

Prison Power



*How God Uses
Imprisonment
To Enlarge His Kingdom*

Jim Cunningham & Paul Estabrooks

“During my six years and 23 days of living in iron cages, the Lord called 96 people to believe in Him!”

-Pastor Ha, Vietnam

“Indeed, the best time in my life was in jail because I was with the Lord - really close! Wherever the Lord is with us, that place is Paradise.”

-Mehdi Dibaj, Iran

“I have been through 23 years of refining (prison) and the Lord has not allowed me to suffer loss through it all, but rather to receive an even greater blessing.”

-Wang Ming-dao, China

“God wanted me in prison for a special purpose. Many people are saved in prison and begin a new journey with God.”

-Matta Bush, Sudan

“The experience strengthened me all the more because it proved that God will come through.”

-Wally Magdangal, Saudi Arabia

“If His name is glorified more through my being in prison than through my being at liberty, there is no greater joy for me than to die on this prison bunk...”

-Mikhail Khorev, Russia



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2nd Edition

Jim Cunningham
and
Paul Estabrooks

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INTRODUCTION

Remember those who are in prison, as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering. - Hebrews 13:3

Prison! Even the word sends shivers down the back and the thought is immediately pushed to the back of our minds. Yet we in the western world often have no idea just how horrible conditions are in prisons in non-western countries.

For most people anywhere in the world, imprisonment is simply the biggest shock of their life. One of the most famous prisoners, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was almost poetic in his description in his book *The Gulag Archipelago*. “Arrest [and imprisonment] is an instantaneous, shattering thrust, expulsion, somersault from one state to another.”

Prison is extremely challenging for those, like Aleksandr, who find themselves there unjustly or for only spiritual reasons. It is rigorous even for those who acknowledge their guilt and must pay the price. But a strong faith in God and trust in God’s ultimate goodness and purposes enables Christian prisoners to emerge with victorious testimonies. Recent notable examples are Chuck Colson in the USA and Armando Valladares in Cuba.

It was during the communist era of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that news of Christians in prison solely for their faith became widespread. And especially the news that God had been with them in a special way during their incarceration.

Russian Christian prisoners were familiar with a common saying, “The only place to be free is in prison because everything has already been lost.” Russian Christian poetess, Irina Ratushinskaya writes on this subject of thankfulness for imprisonment:

Thank you, O Lord, that it fell to my lot to endure the rigours of prison transports, to hide poetry and books from the KGB, to languish in punishment cells and to starve...I shed my youthful pride, and the arrogance which might have destroyed my soul melted away.¹

Founding President of Open Doors International, Johan Comanjen says, “Tears filled my eyes as we sang in the courtyard of a high security prison in Lima, Peru: *‘I have decided to follow Jesus, No turning back, No turning back!’* Two Peruvian pastors, a lawyer, our Latin America director and I were granted permission to visit some of our brothers who were detained there for alleged cooperation with the ‘Shining Path’ guerrilla movement. Permission for such a visit was rarely given at the time. Some prisoners had been convicted for crimes they never committed. Others only joined the guerrillas because they were pressured at gunpoint. It was an incredibly moving experience to visit them, encourage them and worship with them. There are many others in similar situations in different prisons across Peru.”

Al Faki Kuku Hassan was in prison in Sudan and wrote to friends:

Thank you for your prayers for me and my family. You know about my disease that I suffer in my heart and I am in great need of treatment. Please pray that I may receive that soon...There is also good news about new believers here in prison. Some have started a new life in Jesus Christ, having left everything behind, and

¹ Irina Ratushinskaya, *Grey Is The Colour of Hope*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), pp. 123-124.

they have come to follow Jesus Christ with all their might, in spite of the threats against them. May God keep them and also keep you safely in His hands. Remember that Jesus' work here is wonderful!

Later his wife, Muna, wrote and said: "We don't say that Al Faki is in prison, we say that he went there for ministry. We're very happy that he has a chance to share with others and several of the detainees have come to know the Lord."

Even those who have justly been imprisoned and met the Lord there share incredible faith building testimonies. We heard about Hussein, a Muslim prisoner in Sudan charged with murder. In prison, he met followers of our Lord who pointed him to the way, the truth, and the life. Hussein became an over-flowing follower of Jesus. Just days before his scheduled execution, he was brought to the prison office. The authorities presented a tempting scenario: deny your new faith in Christ, return to Islam and you will receive a full pardon and be set free. Hussein chose execution!

Beginning with the patriarch, Joseph, the Bible reveals a significant number of God's people who spent time – most unjustly – in prison and who emerged with significant life lessons from the experience.

In this little revised and expanded volume, Dr. Jim Cunningham examines twelve of those biblical experiences and draws principles from them that reveal how God actually expanded His kingdom as a result of the imprisonment. These twelve principles are also collated at the end of the volume.

Paul Estabrooks illustrates them with stories of real people - members of the Persecuted Church around the world. Concluding the volume are recommendations for us from two pastors, one a Russian pastor who was in prison long term. He shares how to spiritually prepare for such an experience as imprisonment. The second is from a Chinese pastor who spent enough time in prison to give biblically based evaluations of how to deal with it.

Our goal is to stretch your faith and increase your awareness of God's providential working in the lives of His children, and to help you know and apply Hebrews 13:3. Our prayer is that this little volume will help you to understand both biblically and practically why they suffer, how they suffer, and the encouraging results - enlarging the kingdom of God!

Jim Cunningham and Paul Estabrooks



JOSEPH

Genesis 39:20-23

Betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery and then falsely accused of attempted rape by his master's wife, Joseph knew the meaning of unexplainable opposition. He was sent to a fortress enclosure for the King's prisoners. Here he met the King's butler and baker. Joseph accurately interpreted their dreams, but the released butler returned to the King and forgot his pledge to speak on behalf of Joseph's release - for another two years.

When the King has a dream and needs an interpretation, Joseph is finally called from the prison. He washes, shaves and enters the palace, never to return to his prison cell. After giving the Lord's interpretation, Joseph becomes second in command in Egypt. He is in charge of food production and distribution for the entire country. His deliverance at that exact moment led to the salvation of his own father and brothers from starvation.

Joseph later detained his brothers for three days "in prison" (Genesis 42:17-19) before revealing himself to them. Prison became Joseph's sovereign placement for a divine appointment with the King. In turn, Joseph was responsible for the salvation of an entire nation.

"But while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden." Genesis 39: 20b-21

PRINCIPLE #1

What man intends for evil to hinder God's Kingdom, God uses for good to advance His Kingdom.

PASTOR HA – VIETNAM

Following the communist take-over of Vietnam in 1975, Rev. Ho Hieu Ha moved from a mid-country tribal area (where he was a missionary) to the former southern capital city of Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh. After much prayer, he miraculously received permission to use the old International Church of Saigon (Christian Missionary Alliance) building for church services with 29 other believers who joined him. It became known as the Tran Cao Van church.

Every day began with a 5:00 A.M. three-hour prayer meeting and each evening concluded with a Bible Study. Every month they experienced 80–100 conversions. One year they baptized over 800 new believers. Within three years, the church services were filled to overflowing each Sunday with more than 5,000 worshippers. It took four services to get everyone into the sanctuary on a Sunday and all services per week totaled 21.

Government informers were sent weekly to try and catch the pastor making political comments. One Sunday night there were twelve. He knew because one responded to the altar call and shared about the other eleven! Next door to the church was the apartment building of Russian officers. The church's P.A. system could be heard throughout their building every worship service.

The authorities were now displeased with the permission they had earlier given to the pastor. But he preached the Word of God boldly and with wisdom and could not be trapped into saying something worthy of censure. Finally, the government moved in during an early-morning prayer meeting on December 10, 1983. They confiscated the Bibles and hymnbooks, closed the church and locked the gate. Many believers stood weeping at the gates for days.

Pastor Ha's family was evicted from their apartment at the back of the church and his wife and two children were forced to find other accommodations. They ended up living on a balcony of another Christian family's small apartment.

Pastor Ha was taken away to prison. The authorities thought they had thwarted the advances of the kingdom of God in Vietnam and especially in Ho Chi Minh City. During his incarceration, they asked him, "Why is it you are in prison, but your church is still growing?" He responded, "Because people are drawn to Jesus by what they see around them!"

After two years in detention, Pastor Ha was finally brought to trial on multiple trumped-up charges. When his prison truck arrived at the courthouse, he was amazed to find hundreds of people waiting outside – many from his congregation. Upon seeing him, his wife began to cry. Pastor Ha called out to her in a loud but gentle voice, so all his parishioners could also hear. "Dear, please don't cry. God has given me as much ministry in the prison as I had before in the church and I'm willing to stay here to serve Him!"

