesus. If you’re ready, you can do that with a simple prayer, like this one:

God, I know that my “criminal history” means I have sinned and made mistakes. But I also know that Your Son Jesus died in my place, and I ask You to forgive me, for His sake. Thank You for accepting me as I am. Now, help me become more like You. Amen.

If you’ve just prayed those words from a sincere heart, then you can rest assured that your application to become a follower of Jesus has been received and approved. To learn more about your new job description, you can register for a free correspondence Bible study—and receive a free Bible—through one of our trusted partner organizations. Simply write to **“Reentry Edition” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.**

what he would say next.

“As far as I’m concerned, your past isn’t a problem—as long as it’s in the past.”

I beamed with happiness.

“Thank you, sir.” He was

giving me a shot, and I was determined not to disappoint him.

“Now,” he continued, “let’s talk about the future. When can you start?”

God wants to give us a second chance, too. He sent His Son, Jesus, to live as one of us, modeling the life of love, integrity, hope, and purpose He wants all of us to have. Both fully God and fully human, Jesus chose to die a criminal’s death on a Roman cross to pay the penalty we could never pay for ourselves. Then, God raised Him from the grave three days later, breaking the stranglehold of sin and death in our lives.

Now, everyone who turns to Jesus can be forgiven, accepted, and made new—no matter what they’ve done in the past.

Thanks to Him, our sins don’t have to keep us from approaching God. We can come just as we are, being honest about our “criminal history” without fear of rejection. When we do, God exchanges our guilt for Jesus’ perfect record. “He canceled the record that contained the charges against us,” the Bible says. “He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ’s cross” (Colossians 2:14).

Best of all, when we make Jesus the boss of our lives, He puts us to work for His Kingdom. And that’s a job with excellent growth potential—and eternal benefits. ■



AlexSava: Getty Images

Finding Your Identity After Release

by S.L. Ray

Inside Journal spoke with former Prison Fellowship Academy® Reentry Manager Tom Lundquist about finding your literal identity (ID cards and bank accounts) and your figurative identity (value and purpose) after release.

Inside Journal: After being released, how can someone get a driver’s license or other identifying documents?

Tom Lundquist: There’s such a spectrum of how things work, depending on your conditions of release. Reentry services vary from county to county. Some counties have “wraparound” reentry services. Many prisons have transitional services.

In Minnesota prisons, for example, the DOC has transition coordinators that assist in obtaining IDs, birth certificates, and driver’s licenses, even paying some fees for you. Before you do anything, first find out what your permissions are from your parole agents. Then, based on your situation, you can start finding the right resources to help you.

IJ: What about opening a bank account and managing money after release?

TL: When someone is released from prison, the money that they earned in prison is put into an account. They’ll have money on their books and be given a debit card. That card can be used right after release.

If you walk into a bank,

you may get coaching there as far as how to open a bank account. For a credit card, you might have to start off with a bank credit card. That’s OK in the beginning. It keeps your money all in one spot.

IJ: How can someone learn the latest technology on a smartphone and find the right apps, especially someone who has been incarcerated a long time?

TL: I’ve noticed that if newly released citizens don’t have restrictions against a smartphone, they’ll often buy one the day after release. A smartphone opens up all sorts of options.

You may need coaching on how to use a smartphone. If your prison has a mentor, that’s a good way to get help. Otherwise, some cities have

community organizations that will also walk you through things like how to get access to bus cards, which banks are best to open an account in. Once you get a smartphone, you’ll have a lot more options, with banking apps, organizing apps, all kinds of helpful apps—even ride-share apps to help get to a job interview.

IJ: What tips can you share for the post-release job search?

TL: When it comes to finding work, if you have conditions that prevent you from accessing the internet, you’ll need to find a workforce center. Those are places where you can go in and people will coach you on the internet. And it’s all filtered, so you can’t access things that are too personal or improper, but you can access email.

Also, some states have good resources for finding felon-friendly jobs. In some states, the workforce centers have trained staff to assist formerly incarcerated men and women in finding jobs that are not as impacted by their past felony convictions. [NOTE: See sidebar on page 1 for more job help].

IJ: What else is helpful for finding your identity on the outside?

TL: A good faith community. People are much less at risk of relapse or returning to any kind of criminal activity if they find friendships in a church home, and especially a church that’s welcoming to former prisoners. In prison, people often place their faith in Jesus and find their identity in Him. And that relationship with

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67-Year-Old Grad: ‘It’s Never Too Late’

by E.G. Andrews

After 35 years of addiction, countless arrests, and two prison terms, David Norman is on a new path. He graduated as the oldest member of Columbia University’s class of 2016 at age 67, receiving a bachelor’s degree in philosophy. Now he works as a researcher at the university and volunteers for causes that help returning citizens and people struggling with addiction. He recently sat down with Inside Journal to talk about his journey.

Inside Journal: What is something you wish you had known coming out of prison?

