

The Prisoner In Me

The Prisoner ~~and~~ Me

No matter how you look at it, street view or inside the walls behind the bars, prison can be a dark place. Despite the myriad of lights penetrating hallways and cellblocks, dark places remain no light can reach or expose. These are the dark, hidden places deep inside the heart of every man society calls prisoners.

In addition to extensive lighting systems, electronic eyes of dozens of video surveillance cameras accompany those of the guards to keep vigilant watch 24/7 from strategic locations in and around the facilities. Yet there remain many areas throughout the prison to which all eyes are completely blind. For no eye, electronic or human, can see inside the minds of these prisoners to know what they are thinking.

Prisons are full of desperate men.

As I asked in the previous lesson, please consider this one sobering statistic:

- More than **2,000,000** men in the U.S. are in prisons and jails.

That is **the highest percent in the world.** To put this in perspective,

the number of incarcerated men in the U.S. is approaching the combined populations of Dallas and Las Vegas!

Joe, Jr., aka JJ, is the second character I introduced in the book. Joe Sr., his dad, was in prison when JJ was born. Despite his mother's best efforts to protect and raise him well, the blame he assigned to the failure of his absentee dad fueled anger and resentment that led to gang life and, ultimately, prison. Like father, like son? Not the same path his dad took, but the same

desperate place. Equally disturbing statistics bear out what some refer to as a “generational sin” issue. Too many sons of felons become one themselves and join their dads in prison.

So there sat JJ, a young prisoner locked behind bars, ‘living’ in a 6’x8’ cell, doing what others tell him to, in possession of too much time to explore the dark places of his heart formed by years of anger—his mind full of thoughts no one would understand, nor care to hear for that matter. God cares.

JJ is a fictional character, but I have met and ministered to many from backgrounds similar to his over the years of my *menistry*. Many finally come to the end of themselves and that can be a great place for any man to be in the eyes of the Lord. We refer to them as *desperate men*.

Uncommon Denominators

Most men reading this have not come from or lived through the cycle of poverty and violence that produces so many of the men who populate our prisons. You may recall from the last lesson (The Addict Is Me), I stated that on the surface, we do not **appear** to have much, if anything, in common with men who are addicts. The same can be said of men in prison like JJ or his dad. But we know **appearances can be deceiving**, and, as it was with the addict so it is with the prisoner, **they are** very deceiving.

Like many men in my demographic, it is safe to say thousands of men have been part of my life and crossed my path to this point. Rich and poor. Famous and infamous. Ordinary and extraordinary. Churched and unchurched. Christians and very lost men. One truth I learned from decades of working with men from all walks of life is this:

“Not all prisons have bars.”

Consider these four things common to prisoners/prison life:

- Held captive in a place they do not want to be.
- Others control their lives.

- Constant reminder of their pasts.
- Few escape.

Prisons Without Bars

Let's consider those common denominators of men in prison in a different light and context—**our lives**. There are many examples of “prisons without bars”—debt, money/wealth, power, success, among others.

However, three stand out, in my experience, as *strongholds* that imprison us, often with devastating consequences that cause collateral damage and affect the lives of others, like family and friends.

Not one of these strongholds violates the laws of man that will land you in prison. But each is itself a prison for those who allow Satan and his allies or remnants of the flesh to put us, as it were, “safely” behind bars.

- Prison of the Past
- Prison of Opinion
- Prison of Religion

Prison of the Past

This may be the fullest prison of all.

The saddest thing about this prison is that we sentenced ourselves to do time there.

All of us have things (sins) in our pasts we would NOT want to show up on the nightly news or, worse, posted on FB. Dwelling on the past can control our lives. Living there can cripple us. Most men dwell on one of three things: *successes, failures, and what might have been's*. Three things about these you need to memorize:

- Dwelling on past success is the best way to insure future failure.
- Dwelling on past failure keeps us from achieving future success.

- Dwelling on *what might have been's* provides pathways to both.

The most certain thing about the past is this: **We cannot change it!** Good, bad, or indifferent, "it is what it is", as some thoughtful man once opined. Far better are the words of our Lord and the Apostle Paul.

*But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and **looking back**, is fit for the kingdom of God."* (Luke 9: 62 NASB)

Practically speaking, for the man plowing in a field behind an ox, looking back only led to bad things: plow a crooked furrow, run hard into something in front, and worst of all, step in ox poop!

Jesus wants us to come out of our pasts, no matter how good or bad, key our eyes fixed on Him and walk straight ahead, following Him every step of the way.

Two takeaways from the life of Paul *should* allow every Christian to forgive ourselves, open the cell door (for which we alone possess the key), and walk out in freedom in Christ.

- Yes, Paul remembered his greatest sin (as we consider them).

"For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corinthians 15:9 ESV).