Altogether, he spent more than six years in prison and upon release, immigrated with his family to the USA. There he shared this report on God's working in his life during those important imprisonment years:

If God had called me to prison ministry in 1975, I would have refused. But He spent those years preparing my heart, so when the time came, I accepted. I saw all this as the amazing plan of God.

During my six years and twenty-three days of living in iron cages, the Lord called ninety-six people to believe in Him. They were members of the former government, officials from the new communist government, refugees, Chinese, Cambodian – even a few of our captors.

My prison wasn't like one in the United States with television sets everywhere. We slept on the cold floor, facing mosquitoes, leeches, and cockroaches. Prisoners were always hungry, fighting disease constantly and battling each other. One time I was isolated in a very dark room. For sixteen months I didn't see anything. The food was rotten. But praise God, I wasn't sick once during that period.

God put me in prison to share Jesus Christ with the outcasts and the hopeless to express His love. His glory became known in that prison. The guards tried many ways to keep us from communicating with one another, but the witness went on.

Over the years, the prisoners had dug holes in the thick walls from one cell to another. Their purpose was to pass cigarettes, but I used them to speak about the Lord. When I was in isolation, I found that the people below me could hear through the toilet hole. They memorized verses of the Bible, learned songs and came to Christ – all through that hole.

Pastor Ha ministers in North America longing for the day he can return to minister again in his beloved Vietnam.

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah 32-33

1st Time:

“Jeremiah the prophet was confined in the courtyard of the guard in the royal palace of Judah.”
(32:2)

Why? Zedekiah, king of Judah did not like what Jeremiah was prophesying against Judah.

“While Jeremiah was still confined to the courtyard of the guard the word of the Lord came to him saying...”Call to Me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know...” (33:3)

What happens? The word of the Lord came to him...and taught him new truths about God Himself. The Lord did not promise Jeremiah physical freedom. The Hebrew says, ***“Ask Me and I will show you not just magnificent things, but difficult and mysterious and inaccessible things, things otherwise out of reach of your slender imagination.”***

What encouragement this must have been to Jeremiah. An opportunity to have a special encounter with God Himself.

PRINCIPLE #2

Moments of isolation in confinement have proven to be times of special visitation and revelation by the triune God beyond the norm.

TESTIMONIES

Mehdi Dibaj, an Iranian national, spent nine years and twenty-seven days in prison in Iran because of his faith, many of those days in a very tiny isolation cell. After his release in late 1994, Mehdi was asked about his prison years:

What wonderful days they were! Meeting the Lord; walking with the Lord; watching His protection, His miracles; and receiving grace upon grace, blessing upon blessing. Those days were the best days of my life - walking so close with the Lord in the time of troubles...

It is wonderful to be in the fire knowing that you are not alone. You are with the Son of God like Daniel's friends...When the Lord is with us, the prison is Heaven. It is Paradise. So, I'm very grateful to the Lord for those opportunities. Indeed, the best times of my life was in jail because I was with the Lord - really close! Wherever the Lord is with us, that place is Paradise. Praise the Lord!

In prison I sometimes had a Bible. Not always. But the Holy Spirit was with me always. I went to bed when the other prisoners were still talking. At 8 pm, I went to sleep. In the middle of the night at 2 am, I woke up to spend time in prayer, not

only asking but even more listening to God. To practice hearing God's voice...The Lord was with me.

Myrna Grant writes the following about Russian prisoner and martyr Ivan Moiseyev in her moving biography, *Vanya*:

[Ivan] shuddered, remembering the nightmare progression of cells: the cubicle with icy water pouring from the ceiling, and after that, the refrigerated cell, and then the agony of the pressure suit. "*Jesus Christ is going into battle.*" As the words turned over and over in his mind an overwhelming sense of Presence jarred him alert. Joy spread gently through him, warming, burning, bringing him to his knees in the water. "*For me you are to do battle. But be of good cheer. I am with you. I have overcome the world.*"...Tears soaked Ivan's face. He bowed as low as he could in the cramped space and wept and worshipped.²

Others are very direct in their assessment of Christ's presence in their cell. A Christian in Pakistan named Gul Masih was condemned to death on a charge of blasphemy against the prophet Mohammed. In prison, he wrote a long letter to those who prayed for him. Part of it reads:

My dear friends. My Lord has come to me twice in my prison cell. One day I was sitting in my prison and thinking about this injustice in a sad and hopeless mood. Suddenly my cell was filled with light and my body trembled. I saw my Lord. Four days after this, my Jesus came and overshadowed me by raising His hands and blessing me. From that day on, I have been happy and in peace. My Lord is with me in jail. He does not leave me alone.

Joshua Saune, brother of martyred Romulo Saune, was serving a major prison sentence in Peru on charges of subversive activities. He had become frustrated with the slow pace of needed reform. But while in prison, Joshua reported:

I saw a vision. A man coming through the prison walls. I couldn't see his face clearly, but he said, "If you want to be free, you must follow me. I choose you to be my servant." I could feel my body shaking. The power of his presence flooded over me. Tears began to flow from my eyes. I hadn't thought about Jesus for many years. How could this be? I still had twenty years to serve in this ugly hole in the Peruvian jungle! Once again, the black night and the rough prison walls closed in. It must have been a dream.

But Joshua prayed, "Lord Jesus, if you really came to visit me tonight, please prove it. Please send my Dad to visit me tomorrow." Unknown to him as he prayed, many miles away his mother awoke in a flood of tears. In her dream she had seen her son. She knew he was in turmoil. She shook Joshua's father awake. "You must go and see him. You must!" Joshua recalls:

² Myrna Grant, *Vanya*, (Alamonte Springs, Florida: Creation House, 1974), p.137.

The next day I was up with the dawn. Would he come? I almost hoped not. I heard cars and people arrive. But no one came for me. Maybe Mom will come later, I thought. That would be alright. But then from behind the bars, there was my Dad saying, “Your mother had a dream. She told me I must come. A stranger gave me a lift, but when I turned to thank him, he had gone...”

Joshua’s life was changed forever. Now he’s a preacher not a prisoner because the Lord had work for him to do. And the kingdom continues to grow under Joshua’s significant ministry.

Lucy was part of a group of ten Christian “counter-revolutionaries” in a prison camp in China who were required to move a very large and heavy rock. With chains, big sticks and much joyful effort, they successfully moved the rock.

The next morning the prison cadre was in a foul mood. He ordered the others to work in the fields but insisted Lucy stay and move back the rock by herself. She remembers standing on the huge rock, raising her hands and praying, “Lord, your children are suffering, and this miracle will bring glory to You!”

A prisoner passing by suggested she not roll it on its wide side, or it would get stuck. So, Lucy used a fulcrum and pried and shoved the rock back to its original place. The prison cadre was amazed. Seeing the marks on the ground, he asked, “Who helped you?” Lucy answered, “My God helped me!” Many prisoners received the Lord as a result of this demonstration of God’s presence.

PREPARATION FOR PRISON

- Practice experiencing the presence of Jesus every moment through conversational prayer
- Memorize Scripture
- Memorize hymns, songs, and spiritual sayings
- Practice being bold and listening for the Holy Spirit’s direction
- Practice being wise as snakes and harmless as doves
- Practice fasting
- Practice utilizing the full armor of God (Ephesians 6)

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah 37-38

2nd Time:

“Irijah...arrested Jeremiah and brought him to the officials. They were angry with Jeremiah and had him beaten and imprisoned in the house of Jonathan the secretary which they had made into a prison. Jeremiah was put into a vaulted cell in a dungeon, where he remained a long time. (37:14b-16)

Why? Jeremiah was still saying what the Lord told him to say, but the King did not want to hear and was fearful that Jeremiah was actually deserting to the enemy.

3rd Time:

“This is what the Lord says: Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with his life; he will live.” (38:2)

Charged with discouraging the army, Jeremiah was taken and put into a waterless cistern - into the mud - to starve to death. He was spared from death in the cistern by a sympathetic foreigner – an official in the royal palace.

PRINCIPLE #3

Prophets who declare the Word of the Lord are subject to attacks by individuals and authorities -including ‘religious individuals and authorities’ - hostile to both the prophet and the Word of God.

MRS. CHEN - CHINA

Mrs. Chen, also known as Sister Ruth, was the leader of a large network of house churches in China. Because of her preaching, she was arrested and imprisoned three times. The following is an abridged report of her imprisonment:

During her first imprisonment, Ruth was repeatedly taken out of the cell and told to confess her crimes. One day the authorities said, “Yesterday you talked about Jesus! Today you must talk about something else. How many co-workers do you have? How many house churches? How did you begin?”

