

Having a Relative in Prison / Trust God in Trouble

Marj: One sunny, beautiful day we suddenly felt like a tsunami had hit us. Our youngest son was arrested by the police. What a shock! When we heard the news, we just cried. We thought back over the years; our beautiful little boy who became a clever young man. How could things go so wrong for him!

Tammy: Welcome to Women of Hope. I'm Tammy, and Carol and I are happy to be with you again. That was Marj talking. She started to tell us about her son's arrest, and I want to hear more, because today we'll be talking about having a relative in prison. What a terrible situation, Marj! When did it start?

Marj: Well, he changed a lot when he had a girlfriend who wasted his money, and used drugs, and gave drugs to him. Then he lost his job and had no money. He was disturbed in his mind. His next employer cheated him. He began to feel desperate. And then he got addicted to pornography.

Carol: Oh, Marj, that must have been just terrible!

Marj: We think it started when he was a child. He found some magazines on the side of the road on his way home from school. They had obscene pictures about sex. They wrote about women just as *objects* for men to look at and lust after. And they had a very bad effect on him. As he grew up he couldn't resist getting these magazines, and later when he had a computer he would sit at it until very late at night looking up the same things. He was desperately unhappy.

Tammy: You can see how this could happen. A wise man wrote in the Bible: "*whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...think about such things (Philippians 4:8).*" The things we feed our minds on are sure to affect our actions.

Marj: We felt helpless. My husband and I prayed and asked the Lord to rescue our son out of this situation, and He answered in a strange and terrifying way.

The police found him through his computer, because he was watching things that were against the law. They took him away to prison. He wanted to kill himself, and we were scared that he would. We felt like all our world had collapsed, but because we believe in God who hears us, we cried out to him for help to bear this, and for our son to have his problems sorted out. We prayed a prayer like King David in the Bible prayed, when he was in trouble: that God would "lift him out of the pit of despair and out of the sticky, clingy mud and set his feet on a rock and establish his way" (Psalm 40). We hoped and prayed that our son would also ask God for forgiveness and help in his time of need.

Tammy: It sounds as if you did the very best thing - when you're in real trouble, you need to put your trust in God. You know he hears, even the things you can't put into words.

Marj: He was in prison for two months, and we visited him as often as we could. It was a scary place. We had to go through lots of security checks and body searches before we could see him,

and then had to talk to him through thick glass. He was unhappy and his angry outbursts tore at our hearts. We couldn't even reach out and touch him. All I could do was pray for him. We realized that it's not just the person in prison that's being punished, but their family too.

I was often in tears. Friends and family supported us and prayed for us and our son, and that helped us a lot. Some good things did begin to happen: our son was able to help an indigenous prisoner who had been unfairly treated and who was far from his home and family. Our son began to think about studying after he was released, and planned how to solve some of his money problems. We were pleased that he was beginning to think about positive things.

His trial was reported in the newspapers and TV. That was humiliating and painful. We continued to ask God to give us strength. The judge was wise and kind, and seemed to understand that his past had influenced him. He decided that our son could go free, with some conditions on his behavior. Our son accepted this. Since his trial he's been working and planning for the future, and doing some study courses. He seems to have learnt his lesson. We thank God for his goodness and mercy.

Carol: So God did answer your prayer and He helped your son break the terrible cycle he was in.

Marj: Yes, though it was very hard. We've learned from this experience that when we ask God to solve problems, he might do so in ways we could never imagine. We realized that we needed to be thankful for God's answers to our prayers, whether they were what we liked, or not. And we held on to our belief that God is good and just. He knows all that happens and we found that He *can* bring about changes if we ask Him and trust Him.

Carol: You might have a family member in prison, or you might know someone who does. Maybe you have someone you love who's in prison though they *haven't* done anything wrong, and you're struggling to cope. I'm sure I would. We've invited Diane to talk with us today. She's been working with prisoners and their families for several years, and we thought she could help us to think about how prisoners' families can cope better. Welcome Diane.