- But he did not dwell on such grievous sin or live there. Here is the proof and how he moved on.

*"But one thing I do: **forgetting what lies behind** and straining forward to what lies ahead, **I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**"* (Philippians 3: 13a-14 ESV)

My dear brother, for all who are in Christ, by His blood our loving Father God said, "*their sins I will remember no more*". (Hebrews 8: 12) If God can forgive and forget our pasts, so must we. Let's move

on.

Prison of Opinion

While developing this lesson, I wrestled with the best name for this prison. *The Prison of Fear* was one thought; *The Prison of Control* another. I landed on *opinion* because it includes both. Here are two paths people take that allow the prison of opinion to hold us captive.

- ***Fear*** of what others think about them becomes a prison from which they could readily escape if they simply chose to ignore them.
- ***Control forfeited*** to the opinions of others becomes as much a prison as those with bars and high walls from which escape seems impossible.

It is easy to write about this and say I do not care what others think or just ignore what others think. But that would make me a liar and hypocrite. I could write *I would like to be* at a point in my life where both are true. But despite the age of my teeth, I have not yet arrived there. However, having made strides in the right direction, I want to share a couple of keys to help us out of this prison.

- ***Stop listening to the lies.*** Satan is the chief liar and principle accuser of men. Don't let him tell you who you are or are not. For those in Christ, that role is reserved for the Holy Spirit alone. Satan and his fellow assassins exist for three reasons. Jesus called him a thief who came to *steal, kill, and destroy*. They come to bring death. Jesus came to bring life—abundant and eternal. (John 10: 10)

Remind yourself: *"We are not who others say we are. We are who God says we are."*

So even when you have screwed up or the world is beating you down with reminders of your failures, if you are in Christ, you are a son of Elyon, God Most High, a joint heir with Jesus. You were worth dying for. No matter what you have done or how far down you have fallen, you are fully loved. He never stops loving you. Jesus called us

friend even when we do not act the part. Hunker down in that!

- ***Stop simply reading the Word of God and start owning every word of His promises.*** Too many of you do not spend time in the Word of God at all, and I am calling you out on that now. You spend more time reading the WSJ or a sports page. Some that do read their Bibles do so without eating and digesting it (Jeremiah 15: 16). Skimming the Bible like you did college text books is of little, if any, value.

When you do read, own the words. Make them personal and take them to heart. Stand on the promises of God, and bring them up to Him every time you think He needs reminding. He told us to do that.

Concerning verses that speak to this prison of the opinions of others, read, eat, and digest these.

For those concerned with what others think:

“It is dangerous to be concerned with what others think of you, but if you trust the Lord, you are safe.” (Proverbs 29: 25 GNT)

“It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man.” (Psalm 118:8 KJV)

“For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (Galatians 1:10 ESV)

“Because of miraculous signs Jesus did...many began to trust in Him. But Jesus didn’t trust them because He knew human nature...” (John 2: 23-24 NLT)

Let’s leave this prison with words I said to my children all their lives with respect opinions of others.

“It is not who you are, but Whose you are that matters.”

Prison of Religion

Perhaps the saddest of all prisons is this one. It built by men,

sometimes well-meaning, stuck in the past—living as the Pharisees in the old covenants, all the while claiming to have accepted Christ and His blood as the new covenant. Just as in OT times, these people heap burdens and rules on others that they do not and cannot keep. The first person they should lock up is themselves. They are distant relatives of the religious leaders Jesus reviled and called “blind guides”. (Read Matthew 23: 13-36)

*“woe to you, hypocrites, you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in...**you outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness...**you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness;...blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!...you clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence...first clean the inside of the cup and dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.”*

Jesus was dead serious about *religiosity* and imprisoning people in legalism veiled as obedience to God. He continued this line of teaching through His apostle Paul, who was himself a strong Pharisee. But Paul was radically saved, as we know from his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

The book of Galatians is known as the “freedom from religion” book. The Apostle Paul picks up where Jesus left off. It is an uphill grind for Paul because the people knew who he had been—“a Pharisee of Pharisees”—persecuting and imprisoning followers of Christ.

My dear brothers, if someone has imprisoned you in this lonely, desperate jail of religiosity (or you hold others there), I want you to know there is only one key that will open the cell door and set you free: **relationship. Relationship with Jesus Christ.** For Christians, it is not about being religious. It is completely 100% about a very personal relationship with the One true God afforded to those who believe solely through the blood of Christ.

Today there are men on death row experiencing more freedom than some pastors, elders, deacons, and other well-meaning church men. Please allow me to open these prison doors for your release with the most compelling words the Apostle Paul ever wrote:

"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."

(Galatians 5: 1 NASB)

My dear brothers, come out of that prison because you know in your heart the Son set you free and you need to, once again, be free indeed!

Walter