She replied, “I know Jesus. He is my Saviour and He can be your Saviour too. I don’t know any other things. My co-workers have not committed any crime. And I have nothing to confess.”

They insisted she write out her confession. The Holy Spirit moved her to write thirty-seven pages. She wrote about Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection. She also wrote about heaven and hell.

When she handed the cadre-in-charge her papers, he responded, "I asked you to write your confession but instead you have written a lengthy sermon. When I submit this, you will surely die. I have no choice."

His superior read the pages one by one and concluded, "This person preaches outside and now she has put her preaching in writing to evangelize us. I sentence her to twenty years imprisonment!"

That night they held a "struggle" meeting against her. Four hundred prisoners and guards listened to her "crimes." The officials read aloud all thirty-seven pages of her confession and the Holy Spirit worked in more hearts. Many prisoners repented in tears and received the Lord.

On the day of her trial, the authorities chose a square large enough for 100,000 people. Many observers were brought from homes, schools, offices, and even re-education camps. Her husband, Michael, was also brought from his camp to witness her trial.

The prisoners were put on the large platform, interrogated and then sentenced - from five to thirty years. Several were given death sentences. A few fainted on the spot. For those without Christ, death is a tragic situation.

The authorities concluded, "Anyone who dares to preach Christianity will receive the death sentence!" So, Ruth was lined up on the grassy square with all the others sentenced to death by firing squad.

She calmly watched as the rifles were pointed toward her and breathed a quick prayer of committal to her Lord. The shots echoed in the square and everyone fell to the ground - except Ruth. It was a miracle of God's mercy!

That night she was again brought to an even higher stage for interrogation, sentencing, and execution. The officials treated her roughly this time dragging her up by the hair.

They tied a rope around her wrists behind her back and then brought the rope up tight around her neck. It was then hung tautly from above. If she tried to relax her arms, the rope choked her neck. If she tried to relieve the pressure on her neck, it felt like her arms would break. Many people died from the pressure of this kind of hanging. It was far worse than being shot.

"May I say a few final words?" Ruth requested. The highest authority nodded assent. "When the communists took over this land, I was only a sixteen-year-old student," she began. "I have not committed any crime against the nation so why are you sentencing me to death?"

"We say there is no God," they replied. "You preach about God. Therefore, you are public enemy number one and must be executed!"

Ruth responded, "According to your communist rules, there is freedom of religion."

"Why do you have to preach the gospel?" they countered.

She answered, "I have seen the Lord Jesus with my own eyes. I also had five incurable diseases and was told to prepare to die. Jesus healed all my diseases. I carry the five doctor's certificates in my jacket pocket as a reminder. Jesus commissioned me to preach the gospel! This does not hurt our nation."

No one responded so she began to share the Bible message. She started with creation and how Adam fell, and God prepared a way for salvation. The message continued with the birth, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension and soon return of the Lord Jesus. She concluded with heaven and hell and judgment. Everyone was obviously deeply moved.

After coming down from the stage, Ruth was bleeding all over - as well as internally. The prison doctor gave a very cursory check-up and signed a document that she was in a terminal illness and soon to die. This secured her release. But she lived for many more years.

The full story of Sister Ruth's imprisonment is recorded in a booklet by Paul Estabrooks titled: *Great Bible Women of China*.

HANANI

2 Chronicles 16:10

In the thirty-sixth year of Asa's reign as King of Judah, he made a pact with Ben-Hadad, King of Aram, and paid him to have Ben-Hadad attack the towns of Israel. Hanani (the prophet) came to King Asa and said: ***"Because you relied on the King of Aram and not on the Lord your God, the army of the king of Aram has escaped from your hand...You have done a foolish thing and from now on you will be at war."*** (16:7b & 9b)

Three years later King Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet, yet did not seek help from the Lord, but only from his physicians. This is the same King Asa who earlier came to power and ***"did what was right in the eyes of the Lord."*** His heart was ***"fully committed to the Lord"*** all his life. But at the end of his life he had a heart change. Hanani summed it up: ***"The eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him."*** (16:9a)

We are not told how long Hanani spent in prison, but we are told for what he was sentenced: ***"Asa was angry with the seer [prophet] because of this [what he said]; he was so enraged that he put him in prison...and brutally oppressed some of the people."*** (16:10)

PRINCIPLE #4

Being bold and speaking the truth in love may not always reap immediate positive results...and may cause unjust imprisonment.

WANG MING-DAO - CHINA

In the first decade of communist rule in China, pastors were required to join the government's Three Self Patriotic Movement. Pastor Wang Ming-dao (meaning "witness to the truth") spoke out strongly against joining the government body and was arrested and imprisoned. He boldly stated that his Chinese church had no traces of "imperialist influences." After his first arrest in 1955, Pastor Wang was under tremendous pressure. He was tortured and brainwashed and promised release from prison and return to his pulpit if he would just "preach for the government". In his mind this would be lying, and he was certain he could not live a hypocritical life.

Pastor Wang was firm in his resolve, until he heard that his beloved wife, Debra, had also been arrested and was in grave danger. He heard that she was not eating properly and was growing critically weak because of the poor food she was receiving in prison. She would not survive if something were not done. This news so disturbed him that he broke and agreed with his persecutors that he would join the government-controlled church. His plan was to get his wife to safety with her mother and then he would commit suicide. He reportedly wandered the streets murmuring "I am Peter...I am Peter..." and his heart sickness began to affect his body. When the authorities realized that he would not compromise himself by preaching in the government-controlled church, Pastor Wang and wife, Debra, were re-arrested. She received a fifteen-year sentence and he life imprisonment. Wang Ming-dao was finally released in 1980 at eighty years of age. He was quoted on release as saying, ***"So I have been through 23 years of refining and the Lord has not allowed me to suffer loss through it all, but rather to receive an even greater blessing."***³

³ Brother David with Lela Gilbert, *Walking The Hard Road*, (London, UK: Marshall Pickering), p. 4

MICAIAH

1 Kings 22:27

Ahab, King of Israel, was undeniably evil. He was a murderer and a greedy, deceitful King - and he despised the Lord's chosen prophets.

When Ahab sought the help of Judah against the King of Aram, King Jehosaphat of Judah, told Ahab to first seek the counsel of the Lord. Then Ahab gathered some 400 prophets and asked, ***"Shall I go to war?" "Go", they answered, for the Lord will give it into the King's hand.*** (22:6) Jehosaphat was unsatisfied and asked, ***"Is there not a prophet of the Lord here, of whom we can inquire?"*** (22:7) Ahab answered, ***"There is...but I hate him, because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad."*** (22:8)

Macaiah's philosophy of being a prophet of God was quite simple: ***"As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell him only what the Lord tells me."*** (22:14) After the prophet shares about "lying spirits", Ahab said, ***"Put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water, until I return safely."*** (22:27) Ahab disguised himself in battle to look like "one of the men" yet a random shot by a Syrian archers struck and killed King Ahab.

Macaiah had the satisfaction of knowing his words were correct. This was the proof he was a true prophet.

PRINCIPLE #5

Speaking only what the Lord (the Bible) says, may mean persecution and imprisonment but God's truth ultimately prevails.

AHMAD – SUDAN

Ahmad was a respected Muslim leader and a brilliant scholar. While studying for his doctorate in comparative religions he began reading the New Testament and ultimately gave his life to Jesus.

Then in 1991, *Sharia*, the law of Islam, became the law of the land in Sudan. Ahmad was called in for questioning. When he admitted to being a Christian, he was arrested, put in chains, and thrown into solitary confinement. The first night in prison, the officials tried to kill him. Unexplainably, they could find no petrol for their car to drive him to the place of execution.

The next day, he was to be arraigned before the Islamic High Court. A lawyer friend urged him to renounce his faith publicly and just keep it secretly in his heart. Ahmad refused. "Jesus is my only defense," he said. "I cannot deny Him." Ahmad was sentenced to six months in prison, stripped of his military rank, and fired from his teaching position. His wife had already divorced him. He also lost his four children, his car, house, and bank account. If at the end of his sentence he still refused to return to Islam, the judges said, he would spend six more months behind bars.

Ahmad organized small Bible studies and prayer groups in the prison. "By the end of three months," he said, "there were 305 known Christians in our prison, at least seven from Muslim background."

They moved him to a second prison where Ahmad and seven other Christians began meeting together. After a week, 50 gathered around a tree in the prison courtyard. Two months later, there were 115 believers, growing bolder and experiencing miraculous answers to their prayers.