Diane: Thanks for having me. I was listening to Marj and thinking how shocked most people are when a family member is put into prison. I've seen many parents, and wives or husbands, who can't believe what's happening. It's hard, and confusing. In one moment, it seems life is turned upside-down. You might feel overwhelmed by fear ... shame,... stress... anger...,

Marj: ..yes, and grief... loneliness... and you don't know about the future. You're left to explain to others. You're left to carry on.

Diane: When a person is in prison it can have a huge impact on a family, whether they're guilty or not. As Marj said, partners, parents and children of prisoners suffer- for crimes they didn't do. The person in prison may have been the main provider for the family...and they are left without any money for food and other things they need.

I want to say to you; please know that you are not alone. Reach out for help and support from family, friends or professionals. You could find out if there is a local Prison Fellowship office near you. Prison Fellowship is a Christian organisation that helps prisoners and their families, and it

works in 140 countries around the world. Perhaps the legal system in your country is able to help you. Getting help for yourself and your family may be the most important thing you can do!

Marj: We certainly found how important it was to have friends and family supporting us as we went through these difficult times. It was so comforting to know they were praying and caring.

Tammy: I guess you would need to *try* to keep things going as usual, especially if you have children. And keep yourself healthy...Let's talk about visiting a family member or friend who is in prison. Most of us wouldn't know what to expect.

Diane: You need to really understand that life behind bars is *not the same* as life on the outside, so you can understand why the prisoner acts or speaks the way they do when you visit. They lose all rights, privileges, and freedoms. It is difficult to get the basic things they need. Often they are known by a number instead of a name. There are strict prison rules that control every part of their life. They're forced to live with total strangers, and all of them are struggling to survive and get through their own prison term. They cannot make their own choices or decisions. They eat what they're given. They do what they're told or they are punished. Prisoners are "on guard" every waking moment. The only real 'free time' is when a prisoner is locked in isolation, in his cell, alone. Yet even then, he will probably lie awake feeling guilty and worrying about his family. Or he might believe he has been treated unfairly.

That means that when you visit, you might find your family member is very stressed, or angry, or depressed. They will probably be happy to see you, but they may not be able to show that happiness. Most prisoners shut off their emotions to cope in prison. Most times, it has nothing to do with you.

Tammy: Can you suggest anything we should do when visiting a prisoner?

Diane: It really depends on the rules in each prison. Some prisoners are not allowed any visitors- that's really hard. You need to learn, respect and obey the prison rules – whether you agree with them or not. For example, are you allowed to take gifts or food or medicine? Are you allowed to talk privately, or touch the prisoner? How long are you allowed to stay? What time are you allowed to enter? Are children allowed? Can you send letters or parcels? Know the rules **BEFORE** you go all the way to the prison! If you don't learn **AND** obey the rules, you may be banned from visiting again.

Marj: In most prisons, you need to write to the prisoner and ask him or her to have your name on their list of visitors who are allowed in. You can't get into the prison if you're not on this list.

Tammy: Is it really helpful to visit prisoners, when it's so difficult?

Diane: I've worked within the prison system for nearly six years; I've seen visits that build up the prisoner and family, and visits that tear them apart. What makes the difference? Understand what it might be like for them. It may be very hard for you to put your wishes aside and focus on what the prisoner needs, but these visits really are their life-line to the outside world. Use your time together and use your words wisely. Plan beforehand what you want to say. There can be many distractions. Time together goes quickly- don't waste it in arguing. When you visit, try to give hope. Talk about your ideas for the future, and how you can prepare for the future together.

Tammy: I imagine that you could feel pretty angry with them for causing such awful problems.

Diane: Yes, and you may have good reason to be angry with them! But think about forgiving them so you can both look to the future. Forgiveness brings changes- for the person who offers forgiveness and the one who accepts it. When you forgive, you recognise they have done wrong, but you offer that person a way forward, a way out of the life controlled by guilt and anger.

Carol: You know, that's what God does for us when he forgives us. He gives us a new start. So maybe you can offer a new start if the person is willing to take it.

Diane: It's not easy to 'let go' of your feelings and let God begin to change things. But when you do, it can change your future and the future of any children involved.

