



FINDING *Jesus* IN JAIL

FROM DRUG ADDICT TO
MISSIONARY, JACOB ZAILIAN
PREACHES FREEDOM IN CHRIST.

When Jacob Zailian sat in a jail cell, he couldn't have imagined he would one day hold the title of pastor. He had been living on the streets and was addicted to drugs. He was estranged from his then-girlfriend, Francine, and their three children. But when Jacob started reading the Bible, his life turned upside down.

"That is when God changed my husband's heart," said Francine Zailian, now Jacob's wife. "From then on, Jacob included God in his life at every moment. His faith was projected into our relationship, his fatherhood, and his future ministries. The situations and circumstances that once defined him were nothing compared to the freedom my husband and my family found."

After Jacob was released from jail, he completed a Salvation Army rehabilitation program and reentered society with newfound purpose and hope. His uncle, a strong believer, disciplined him by meeting him regularly to pray, read Scripture, provide accountability, and teach him how to live out the Christian faith.

However, many of Jacob's friends from the rehabilitation program quickly fell back into lives of addiction. It was devastating for him to watch. "I started seeing my friends fall like flies. And when I was on drugs, I was even worse off than them," Jacob said. "I thought, 'How am I the one staying sober? What's the difference?'"

Jacob realized discipleship was crucial both to staying sober and growing in his walk with Christ. "That's the missing key—discipleship. You have to get trained up, and then you have to start pouring into other people."

Years later, Jacob felt God calling him to build a discipleship house where recovering addicts could rebuild their lives while walking through a Christian discipleship program. Then he and Francine attended a ministry conference, and they both felt God calling them to plant a church in Sanger, California. "Being a pastor is nothing I ever planned or even wanted," Jacob said, "but it's the best thing that ever happened to me. It is God doing the work."

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH DISCIPLESHIP

Now, 30 men and women participate in the Zailians' discipleship ministry, which boasts an 85 percent success rate. Individuals commit to a 13-month program where, after an initial period of drug detox and six months of discipleship, they become eligible for a job and can receive ongoing discipleship. Jacob is also pastor of Set Free Sanger, a church that meets twice on Sundays and offers a hot meal after the evening service.

One of the main reasons the Zailians are able to reach the community is their personal testimony. "If our story can encourage and let someone know that there is a light at the end of this tunnel and that there is a God who cares about them, it is all worth it," said Francine.

Ministry has not always been easy. At one time, the Zailians were spending more money to serve dinner after

a Sunday service than they received in the offering plate. They were living on food stamps and working to support their family while also starting a new ministry.

"I had to ask myself, 'How badly do you want this? Are you ready to go all in for Jesus?'" Jacob said. "I knew I had to stay faithful. Jesus calls us to be faithful with whatever we're given, and I was faithful with pennies. We have really seen God come through."

In building this ministry, the Zailians have experienced what it means to follow God and learn along the way. They are guided by Mark 4:25, which says, "For whoever has [a teachable heart], to him *more* [understanding] will be given; and whoever does not have [a yearning for truth], even what he has will be taken away from him" (AMP).

"We want to remain teachable," Francine said, "always seeking His truth and understanding." Continual growth and learning are core parts of the discipleship model. The Zailians value learning from those ahead of them, teaching new believers behind them, and being living examples of the power of discipleship.

REACHING THE LEAST OF THESE

While many ministries have to go out and look for ways to evangelize, these opportunities walk in Jacob's door on a regular basis. Every day, he receives phone calls from people asking to participate in the discipleship program. "With most evangelism, you have to help people understand that they are a sinner—we're all sinners—and we cannot be with a God who is holy without faith in Christ," Jacob said. "These people come in already broken. They know they need help, and they're looking for answers. To see them come to faith and be baptized is amazing. It's the best evangelism ever! And they're coming to us."

Francine said their ministry seeks out those who are broken and unwanted by other services or programs. No matter what their lives look like or how lost they feel, Set Free Sanger is a safe place where they will find love and care.

"The struggles of addiction, rehabilitation, and hard circumstances can apply to everybody," Francine said, "We have realized how many can speak and share the Word of God, but we also want to walk the walk and lead others by being an example. Even through our brokenness, we can still choose to serve."

Jacob shared that three graduates of the discipleship training program are now studying to become pastors. "One used to be a Mormon . . . It's amazing to see the changes in their lives and the lives of their families."

A FAMILY MINISTRY

Set Free Sanger is not only Jacob and Francine's ministry, but the entire Zailian family's. The couple's three children are now teenagers, and they play an important role in

connecting with the families that come through the church or discipleship program. Instead of shielding their children from difficult environments, Jacob and Francine give them a front-row seat to true ministry.

“Interacting with recovering addicts or former homeless is normal to my kids,” Jacob said. “That’s what they think church is, reaching the least of these.” Jacob added it’s hard for his children to say goodbye as people graduate from the discipleship program and move to a new life, because the participants truly feel like family.

At Set Free Sanger Church, the meal after the Sunday evening service is a time to connect with people of all ages, including teenagers. Francine said teens are often searching for identity, and the Zailians encourage them to build that identity in Christ. “We are created differently for a reason,” Francine said. “We each have our purpose. Our authenticity connects to how God will use us. He can use every part of us, the good, the bad, and the in-between.” The transforming work of Set Free Sanger is affecting more than individuals; it’s changing entire generations by teaching families the gospel truth.