DANIEL

Daniel 6

The 120 satraps appointed to rule throughout the kingdom of King Darius had a problem. ***“Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators...by his exceptional qualities, that the King planned to set him [Daniel] over the whole kingdom.”*** (6:3)

This led to a basic human response of jealousy, envy, and a plot to remove Daniel. Notice the plan: ***“They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.”*** (6:4b)

So, they set a trap, to catch Daniel doing what he normally did three times a day. ***“He got down on his knees and prayed and gave thanks to his God, just as he had done before.”*** (6:10)

The King gave the order, against his will, and threw Daniel into the lion’s den. The King tried to encourage Daniel when he said: ***“May, your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you.”*** (6:16b) In the morning Daniel was alive and well. ***“My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lion. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in His sight...”*** (6:22)

PRINCIPLE #6

To be unjustly incarcerated can bring a disproportionate amount of attention and respect from the same authorities who are opposing the spread of God’s Kingdom. They soon realize they are not arresting criminals but fighting against God Himself.

DR. ELIEZAR VEGUILLA - CUBA

Eliezer Veguilla, a Cuban pastor’s son, became a doctor specializing in internal medicine. But Eliezer’s passion was youth evangelism. He served as the President of the Baptist Youth World Alliance.

He also formed a music group of talented young musicians called “Harp Of David”. They toured the island singing about the love of God wearing their T-shirts proclaiming, “CUBA PARA CRISTO” and popularizing a catchy original song of the same name.

Eliezer was also deeply involved in Bible and Christian material distribution throughout the island. As well, he conducted campaigns with the movie JESUS. One night he was scheduled to show it in a rural church and the local police deliberately cut off the electricity. However, he had a small generator with him and since the church was the only building with power, the whole town turned up to watch the movie.

After Christmas of 1993, he organized a huge Christian musical in Havana held in the National Theatre on January 6th, 1994. The authorities were shocked as more than 3,000 people attended the concert...including the minister of culture and religion. Just weeks later, they arrested him as he left work at the hospital one night. His “crime” was being a Christian leader and the charge was being “a CIA agent”. Here’s how he describes his prison experience:

Not too long ago, I found myself unjustly shut away in a prison dungeon. There were days in which, for over 16 hours at a time, they kept me in total darkness, where I couldn’t even see my own hands.

I was the subject of intense interrogations, as well as physical and mental torture. I was switched back and forth between boiling hot and freezing chambers.

One day they showed me a ferocious-looking bear, with teeth and claws big enough to tear a man to pieces in a few seconds. A short time later they threw me in a dark cell with what I thought was the same bear; but soon I realized this ones teeth and claws had been removed and was chained.

My torturers expected me to panic and yell for mercy. However, I sat in a corner of the cell and to their astonishment waited quietly for them to come and get me out.

On another occasion they told me that I'd be executed by a firing squad. As they "prepared" me for it, I saw all the signs that it was going to take place that same day. It was one of the most difficult moments of my entire life. A few minutes earlier I had heard screams of terror and then gunfire. Then they took me into the room where I was to "die." A trail of blood as though a corpse had just been dragged ran from the blood-splattered wall to which I'd be tied, all the way to another exit door. The soldiers were already lined up holding their rifles.

As they stood in position, their leader asked me if I wanted to be blindfolded. Everything indicated that very soon I would be in the presence of the Lord. "Don't cover my eyes. You are going to kill me without a reason, and I would like to face my killers" was all I could say at that point. "God loves all of you! Jesus Lives!!! CUBA PARA CRISTO!!!"

I heard the order, "Fire!" Then came the click of triggers and the laughter of soldiers. The entire thing had been a mock execution! With the little strength left in me at that moment, I kept yelling "CUBA PARA CRISTO" while my torturers continued to laugh.

All these events helped me to comprehend at a deeper level the true meaning of my faith. It was then that I understood our Lord was born with the purpose of coming to this world to be with us to have a beautiful ministry and to carry our sins giving us peace. He bore on his shoulders the result of our sins, which is suffering and death. Nothing that is done to us compares with what He suffered because of His love for us.

My wish for my beloved homeland is the same one for which all the Cuban believers have been fighting all along: CUBA PARA CRISTO!

After 47 days of interrogations and torture, Dr. Vegilla was released from the prison because the authorities could not find evidence to convict him. They placed him under house arrest and he and his family became the target of constant surveillance and threats by officials. This forced him along with his wife and two children to leave the country on September 15th, 1995. Today they serve the Lord in Miami.

Ironically, the dream of Dr. Vegilla for his native land of Cuba is slowly being realized and implemented by the same authorities who had him unjustly incarcerated.

In 1999, Fidel Castro's regime granted authorization to the evangelicals (for the first time ever) for public evangelistic crusades and local church outreaches across the island nation during the months of May and June. They were also televised nationally.

Read about the origins and results of the revival in Cuba in the booklet, *Cuba Para Cristo*, by Hermano Pablo (Paul Estabrooks).

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Matthew 4:12 & 14:3-4; Mark 1:14; Luke 3:19-20

Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch, (one of several sons of Herod the Great and ruler of a fourth part of a region) arrested John the Baptist and placed him in prison.

John had been saying it was unlawful for Herod Antipas, to arrange for Herodias, his brother Herod Philip's wife to leave Philip and marry Antipas. This was contrary to Mosaic Law.

“But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodius, his brother's wife, and all the other evil he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.” (Luke 3:19-20)

John had spoken directly to Herod Antipas about the matter as a personal moral issue but in doing so he incurred the wrath of Herodias.

She later arranged (through her daughter's beauty and dancing on Herod's birthday) for John to be beheaded in prison.

PRINCIPLE #7

To confront an authority on a matter of personal morality means one must be prepared to pay the price for the confrontation - even one's life.

KWAN-JOON PARK - KOREA

Korean Elder Kwan-Joon Park was called an “Elijah of Korea” or sometimes a “Daniel of modern times”. He died as a martyr for his faith in Christ and his opposition to the Japanese colonial rule during the Second World War when the Japanese Imperialists occupied Korea.

At that time, the Japanese cruelly enforced Shinto worship on the Korean people, especially Christians.

On March 24, 1939, Elder Park went to Japan to protest against the inhuman colonial policies of Japan. He walked into the 74th Imperial Diet of Japan. When the opening pronouncement of the Lower House was made, he stood up from his seat in the visitor's balcony and shouted, “This is a great mission of God, Jehovah's great message!

Then he threw leaflets to the floor below exposing cruel abuses of Korean Christians by Japan and warning them of God's imminent judgment and destruction of Japan as a result of her wrongdoing and tyranny. The leaflets also explained the resistance against Japanese imposition of Shinto shrine worship upon Korean Christians.

Elder Park was arrested and sentenced to six years in Japanese prison. While serving his sentence, he was martyred at the age of seventy.

One line from his last poem written during his imprisonment expresses well his firm resolution to die willingly for Jesus Christ: **“Since Jesus died for me, I will die for Jesus!”**

Translated from a memorial plaque at the Christian Martyr's Memorial outside Seoul, South Korea.

PETER AND JOHN

Acts 4:3 & 5:18-19

The religious leaders seized Peter and John and put them in jail over night because they were ***“proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.”*** (4:2b)

Peter and John were released in the morning, threatened and commanded ***“not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”*** (4:18b) They returned to the church and as a body they prayed – not for protection but for more boldness.

This led to a second arrest on account of the leaders’ jealousy over the crowds that followed the apostles.

“But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ‘Go stand in the temple courts,’ he said, ‘and tell the people the full message of this new life.’” (5:19-20)

The ultimate result? ***“...more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.”*** (5:14)

“Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” (5:42)

PRINCIPLE #8

Persecution, including imprisonment, often increases rather than diminishes one’s boldness, which in turn multiplies the number of new believers being added to the Church.

MATTA BUSH – SUDAN

Pastor Matta Bush served over seven years of a thirty-year prison sentence in the country of Sudan. When visited inside the prison, he exhibited serenity and joy as he said:

“God...wanted me in prison for a special purpose. Many people are saved in prison...In El Obeid, prisoners were really saved and they began their new journey with God. Even the guards were also saved and that is why they transferred me here to El Khobar prison.”

It turns out Matta Bush had thirty to forty people in a discipleship class in the former prison. He concludes, “Because God loves me and I love Him, He gave me the freedom to speak and preach in prison. Since there was nobody else, He used me to do His work!”

He shares that in the second prison, two hundred have come to Christ through the Bible study class the authorities allowed him to lead. They even gave permission for the construction of a chapel on the prison compound.

Shortly before his final release from prison, the authorities told him that he did not really belong in prison. He was a good man, a man of God. And so, they offered him the opportunity to go out of prison during the day but then he must return for the night.

What joy he experienced with the believers in the city! But he soon began to realize this was not the will of God. How could he witness to his fellow prisoners who did not have this freedom to go out?