Tammy: I was thinking about the children. What if the prisoner is violent and likely to hurt the children? Would you still forgive him?

Diane: That's a hard question. You know, it's possible to forgive someone for their past, but still realise that they are not safe to be around. Forgiving isn't forgetting; it is letting go of the desire to hurt them. But you still need to protect people who might get hurt.

Carol: That's something to think hard about, isn't it? Now, what should we expect when the time comes for the prisoner to be released?

Diane: Sometimes when a prisoner is allowed to go free, he or she feels as if everyone knows they have been locked away, and they feel embarrassed and afraid. Sometimes they want to hide away from people. It's hard to come back to a world of noise and activity, and their moods can change a lot. They might feel out of touch with how things have changed, especially if they've been in prison for a long time. It might be hard to make decisions again. So they might turn back to alcohol or drugs to cope with all the change. Sometimes, they learn bad habits in prison, and they might be aggressive and angry. If your family member is abusive, try and get some help for them and protection for the family.

Tammy: I'm thinking that a parent returning home would need to make many changes to fit back into the family.

Diane: Yes, and it's not always easy for the wife or husband who had to be the leader in the home while their partner was away. Men often find it hard to adjust when the wife has managed the money and children on her own. Both of you will need time and space alone. If things were difficult in the relationship before, those problems will still need to be fixed. Be honest and open about your feelings. Talk about what you both need and expect, and the roles each of you take on. And be sure to ask for help when you need it.

Carol: Don't forget the children, It could be hard for them too.

Diane: Good point, Carol. You need to spend time talking to the children before their parent is released, about what will happen. Listen to how they feel about it. Get support from family, friends or a counselor. Remember it takes time to get to know each other again, so take things slowly.

Tammy: Welcome back to Women of Hope. We've been talking about having a relative in prison, and how hard this is for the prisoner and the family. Did you know that many of Jesus' early followers were put in prison because they insisted on talking about him? They had believed in Jesus as God's Son and their Savior, and they wanted to tell everyone about him, whatever it cost them.

Carol: Actually, there are people in prisons in the world today for the same reason.

Diane: One of those early Christian leaders was Paul. He was always being arrested and beaten, and put into horrible Roman prisons. I'd like to read you something he wrote from prison to his friends in a place called Philippi. It's in God's word, the Bible.

Paul wrote "I have learned the *secret of being content* whatever is happening, whether I'm well fed or hungry, whether I have plenty- or nothing! I have the strength to do everything by the power that *God gives me.*" (Phil 4:12-13)

This is a secret that could help us through the most difficult situation; to accept and be content deep-down in our hearts, whatever happens. Why can we do that? Because we know God is in control and he gives us the strength to get through anything when we trust him completely. Here's something else Paul wrote: 'Your life in Christ Jesus makes you strong, and his love comforts you.' (Phil 2:1)

There's something else I want to say to you, if you've been in prison, or feel a failure...or if you're going through a really hard time right now. The past, or what you're going through, does *not* have the power to control your future! God can bring great things out of these times. God can bring hope to you if you feel rejected. He can bring back things that seem lost.

I want to encourage you; don't let these difficulties take control of your future. Do all you can to get help, to let go of your past and welcome tomorrow. Even in prison, you can be *free inside yourself* as you trust Jesus Christ. You're not alone, and the Lord will never leave you nor forsake you. Go forward in the power and promises of your God. Learn the secret of being content in *every* situation. I've found that going through something difficult can be the very thing that takes you into a better future!

Marj: Can I just say; I've proved that is so true. We've learnt to look to God for our future and we're trusting God for our family.

Tammy: Thank you so much Marj and Diane, for being with us today. Let's remember to pray for those who are in prison and for their families, and to help support them in practical ways, if we can. It's time for us to go, but we'd love to hear from you at any time. You can write to us in care of this station or at TWR Women of Hope.... The address: TWRWomenofHope.org

Carol: We do hope you will be with us again. May God bless you and give you new hope. Have a great week filled with God's blessings.