LOOKING FORWARD

Jacob has officially been a pastor for three years, and the ministry has seen incredible growth. The discipleship program, which hosts 30 people, now has three facilities, and Set Free Sanger has a new church building. The next goal is to build a local ranch to serve as a rehabilitation center.

“Right now, when we get someone off the street, we send them four hours away to a ranch in Southern California, where they detox and get sober,” Jacob said. “We are searching for a local property in the Fresno County area to build our own ranch where this could happen, and we could host 1,000 people per year.”

The Zailians are working to create a fundraising campaign, and they ask for prayers God would bring the right people and resources to expand the ministry.

In the end, Jacob and Francine want families to know there is hope for true and lasting freedom, not just through sobriety, but through a purposeful, transforming relationship with God. “We want to let others know that they

are not alone and they have the strength to make it through,” Francine said. “They have a God who cares and will be with them through every step of the journey. Jacob and I are just His vessels on this earth to share that message.”

WAYS TO PRAY FOR THE ZAILIANS

- Pray God would give them strength to obey His calling.
- Pray for God’s guidance as they equip others to serve in ministry.
- Pray for wisdom in balancing ministry, home, and social life.
- Pray for good stewardship of their time, energy, and efforts.
- Pray the children of Set Free Sanger would truly know who God is and understand He wants the best for them.
- Pray children and teenagers would find their identities in Christ and not be swayed by the world.
- Pray for unity in the body of Christ within their church, city, and state.

SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT

Francine’s favorite passage in the Bible is in Ephesians, where Paul taught on the armor of God. “The armor of God is a guide to help us prepare for whatever may come,” she said. “It sets our posture to focus on God and to recognize Him in everything. We know who we are, and we’re ready for whatever we will face.”

- Read Ephesians 6:10–18.
 - How do you think studying the armor of God prepares leaders for ministry?
 - Which piece of armor stands out to you?
 - Can you think of an example of a time you or someone you know used the armor of God for protection?
- The passage ends in verse 18, which says, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.” Use this verse for inspiration as you pray for the Zailians and Set Free Sanger Church.

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RACHEL SINCLAIR is a writer who loves to share stories and help people grow deeper in their walks with Christ. Connect with her at rachelsinclair.net and on Instagram at [@rachelsinclairwrites](https://www.instagram.com/rachelsinclairwrites).



Sanger, California: Finding Jesus in Jail



FOR GROUP OR CHURCHWIDE STUDY:

1. Summarize the Mission Study for the group, focusing on Jacob and Francine's story.
2. Say, *Jacob Zailian was set free from a life of sin. The beginning of Galatians 5:1 says, "For freedom Christ has set us free." The rest of the verse reminds us of how we are to live once we're set free. Ask, How did Jacob stand firm and resist the yoke of slavery to his former way of life?*
3. Ask volunteers to read Luke 8:14, 1 Corinthians 14:20, and Colossians 1:27-29 aloud. Ask the group to share ideas for how the church can disciple others toward accountability and spiritual maturity and write the answers on a board.
4. Ask a volunteer to read John 6:60-69 aloud. Ask, *How did the disciples reflect a teachable heart even when Jesus's teachings weren't easy to follow?*
5. Divide into small groups to examine the way Jacob's uncle disciplined him. Read Acts 2:42-43 and consider how did the early church first model the same practices and look at ways your church can too.
6. Remain in small groups to discuss the following: Mark 2:13-17 tells of Jesus eating with the "least of these" in his days. In some cultures, eating was and still can be a sign of fellowship with someone. According to verse 15, why were they reclining with Jesus? How does Paul's testimony in 1 Timothy 1:12-16 reflect Christ's heart for the sinner?



FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY:

1. Jacob Zailian never set out to be a pastor, but it was clearly God's plan. What area in your life do you see God at work in a way you didn't plan or imagine?
2. If the Zailians wanted to keep growing and learning as disciples, they had to remain teachable. Read 2 Timothy 3:16. How is God's word profitable for teaching us more than head knowledge? According to Matthew 28:19-20, what is the role of teaching in the Great Commission?
3. The Zailians' personal testimony allows them to reach their community with the gospel. Read 1 Peter 3:15. As you think about your sphere of influence, with whom can you share your testimony this week?
4. Francine Zailian has observed teenagers in her church searching for identity, encouraging them to build it in Christ. Ephesians 1:3-14 is one of many examples in God's Word about our identity in Christ. In a journal, write down where you see "in Christ" and the connection to your identity in Him.
5. Jacob asked himself a question we must ask ourselves daily: "Are you ready to go all in for Jesus?" What is your response? Read Luke 9:23. If there is an area of life in which you find it hard to be faithful, confess it to God.

FOR FAMILY STUDY:

1. Read Luke 6:12-16 aloud. Ask, *Before Jesus called these twelve men to be His followers, what did He do?*
2. Say, *The Zailians are reaching other people and whole families with the gospel. Ask members of your family take turns reading Acts 16:29-34. Ask, What did the family in this story do after they heard the good news?*
3. Read John 13:14-15 aloud. Say, *People need to hear about Jesus, but as Jacob and Francine learned, people also need to see an example. What did Jesus do that was an example to His disciples? Who is someone you think is a good example?*
4. Read Matthew 25:40 aloud and compare the way the Zailian family helps those in need with Jesus's words in this verse. Ask, *When we help others, who are we really serving?*
5. Remind your family that the Zailian family serves with North American Mission Board together. Brainstorm ways your family can serve others together.

ENA REDDING* serves in the Middle East. She is passionate about making disciples and seeing God at work.

*Name changed.