Matta Bush returned to prison authorities and told them he would no longer make use of the opportunity to go out. He said it was clear to him that it was not yet God's time.

Later the authorities offered him another special privilege – to sleep in an air-conditioned room. He also turned this down as he realized this would mean he could no longer witness to his prison mates during the night – the most fruitful period to share.

PRAY FOR CHRISTIAN PRISONERS

- Pray for God's strength and protection for those being tortured and interrogated
- Pray for the persecutors
- Pray that Christ's witness will be strong in the lives and mouths of those being abused for the sake of His name
- Pray as though you are actually sitting on a cold, dark, and foul-smelling prison floor with a brother or sister in Christ
- Pray as though you are hungry, as though you are cold, as though you are discouraged, as though you haven't seen your family in a long time
- Allow Christ to touch you with their pain, and your prayer for them will be deeply personal and powerful

PETER

Acts 12:3-6

“[Herod] had James the brother of John [arrested] and put to death with the sword...When he saw this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter...put him in prison...guarded by four squads of four soldiers each.” (12:2-4a)

God in His sovereignty does not reveal to us why Peter was released from prison and James was martyred.

During Peter’s imprisonment, friends gathered for a prayer meeting. The scripture says they prayed to God “earnestly” for Peter. During the night, an angel of the Lord woke Peter up, released him from his chains and led him past the guards to freedom. Peter thought he was dreaming.

Peter went to the prayer meeting location but the believers at first found it hard to believe and when they saw him were surprised and astonished.

Imagine the boldness this answer to prayer gave the praying believers that night!

Needless to say Peter’s “escape” created no small stir at the prison and as the honour system required, the guards were put to death.

PRINCIPLE #9

Being arrested for one’s faith tends to increase prayer support by those who remain “free” - for the one arrested and for the Kingdom of God.

MEHDI DIBAJ – IRAN

Iranian Christian leader, Mehdi Dibaj, spent over nine years in prison for his faith. In early 1992, he wrote a letter home on his son's birthday. Part of the letter reads:

I don’t want to hide it from you that I always envied those Christians who all through Church history were martyred for Christ Jesus our Lord. Because for a Christian it is a loss to leave this world by natural death. What a privilege to live for our Lord and to die for Him as well! And I am prepared for the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, not only to remain in prison but to give my life in His service as well.

In late 1993, he was tried on charges of apostasy after being a Christian for over forty years. He made his own defence and simply used his written statement to share his commitment to Jesus.

In early 1994, he was sentenced to execution. When his younger son (to whom he wrote the birthday letter) visited him he said, “Please tell all who pray for me that I believe this is my hour of trial like Abraham...I will not bow before the worldly-minded people and beg them for my release or forgiveness! I am quite ready for execution. This is my privilege that no one has the right to take away from me.”

There was a great international outcry when the news of Mehdi Dibaj's scheduled execution was publicized. Prayer was offered up all over the world on his behalf. Suddenly on January 16, 1995, the Teheran government released Mehdi Dibaj from prison and denied it had sentenced him to death for converting from Islam to Christianity over forty years earlier. It was a great day of rejoicing for the believers in Iran. Even *TIME* magazine reported the release under the title “Answered Prayers.”⁴ But six months later Mehdi Dibaj was martyred by vigilantes. He indeed served his Lord well!

⁴ “Answered Prayers,” *TIME*, January 31, 1994, p.9.

PAUL AND SILAS

Acts 16:16-30

Paul with Silas in Philippi was: ***“stripped and beaten...severely flogged...thrown into prison...put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.”*** (16:22b-24)

Picture this scenario. Paul and Silas are traveling from town to town throughout the region of modern Turkey. They tell everyone the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. The churches are being strengthened and growing daily in numbers. But they have been “hindered by the Holy Spirit” from preaching the word (the good news of Jesus Christ alive from the dead) in the area of Mysia and Bithynia. ***“The spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.”*** (16:7b)

So they move to the coastal city of Troas. That night they have a vision of a man in Macedonia begging them to come over and help. They go...meet a slave girl...cast a demon out of her...then the girl’s owners have Paul and Silas arrested, stripped, beaten, flogged and thrown into prison.

You are doing, by faith, what God has led you to do and you end up in prison. How can this be? The story continues with an earthquake, their release from prison and a new church established in Philippi. The beginning of the advance of Christianity across Europe. Praise God!

PRINCIPLE #10

God in His holy sovereignty may use a prison experience to encourage His servants, glorify Himself and advance His Kingdom beyond our expectations.

OSWALDO MAGDANGAL - SAUDI ARABIA

In late 1992, “Wally” Magdangal, a Filipino Christian who for years had pastored a clandestine house church in Saudi Arabia, was arrested. His secret house church was penetrated by the “muttawa”, the Saudi Arabian religious police.

For three-and-a-half hours he was physically and mentally tortured. They slapped, boxed and kicked him on the face. Then using a long stick, they lashed his back and the palms of his hands. Then the soles of his feet. He could not stand without wincing and he describes his bruised body as looking like an eggplant.

Upon returning to his cell, Wally prayed for five hours thanking God for allowing him to participate in the sufferings of Jesus. Here are his own words: “Suddenly there was light. The cell was filled with the Lord’s Shekinah glory. His presence was there. He knelt and started to touch my face. He told me, ‘My son, I have seen all of it. That’s why I’m here. I am assuring you that I will never leave you or forsake you.’”

Wally woke up two hours later feeling like a new man. He was amazed when he saw his body had been restored to perfect wholeness. No bruises, no cuts, no bleeding or blood stains. He adds, “God had completely restored me.” This was a significant source of strength as he later repeatedly witnessed to his interrogators. Once after sharing his faith, Wally noticed the guards countenance change. He was smiling. Wally said, “I could feel the Holy Spirit working already.”

Wally (and his fellow-pastor) was spared scheduled execution on Christmas Day. Miraculously, at the last moment, they were deported home to the Philippines. He concludes, “This strengthened me all the more because it proved that God will come through.”

THE APOSTLE PAUL

Acts 21:34

“taken into the barracks”

Acts 23:35

“under guard in Herod’s palace”

Acts 24:27

“when two years had passed”

Acts 28:16

“allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him”

Paul writes how he has more to boast about in the Lord than anyone else because, *“...[I have] been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned...”* (2 Corinthians 11:23b-25a)

Paul was the “persecuted of the persecuted” in the early Church in keeping with his mandate spoken by the Lord at his conversion: *“This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”* (Acts 9:15-16)

PRINCIPLE #11

“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.”

2 Corinthians 12:9

PAUL OF AFGHANISTAN

In Kabul, a brilliant young blind man who had memorized the whole Qur’an in Arabic listened to the gospel by radio and later publicly declared his faith in Jesus as his Lord. He became the first blind student to attend regular-sighted schools in Afghanistan. He graduated from University of Kabul with a law degree in order to defend Christians who might be persecuted for their faith. Some of his encouragement as a young believer came from a missionary from neighbouring Iran, Mehdi Dibaj.

Under the communist regime, Paul was arrested on false charges and put in a notorious prison where tens of thousands were executed. There was no heat in the jail during the cold winters. He had to sleep on the freezing mud floor with only his overcoat. A prisoner next to him was trembling with cold since he did not even have a jacket. Paul remembered John the Baptist had said, *“The man who has two coats should share with him who has none.”* (Luke 3:11) He took off his only coat and gave it to the neighbour. From then on, the Lord miraculously kept him warm every night.

He was given shock treatments to try to brainwash him leaving scars on his head. After release from prison he kept mastering foreign languages and continued translating the Bible, writing and preaching...as well as discipling new believers. In 1988, Paul was kidnapped by a fanatical Muslim group and charged with apostasy. He was beaten with rods and ultimately martyred. But his testimony lives on today in south Asia as a trophy of God’s grace.

Read more in Dr. Christy Wilson’s excellent book, *More To Be Desired Than Gold*, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1994.

PAUL, THE APOSTLE

Philippians 1: 12-14

The great Apostle Paul, in writing to the church he had established in Philippi, indicated that what others thought to be so terrible – his own imprisonment – God turned into good. Rather than hindering the gospel, it actually aided its advance. As a result, everyone - including the palace guard - learned that Paul was in prison only because of his love for Christ. And the other brothers and sisters were encouraged to be more bold and courageous in their witnessing.

From our time perspective, another “good” result of Paul’s imprisonment was the time to write. Our New Testament would be much thinner if the prison letters of Paul and others were missing. Paul writes to the Philippians from prison: *“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.”* (Philippians 1:12-14)

PRINCIPLE #12

Being in prison can advance the Gospel by making the entire church more courageous and fearless.

“Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Philippians 1:20-21

TESTIMONIES

The prisons outside North America have an infamous reputation for physical cruelty, mental torture and inhumane conditions. Yet from all over the world come reports of Christians who saw their imprisonment as an opportunity to serve their Lord and encourage the brethren to be bold in witness.

Chinese pastor, C.Y. Chan, was sent to prison camp in Kiangsu in 1961 at the age of 27. At that time, his house church numbered 300. For over eighteen years he laboured in the camp forced to work in the “night soil” pits carrying buckets of human excrement to the fields.

Knowing his trials, his church stood with him in prayer daily and also became bolder in their own witnessing. He testifies that during those eighteen and a half years, he was never once sick in spite of the germ-infested workplace.

When he was released in 1979, his church had grown to 5,000. Today the more than twenty groups he pastors have over one thousand members each.

In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, fourteen Christians continued their witness while in prison by reading Scripture aloud. By the time they were released, they had read through the entire New Testament and forty-four inmates professed faith in Jesus Christ.⁵

Former prisoner Pedro Pablo Castillo preached and counselled political prisoners in Nicaragua. Eventually almost half of the four thousand prisoners in Jorge Navarro jail near Managua became Christians. On the eve of their release, seven hundred political prisoners prayed, sang and read Scripture to celebrate their pardon. Castillo returned to the jail prior to his former cellmates' release to urge them to let Christ shine in their lives whether in jail or outside!⁶

Mikhail Khorev, a very effective evangelist in Russia, spent many years in prison for his continued public ministry. On one occasion his family was refused visiting rights and sent home. When the guard taunted him about it, he replied:

I would like to tell you that my God is fulfilling his plans through you and will use you for our blessing. I love my family very much and being together with them means a lot to me, but if it brings more honour to the Lord for us to part rather than be together, then why should I insist on seeing them?
If his name is glorified more through my being in prison than through my being at liberty, then I tell you that there is no greater joy for me than to die on this prison bunk as a prisoner, as my father did and as many of my brothers in the faith have done.⁷

Mikhail is also quoted as saying, "I have to admit to you that prison is a very useful school for our education and for the testing of the genuineness of our faith...I'm grateful to the Lord for this school and for his leading."

Another Russian Christian prisoner, Vladimir Okhotin, spent two and a half years in prison for his faithful witness to the Lord. His story is told in *Let The Waters Roar* by Georgi Vins. He says:

From my first moments in prison I realized the Lord had brought me there to serve him. I was in bonds, but for a Christian, bonds are a new opportunity for ministry. How could I have a ministry there? By telling people about God, by preaching repentance...
Being a servant of the Lord in prison or work camp takes patience. You cannot rush things. Once you have announced you are a believer, the other prisoners watch you carefully.

⁵ "Ethiopian Believers Continue Witness Despite Imprisonment", *Decision*, December 1987, p.19.

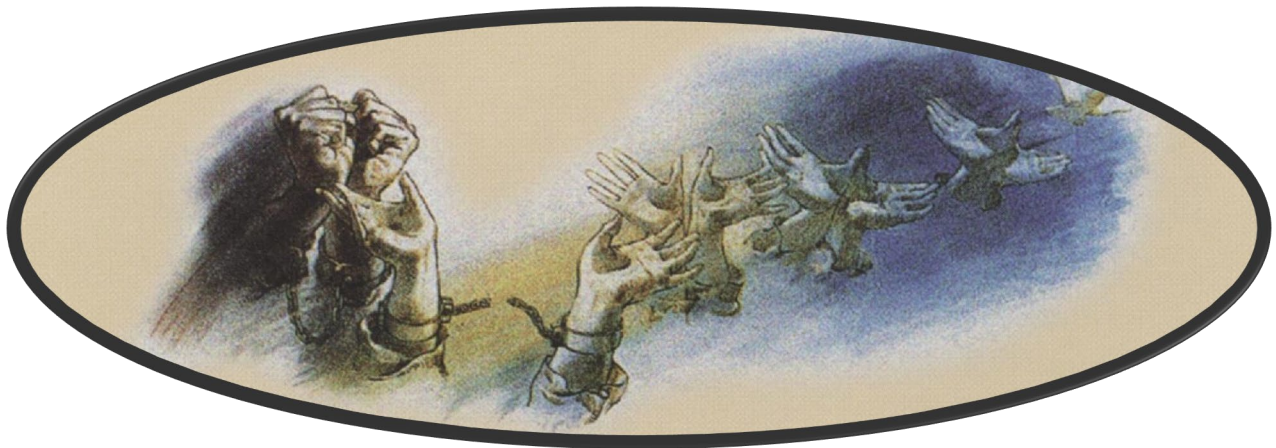
⁶ "Prisoners Released" *Christianity Today*, May 12, 1989, p. 58.

⁷ Mikhail Khorev, *Letters From a Soviet Prison Camp*, (Eastbourne, UK: Monarch Publications, 1986) p. 190.

You must live a pure, Christian life. You are in corrupt, vile surroundings, but you cannot let the surroundings rub off on you. You must serve the Lord from the first day there.⁸

Armando Valladares, shares about one Christian prisoner in Cuba who deeply impacted his own life and faith during his many years of imprisonment in Cuba:

His hat fell off his head and the wind ruffled his white hair. Very few men knew his real name, but they knew that he was an inexhaustible store of faith. He managed somehow to transmit that faith to his companions, even in the hardest, most desperate circumstances. "Faith, brother," he constantly repeated, and he left a wake of optimism, hope, and peace. All of us called Gerardo the *Brother of the Faith*. He was a Protestant minister and had dedicated his life to spreading the word of God. ***He was his own most moving sermon!*** (emphasis added)⁹



⁸ Georgi Vins, *Let the Waters Roar: Evangelists In The Gulag* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 102.

⁹ Armando Valladares, *Against All Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p.199.

VICTORY-SURVIVAL 101: How To Prepare For Imprisonment

Preparation for any challenge in life is a combination of mental, physical and spiritual training. For prison preparation, perhaps the most significant concept that helps is the understanding that wherever Jesus is, that is Paradise. In China, Mrs. Chen sang hymns (she had memorized early in life) constantly to her cellmates. Their favourite was “*Where Jesus Is, ‘Tis Heaven There.*” Pastor Richard Wurmbrand spent fourteen years in Romania’s dreadful prison system. He comments:

I know about a kind of paradise. In this paradise there have been beatings and tortures. We were deprived of everything. We had nothing to eat or to clothe ourselves with. In winter it was cold. We never saw our wives, mothers, or children. We never had a Bible or a book. We had none of these things, yet there was an inexplicable joy in the Lord.

Singing was not enough for us; we have also danced in prison. We had moments when we felt with intensity the nearness of Jesus. There was such joy in our hearts. The gray walls of the cell glowed like diamonds.”¹⁰

Russian pastor Ivan Antonov spent a total of 24 years in bonds for preaching the Gospel. In November 1988, at the age of 69 he was released from Siberian exile. He shares:

While in prison camp, I felt that my primary ministry was prayer. Like Daniel, I prayed three times a day, opening the windows of my heart toward my friends in freedom. I also prayed for our persecutors.

I would sing hymns. I was really glad I knew so many. I had memorized about one hundred seventy hymns, and in order not to forget them, I reviewed several every day. So over a time, I sang through all of them.

I want to emphasize to my young friends that you should worship God with songs and poems and memorize them. They will come in handy.

But most important of all, you should study and memorize the Word of God. When I was in prison and camp, I had no Bible, but I was able to review what I had stored in my heart. I went over two chapters from the Old Testament and two chapters from the New Testament every day. This experience reminded me of Joseph in Egypt. During the time of abundance, he was laying aside stores of grain. When the famine came, he distributed grain from these stores, and the people were saved from starvation... These Scriptures were food for my soul. I sang hymns every morning and at night before going to bed. God always woke me up in the morning, an hour and a half or two hours before the morning bell. This gave me time to pray and to meditate in peace, because once everyone else was up, there was too much noise and shouting. It was impossible to concentrate. So in those quiet hours, I would go outside in the fresh air and sing hymns of praise to God and pray...¹¹

After his release Ivan Antonov returned to the prisons and camps where he had earlier “done time” – but now to share Christ with the current prisoners. He was excited to report that fifty of these criminals were now studying God’s Word and expressed a desire to start a new life in Christ.

¹⁰ Richard Wurmbrand, “Begin Your Day With Singing”, *The Voice Of The Martyrs*, May 1999, p. 2.

¹¹ Ivan Antonov, “Survival 101: How to prepare for imprisonment”, *Prisoner Bulletin*, 1989, p. 13.