David Norman: How much easier this is—the honest working life—than leading a criminal life. We expend so much energy in a criminal life, and that energy is wasted in so many ways. The working life has its stresses and its problems, but there’s a better payoff in the end. I have this new life of working, learning, being involved in civic enterprises. It’s so much better.

IJ: How did you end up attending Columbia?

DN: In prison, I was reading all the time. I worked as a teacher’s aide and later worked in a program called



Transitional Services. They gave me training in facilitating classes while I was teaching other people life skills. I had a lot of people tell me, “You should be a teacher!” So when I got out, I got a job as an outreach worker at Mount Vernon Hospital in New York, and eventually got a part-time job with Columbia doing research. That gave me the chance to go to school tuition-free—but I had to apply and get accepted first!

IJ: Did you ever ask yourself whether you would finish, and if so, what kept you going?

DN: Of course. But I spent six years telling people what I wanted to do with

my life, and I felt like I had to own that. A lot of people knew my previous reputation and thought I was faking. They thought I had conned the parole board or something. But I believed my transformation was real, and I knew I could live it out. Whenever I had trouble in school, I remembered how far I had come, and I knew I couldn’t give up. I used to be addicted to heroin, man, and there I was, finishing a degree. And I’ve had those people who said, “You know what, Norman? I’m really proud of you.” That kept me going.

IJ: How did you find supportive community on the outside?

DN: I’ve chosen people, at my jobs for instance, to become my mentors. I knew I’d need their wisdom and support. My supervisor is like a mentor to me. And I built good relationships with them just by being honest. I told everyone about my past; I knew they’d find out anyway. Bosses, professors—they’d see where I had come from and what I was attempting to do. They’d say, “Wow, that’s quite an accomplishment.” You see, I was really bitter in my early life and thought everyone was out to take advantage of me. But I found that I needed to be honest, and I needed to work hard, and someone would have the goodness to work with me and

encourage me on my journey.

IJ: What was valuable about going to college later in life (besides your degree)?

DN: I learned that the people who are most successful are not the ones who set out to make money. The successful people are the ones who set out to make something, to do something, because they love to do it. Maybe they’ll make money. But more importantly, they’re doing useful things with a good attitude. For me, service is important. I had this “it’s about me” attitude for such a long time. I didn’t become happy until I started to serve other people.

IJ: What would you say to someone who feels like it’s too late to start over?

DN: It’s never too late. It’s still worth it. The whole thing is a journey anyway, and it can still be enjoyed. Don’t bite off more than you can chew, but I think if you can acclimate to one small change at a time, you can accomplish things. So take an honest inventory of yourself—maybe you need to change your attitude about something, or about people. Be humble and open to change. You’ll see small, incremental changes, and you’ll reach the end of your life better than how you were when you started. ■

REENTRY CHECKLIST

Tear out this checklist and carry it in your wallet to remind yourself of the things you want to accomplish.

- ☐ Get Social Security Card and other forms of ID (certified copy of birth certificate, picture ID).
- ☐ Complete any in-prison reentry programs available.
- ☐ Deal with outstanding warrants, charges, and detainers under your legal name or any name you may have used in the past.
- ☐ Complete a drug treatment program or find a program in your community, like a Celebrate Recovery chapter, immediately after release.
- ☐ Form a job search plan (make a resume, network with friends and family).
- ☐ Secure short-term housing.
- ☐ Make a plan for a safe, positive, and healthy way to celebrate your release.
- ☐ Get directions and a ride to a local church on the first Sunday of your freedom.

My short-term goals: _____

My long-term goals: _____

Finding Your Identity Continued from page 3

Jesus involves other people, to help anchor and deepen their values. Well, that’s even more critical when you leave prison. In prison or jail, there aren’t as many temptations, you have more time on your hands, and you can study a lot. But when you’re released, you have a wider range of decisions to make, and you don’t have the level of people keeping you in check. Without a network of support, it’s a lot harder to stay on the right path. People who find community on the outside tend to do well. People who don’t find community tend to struggle.

IJ: How long does the reentry process take?

TL: Figuring out who you are in Christ, or who you are as a person, takes time. Several former prisoners I worked with told me it took them a year after getting out to find out who they are. In fact, research says it takes three years on average to get established. Sifting through the temptations, the

freedoms, the stresses, and the faith piece can be a slow process of transformation. You might even flourish for a while but then start to drift. One man after his release started off attending a huge church but didn’t find any friendships there. He wondered if simply attending church but not getting to know other people is what Christianity on the outside was supposed to look like. But then he found a smaller church with real friendships. This church was also very intentional in welcoming those who were incarcerated. ■

IT SAYS IN 2 CHRONICLES 15:7, “But as for you, be strong and courageous, for your work will be rewarded.” Be patient with yourself and include others in your reentry process. Pursue your identity, find your community, and build your support.



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