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## Redeemed

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## ARTICLE

# REDEEMED

GINA EVANS\*

What does it mean to be redeemed? Merriam-Webster defines it in several ways: “to buy back,” “to free from what distresses or harms,” “to change for the better,” “repair” or “restore,” “to free from a lien by payment of an amount secured thereby,” or “to atone for or make worthwhile.”<sup>1</sup> In the case of a pardon extraordinary, it does all of those things.

I began my criminal career stealing cars, skipping school, and underage drinking when I was fourteen. My propensity for addictive behavior was already deep in my bones—with a needle deep in my arm—by the time I was sixteen. This early behavior, and no meaningful trauma-informed interventions, led to fifteen years of criminal behavior, substance use disorder, and actions that, from the outside, would appear I had very little concern for my life. By the time I was twenty-six-years-old, I believed I would die with a needle in my arm, or that I would spend the rest of my life in prison. This is a hard way to live when you feel you are irredeemable.

In 2002, my beautiful mother made the most difficult decision of her life and put my children, Danielle (age nine) and Christopher (age two), up for adoption. She wanted more than she could give them as an older grandparent. She wanted them to have a mom, a dad, and a shot at a normal life. The day they terminated my parental rights was the beginning of my end—a crossroads, so to speak. The adoption was an open one for my mom and stepdad, but a very closed one for me. Part of the adoption agreement said I could not have any contact with them until they were adults.

I was in the Shakopee women’s prison at the time doing twenty-seven months on a Theft of a Motor Vehicle charge. I fully understood that my

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1. *Redeem*, MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/redeem>.

mother was doing what was best for the children, and I supported her decision. The question rolling through my mind was: who and where would I be when they came to find me? Would I be in prison again? I was already on my third prison sentence. Would I be dead? For the first time in my life, I was at a crossroads.

The Shakopee women's prison offers classes quarterly, and one of them is a class on re-entry into the community. It covers topics like how to answer the felony question in a job interview, how to get car insurance after not having it for a while, and how to get your driver's license back. On the day we could sign up for classes, I hustled over to the core building to sign up for the class. I was one of the first people on the list. On the first day of class, I discovered it was actually a Prison Fellowship Bible study that included all these practical applications, and, boy, was I upset.

I was never a person of faith. I didn't grow up in the church and never found comfort in services during any of my incarcerations. I was not one of those people who found God in prison and then left Him there. I felt tricked. During the next ten weeks, I did everything I could to show the volunteers they were wrong and didn't understand me or people like me. I read what we were instructed, but not to understand; I read it for battle. I would go back to class and say, "It says this here, and another thing here, and these two things are contradictory." They were so kind and gave me so much grace, always pointing to Jesus and Gospel as a bridge to my point.

By the time the class was drawing to a close, I didn't care if what they believed was true or not, I just wanted to believe in anything the way they believed in the Bible and the words of Jesus. On the last day of class, January 2003, I asked Ellis, the leader, how I could have what he had. He told me, "Gina, God knows what you need. Just ask Him to show Himself to you, and He will." It was then I started praying very crudely, "God, if you are really real, show yourself to me."

On Mother's Day 2003, I called home to wish my mom a happy Mother's Day. As soon as she said hello, I could tell something was wrong. She said, "Baby, the kids are back home. The adoptive parents decided it wasn't a good fit." It's hard to explain all that happened in a few moments in that three-foot-by-three-foot phone booth. Looking back now, it felt like a scene in a movie where everything moves in slow motion. Physically, the air was sucked from my lungs. It felt like when I was twelve and climbing a tree in a friend's backyard. I swung from a high branch down to a lower one, and physics . . . my hands spun around the limb; I launched out and down with gravity. I landed flat on my back and couldn't catch my breath.

Similarly, in the phone booth, I couldn't catch my breath. I couldn't understand how someone would give up the very thing I would have given anything to have back: my children. Had the God I had been praying to for months finally shown up? I burst into tears—hard, uncontrollable tears streamed down my face. Suddenly, a peace I had never felt before came

over me. Thoughts began racing through my head. Could I be sober? Could I be a mom again? Could this be the chance I have been waiting for, to start over again and do it differently this time?

This was redeemed: to buy back, to free from what distresses or harms, to change for the better, repair or restore, to free from a lien by payment of an amount secured thereby, to atone for or make worthwhile. This moment was the beginning of my end. After being released from Shakopee, I entered Minnesota Adult and Teen Challenge and spent a year doing the trauma-informed work I needed to ensure I never returned to a lifestyle that doesn't serve myself or my family. After graduating from the program, I began working in the reform community on background study, expungement and pardon reform, Ban the Box, and Restore the Vote—all things to serve those men and women coming behind me to have a smoother transition back into the community, because we can only keep what we have by giving it away.

On June 15, 2016, I stood in front of the Pardon Board, Governor Mark Dayton, Attorney General Lori Swanson, and Chief Justice Lorie Gildea and laid myself bare before them. With thirteen felony convictions and a criminal history dating back fifteen years, there was a real chance I would be denied, and I understood this going in. The experience is intimidating and very surreal. You are sitting in front of these powerful people who hold your future in their hands, in a room of your peers. The people waiting to go next are sitting behind you, watching along with reporters and any other curious individuals that are interested in the process. I myself have been to twelve or so of these hearings. You, and anyone you have brought with you, have exactly ten minutes to present your case. Then, with very little discussion, they make a decision right there in front of everyone.

Chief Justice Gildea asked some really difficult questions about some of the most shameful moments of my life, as is her duty to the people of Minnesota. At that moment, it felt like defending the dead because the person who committed those crimes is no longer with us. When Chief Justice Gildea said she would support my pardon, it was like a flashback to the phone booth—that overwhelming feeling of relief and understanding that, once again, God had shown up in a mighty way. One by one, the Pardon Board said they supported my pardon, and I knew in that moment that I was redeemed: bought back, free from what distresses or harms, changed for the better, repaired and restored, free from a lien by payment of an amount secured thereby, atoned for and made worthwhile.

When we went back into the little adjacent room to collect our things, there was a reporter in there. He asked me, “Do you know how lucky you are?” I looked at him puzzled. He said, “I have been covering pardon hearings for twenty years and, with the length of your criminal history, I would have bet my mortgage you were going to be a ‘no.’” I thank God, Professor

Mark Osler, and universities like St. Thomas that continue to do this work because there is no better feeling than redeemed.