TO THE GARDEN AND THE CROSS

(This sermon was preached in Chungking, China in late 1998. The preacher is a house church leader who had been arrested and held for three weeks, four months prior to this talk.)

When we suffer for Christ, what actually happens? I mean, what really goes on spiritually within us when we are going through suffering?

I ask the question because a young sister was listening to me recently recount my experience of being in jail for three weeks last year. She said, “You talked of having constant diarrhea, of being kicked and punched painfully, and you even feared that God was punishing you ... yet you talked also of feeling joy and experiencing peace.” She said to me, “I don’t understand how these things go together.”

My reply to her, and I give it also as an instruction to you all (for you will all suffer at some point for His Name), is that when we suffer, three spiritual experiences happen to us all at once: angelic strengthening, superhuman forgiveness, and human incomprehension. These three things appear contradictory, but if you suffer, you will find they come together as they did in the life of Christ. An old Christian used to say to me, “When they lead you away to jail, tell yourself you are merely going with Christ to the Garden of Gethsemane, and to the Cross.” To the Garden, and to the Cross. I liked that. I tested it. It’s true.

1. Angelic Strengthening: The Garden

My arrest was totally unexpected. There was no warning. I was taking a teaching seminar in one of our church groups in northeast China, when in the middle of the afternoon, six policemen burst in and the next thing I knew I was punched in the stomach and lying on the floor. One of the policemen put his foot hard on my neck and I couldn’t move. I was then allowed to get up. Someone rammed me in the kidneys with a baton and I fell again, gasping from the pain. The pain was sharp and severe all the way to the police station, and I couldn’t take anything but the shallowest breaths. It turned out my digestion was ruined for months.

Although it was unexpected, there was a strange way in which I had been prepared for it. The night before, I was praying at midnight for the seminar. I had a list of all the participants, and was praying for each one. The more I prayed, the more discouraged I became. These men and women were too young, or too uneducated, or too wounded. I just felt that they were not good enough to be leaders in our movement. I slumped and sighed and felt very depressed. Also, I was having a bad stomachache. For weeks my stomach was sore and nausea had been my constant companion.

Then all of a sudden I felt a depression on the sofa, like someone had entered the room and sat down beside me. I opened my eyes. There was no one there, but the depression on the sofa remained. Then I felt a large hand on my back. It was hot and pressed into my lower spine, straightening me up. I felt strong again and my nausea disappeared. Then a soft voice said, “I am strengthening you for the fight. Do not worry about these young people. I am the strength of God, sent by Jesus to look after them and you. I will help you because He loves you.”

That was an angel. I am convinced of that. Just as the Scripture says of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength” (Luke 22:43), so it was for me. Angels appear to give us strength. And so all the time I was being taken to the police station in a cramped van, I was repeating the words of the angel to me, “I will help you because He loves you.”

So I want to make this clear to you all. Whenever you face the challenge of suffering for Christ, you will be angelically strengthened beforehand. You need to keep praying, because that's when the angel comes. But if you pray, you will be ready, because an angel will be there to strengthen you to bear anything.

2. Superhuman Forgiveness: The Cross

This is what amazed me the most. Whenever I was beaten up (and that was quite often during those three weeks), I would first feel searing pain, and then another feeling would flood in, almost wiping the pain away. Do you know what that feeling was? Pity. Pity for the man who was beating me.

I kept seeing my interrogator as a man gone wrong. I felt sorry for his mother, who would be so ashamed of him. I wondered what kind of father he must have had, to turn him into such a monster. I felt sad to be in the presence of one of God's creatures that could treat another human so badly with so little concern.

Then I would get amazed at myself. Through the pain I would think, "I should be angry, but I'm not, all I want is for this man to be saved." I had three ribs and a wrist broken, two teeth knocked out, my kidneys were malfunctioning, and yet all I could wish for was for the man beating me to find Christ and forgiveness.

Now I agree with that young sister. It sounds very strange. It doesn't even ring true. It's more human to be angry, or to be afraid. But I can only say this was not myself making me feel that way, but Christ within me. It was superhuman. It was Divine. And to this day, it serves as the greatest assurance I have that I am saved.

Again, this is also the way of Christ. In Luke 23:34, He says from the Cross itself, in the midst of excruciating pain, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." I tell you, it gives you such a thrill to know that you feel as Christ felt. That's why suffering is counted such a joy, such a privilege. It confirms to the sufferers that they are Christ's, and He lives in them. We don't have to trust a word that this is so. We feel it in our very breastbones.

3. Human Incomprehension: The Cross

But it is not all triumph. I know some pastors who said they just smiled all the time from the moment they were arrested, and felt unutterable joy the whole time. I suppose that is possible. After all, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego seemed to be very calm throughout their ordeal. But we must not make that the test of true spirituality. The Psalmists are full of despair and questioning as they go through hard times. So were Jeremiah and Job and Habakkuk. And most sobering of all, our Lord Himself was heard to cry from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15: 34)

This is the dark side of the experience. What makes suffering hardest to bear are the questions, the voices that well up within each of us, that are full of doubts, despair and depression. And I believe this is OK. As humans we were not meant to suffer. We were made to be part of a perfect world, with no sorrow or sighing, an Eden where everyone was righteous and fulfilled. So when we suffer, there is a sense in which our bodies and spirits witness saying, "This is unnatural, this is not why we were created."

In my own case, I wondered whether God had turned His back on me, or was punishing me for past sins. Yes, I know that sounds odd after all I have just said about feeling the power of God

within to forgive my persecutor, and having the angel strengthen me. But you forget these things in the dark watches of the night, sleeping sandwiched between two prisoners and being cursed by everyone because you need to rise and go to the toilet, and so everyone must wake up and shift their position. It was the nights that were worst.

But most of these doubts were not weaknesses as such; they were attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible. Where is God here? What's He up to? How can this possibly extend His kingdom? How is His glory served by one of my sisters being raped by an interrogator? The fact is, when we suffer, there is so much that we cannot understand. I read somewhere that "because we are human, we yearn to understand, but because we are human, we cannot understand."

Suffering puts us in our place. It humbles us to realize that we are not really in charge of our lives. This is a hard realization. God is in charge, and His purposes can be hard to discern at times. He takes even the sin of the world, and turns it to good account. We often do not see how He does this, but we believe it. Accepting it in faith is never easy when you are suffering.

Conclusion

So that is why suffering Christians appear to speak out of "both sides of their mouth." On the one hand we talk of joy and endurance. On the other hand, there is anger at God, pain and a feeling of spiritual desertion. They sit together, because there is always a war of different feelings and emotions.

Although we are angelically strengthened and the recipients of superhuman forgiveness, we also experience a sense of spiritual abandonment as a result of our human incomprehension.

But the greatest thing of all is to walk the way of Christ. That is the privilege of suffering: to suffer a little as our Lord Jesus suffered. As He identified with us by suffering pain, so some are called to identify even more closely with Him by going into the Garden, and onto the Cross.

Never fear, my friends, when you are arrested. You will receive strength. You will also be bewildered. Think of Christ, and follow him into the Garden, and onto the Cross.



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Paul Estabrooks

There are many principles and results God in his sovereignty accomplishes in allowing his chosen ones to serve time in prison situations. And these are all substantiated by biblical teaching and modern life examples. As we become aware of them and allow them to enlighten our understanding, we can become even more useful servants of the Lord.

The words describing Pastor Gerardo, the martyred “Brother of the Faith” in Cuba’s prisons, still ring in my ears: **“He was his own most moving sermon!”**

An Open Doors-Africa co-worker named Solomon was assigned to find out if there were many Christians in prison or labour camps in Mozambique during the communist regime there. While researching, he was arrested himself:

In prison, all my possessions, including my Bible were taken from me. Then I was subjected to a cross-examination for six hours, after which I was thrown into a cell, exhausted. I had to sleep on a concrete floor. I did not even get a blanket...

Knowing that my heavenly father would never forsake me, I directed all my attention to my fellow-prisoners. Although I still had to sleep on the floor and was harassed by malaria, bugs and gnawing hunger, I tried to talk about my faith as much as possible...

I had the opportunity to preach to my companions. I prayed for the sick and the Lord heard my prayers and healed them. That was of great support to them and during my stay in prison, I led fifteen people to the Lord.

Unexpectedly, I found out that there were more Christians in prison. Now it became clear to me why I had to be arrested. In the first place, to bring the message of salvation to the lost ones in prison. And secondly, to strengthen my fellow Christians.

In the final book of the Bible, we find the Apostle John in a form of imprisonment – exile. There on the island of Patmos, God gives him a powerful vision of the future. A most fitting conclusion to the canon of Scripture.

During her third imprisonment for preaching in China, Mrs. Chen was also given a vision from the Lord. She saw thousands of missionaries from the West and the East working side-by-side digging a trench. The trench became bigger and longer after much hard work. Then water started to flow into it. It became the River of Life. She saw it flow first through all parts of China and after that into the whole world. The workers were very happy and their singing filled heaven and earth.

Already we are seeing this vision being fulfilled, yet much remains to be completed. And possibly a significant number of present and future imprisonments will empower the flow of the Spirit into the whole world. Today there are hundreds of Christians languishing in prison cells around the world for their faith. Expatriate Christians – such as our Filipino brethren – are still today in those terrible prisons of Saudi Arabia. Even in free countries like Peru, hundreds of falsely accused Christians are incarcerated and awaiting justice. They need our prayers. But be sure they spend their waiting time in productive ministry for their Lord.

In conclusion, we return to those faithful Christian prisoners of the Soviet Union era for whom we prayed in previous decades. Let us never forget their message to Christians in the free world: **“Live in such a way that your prayers for us will be heard!”**

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Jim Cunningham

By what authority do we write about the “principles of prison power”? We have not been sentenced to prison for our faith, but we speak to the topic by conveying the integrity of men like Pastor Allen Yuan in China who spent many years in prison.

We met Allen and his wife Alice on a number of occasions in China. What were the charges that resulted in a 44-year-old father of six children - the oldest age 14 - being taken to a labour camp to work 9 hours a day, seven days a week for 21 years and 8 months?” Who is this menace to society? And what did he do? Here are his own words:

In 1949, China’s liberation occurred. After that we could no longer have street meetings or preach on the radio. The new government had a rule that the Bible could be preached only inside the church, not outside...

In 1950...the Three-Self Patriotic Movement started. [Note: Protestant Churches had to be; self-governing - no external ties; self-supporting - no external funding; self-propagating - no external aid in order to cut all connections with Western “imperialism”.] It was headed by the government’s Religious Affairs Bureau. All the religious activities were to be led by the Communist Party...Beijing in 1950 had over 60 churches of different denominations. Those who received foreign aid joined...

In Beijing there were eleven preachers who refused to join the movement...for three reasons: First, we were independent: we received no foreign aid. Second, the Bible says one must not be yoked with unbelievers. Thirdly, we believed that politics and religion should be separate.

I was arrested in 1958...[and] given a life sentence with no hope of being released. I had made this statement: “The Church of Jesus Christ is a virgin Bride prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ - the Bridegroom; not a whore to work for the government!” I was sent near the Russian border to do farm work...

For ten years during the Cultural Revolution, I couldn’t receive any letters from home...It was very cold, food was bad and the work was hard, but in 22 years I never once got sick...I came back alive; many did not. I had no Bible for 22 years...I met only four other Christians...Catholic priests who refused to join their Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association...I was released (along with others over age 60 with 20 years in prison) in December, 1979. I had been in prison for 21 years and 8 months.¹²

I asked, “Allen, after all these years would you say the same thing again?” He looked at me and with firm resolve repeated the phrase that sent him to prison. As an octogenarian Allen carries on. As recently as August 1, 1998, he baptized over 300 new house church Christians.

Could persecution and imprisonment of Christians happen here in a western country like Canada? Rev. Carolyn Nicholson, a United Church minister in Glen Margaret, Nova Scotia, ministered to the families of the 229 people killed in the Swissair Flight 111 crash off Peggy’s Cove, Nova Scotia, in the summer of 1998. A government protocol office informed her that she

¹² Unpublished testimony of Pastor Allen Yuan.

(and the community Catholic priest) could say the opening blessing at the Memorial Service provided “no references to Jesus Christ, or no readings from the New Testament (Christian scriptures) were permitted.”

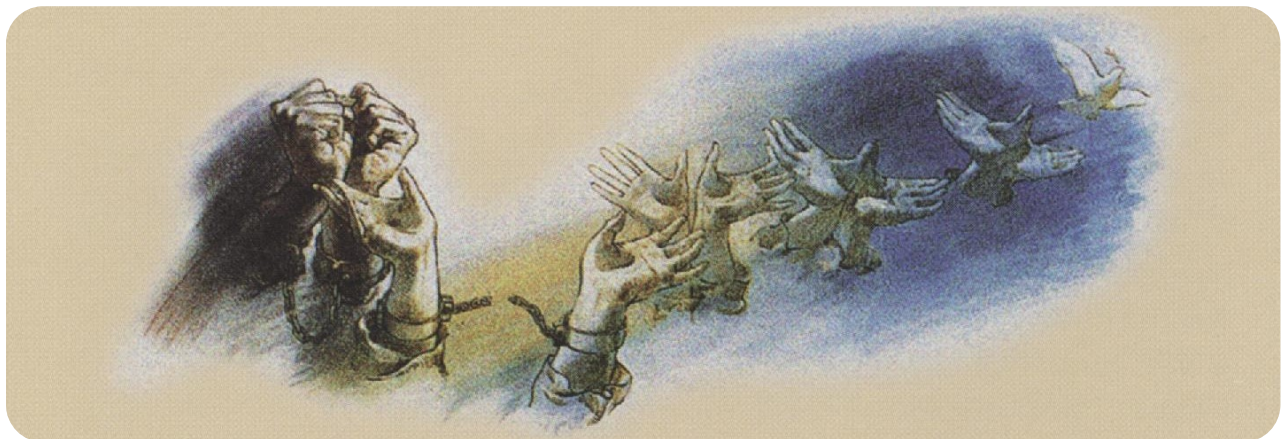
A 1993, *MACLEAN'S* magazine survey claims 78% of Canadians define themselves as Christians. Only 2% of Canadians are Jewish, Hindu, Muslim or New Age yet at that Memorial Service a Native Canadian spoke of her people's beliefs, a Rabbi read from the Hebrew scriptures and the Muslim representative read from the Qur'an. Is Canada, “the true North strong and free,” beginning to sound and act like Communist China, circa 1950?

What would have happened if the Christian ministers had the “chuzpah” to read the Bible and pray in the name of Jesus Christ on behalf of the Christians who died in Swissair Flight 111? Would the priest and minister have been arrested? Charged? Imprisoned? We will never know. Someday it could happen. That is our motivation for writing this book: to help each reader see that the possibility is there for a future imprisonment for our faithful proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And then to know how to respond to that possibility.

***Prison is part of God's sovereign plan
for the expansion of His Kingdom.***

When Peter said to Jesus: “**Your are the Christ [the Messiah] the Son of the Living God**”, Jesus replied to Simon meaning “Pebble” whose name was changed to Peter, meaning “Rock”: “**You are Peter (Rock) and upon this truth (Rock), I will build My Church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.**” The Gates of Hell are defensive. They are designed to stop and advancing army. God's Kingdom is advancing and as it does it goes behind the defenses of the enemy and releases hostages to sin and brings them into the light of God's Word. Sometimes prison power advances the Kingdom of God faster and further than any other method.

We are ready!



12 PRINCIPLES OF PRISON POWER

PRINCIPLE #1

What man intends for evil, to hinder the advancement of God's Kingdom - God uses for good to advance His Kingdom.

PRINCIPLE #2

Moments of isolation in confinement have proven to be times of special visitation and revelation by the triune God beyond the norm.

PRINCIPLE #3

Prophets who declare the Word of the Lord are subject to attacks by individuals and authorities including 'religious individuals and authorities' who are hostile to both the prophet and the Word of God.

PRINCIPLE #4

Being bold and speaking the truth in love may not always reap immediate positive results...and may cause unjust imprisonment.

PRINCIPLE #5

Speaking only what the Lord (Bible) says, may mean persecution and imprisonment but God's truth ultimately prevails.

PRINCIPLE #6

To be unjustly incarcerated can bring a disproportionate amount of attention and respect from the same authorities who are opposing the spread of God's Kingdom. They soon realize they are not arresting criminals but fighting against God Himself.

- continued

PRINCIPLE #7

To confront an authority on a matter of personal morality means one must be prepared to pay the price for the confrontation, even one's life.

PRINCIPLE #8

Persecution, including imprisonment, often increases rather than diminishes one's boldness, which in turn multiplies the number of new believers being added to the Church.

PRINCIPLE #9

Being arrested for one's faith tends to increase prayer support by those who remain 'free' - for the one arrested and for the Kingdom of God.

PRINCIPLE #10

God in His holy sovereignty may use a prison experience to encourage His servants, glorify Himself and advance His Kingdom beyond our expectations.

PRINCIPLE #11

"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9

PRINCIPLE #12

Being in prison can advance the Gospel by making the entire church more courageous and fearless. "Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Phil. 1:20-21

