

## Lesson 4—Why You're In Prison

Scripture: Psalm 107:10-15

<sup>1</sup> Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for *He is good!* For His mercy *endures* forever. <sup>2</sup> Let the redeemed of the LORD say *so*, Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy... <sup>10</sup> Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, Bound in affliction and irons— <sup>11</sup> Because they rebelled against the words of God, And despised the counsel of the Most High, <sup>12</sup> Therefore He brought down their heart with labor; They fell down, and *there was* none to help. <sup>13</sup> Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, *And* He saved them out of their distresses. <sup>14</sup> He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, And broke their chains in pieces. <sup>15</sup> Oh, that *men* would give thanks to the LORD *for* His goodness, And *for* His wonderful works to the children of men! <sup>16</sup> For He has broken the gates of bronze, And cut the bars of iron in two.

Okay, so now you know why I was in prison, let's talk about why you're here. If you said, "I'm in prison because I broke the law" or "...because I got caught," you'd only partly be right. If you said, "I'm in prison because I sinned," again, you'd only partly be right.

The most important reason you're in prison is that it is result of the goodness, mercy and wonderful work of God in your life! "What?!" astounded, you ask. You're in prison because God is good and merciful and he works in ways that are wonderful, even if hard to understand at the time.

### God is Merciful

How many of you will admit that you could have been killed doing what you were doing? How

many of you know friends that died doing what you were doing? Do any of you know someone who received a longer sentence for the same crime you committed?

What about your sin? Did coming to prison stop you from killing yourself or someone else as a result of your drinking, drugs, or abuse of others? Would you have stopped on your own? How many times have you tried to stop before?

Don't you see how merciful God is? Among other reasons, He took you captive to put the brakes on, to stop you in your tracks. Proverbs 14:12 states, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." God knew the path you were on would surely lead to your death, if not physically, certainly in eternity, and He isn't willing to let you go without a fight!

### You Did Wrong (You "Rebelled")

In v. 11, second to the mercy of God, the Psalmist declares that you're in prison because you "rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High..." How did you rebel against God? How have you despised his counsel?

The Bible declares that the creation has enough evidence in it about God and His will that we are without excuse when we sin (Psalm 19; Romans 1). What about creation? Did creation have anything to say to you about your sin? Do you think you should have taken note the first time you nearly choked to death on that cigarette or joint? Might you have learned anything from the way you felt "the morning after"? Vomiting wasn't enough of a clue for you? Your arm getting infected from the needles didn't lead you to believe perhaps you weren't using them as or

for what they were intended? Hepatitis, gonorrhea, HIV, failed to convict you that promiscuous or unfaithful sex was a bad idea? Of myself I would ask, "Didn't the fat, swollen reflection in the mirror, the shortness of breath, or the occasional joint pain tell me I was overeating?" Of course it did, and does!

What about your conscience, that still, small voice? Did you ever have an angel on one shoulder trying to steer you away from sin even while the devil whispered in your other ear? The Scripture states your conscience is really the law of God, written on your heart, that either accuses or excuses your actions (Romans 2:14, 15).

How many times did He send someone to ask you to stop? How many times did you ignore the writing on the wall? Before Christian group DC Talk broke up, Toby Mac rapped, "The warning signs are like flares in the night, still I proceed my greed is in spite of the fire I know that's bound to burn, why is that I always gotta learn the hard way?"

How many times did you go to church, hear the message, and walk out the door the same or worse before you came in? How many times did God place people in your life to plead with you to change? But you rebelled.

You resisted God. You rejected His counsel. If you're honest, you despised His counsel. You hated it; you hated Him. And He wasn't happy with you either.

### **He Brought You Down**

Do you ever remember being depressed before you went to prison? Did you ever wonder whether your life would ever change for the

better? Why was all of this or that happening to you?

After David committed adultery and murdered a faithful friend, in Psalm 51 he plead with God to restore to him the joy of his salvation. One of the natural consequences of our sin is that we become depressed, not because we are sorry for offending God, but because we are sorry for its consequences.

In *Competent to Counsel*, Jay Adams wrote that he never minimized it when someone told him they were feeling suicidal. Instead, he used it as an opportunity to find out what was going on in their life that they would feel suicide was the only way out. More often than not, he would discover the depression stemmed from some sin from which the person had not repented.

Adams also noted that part of the divine purpose for our feelings is to tell us when something's not right. He said they are kind of like warning lights on the dashboard of a car. When a light comes on, most people lift the hood to find out what's wrong. But when it comes to feelings of depression, we seldom "lift the hood" and look inward. Instead, we blame everything outside of us, even disconnecting the warning light with some sin. Or, still trying to find the answer outside of Christ, we turn to secular psychiatry and antidepressants. It is any wonder there are so many depressed people in America?

Eventually you get arrested and now you're incarcerated. Your away from your family, your wife is in the arms of another, your kids are being raised by someone else, your job is gone, you may have lost all your assets. As the country song goes, "I don't have much but what I have is mine." And now you've lost that.

You're in prison with people not even you would have hung with on the streets. Some guys act like they're afraid of the water. Others blow up at the slightest provocation. You may not have a job. If you do, you're not being paid the same as if you were free, you may not get paid at all. You live under the curse of having to work hard (Genesis 3:17-19) but now you don't even get to enjoy the fruit of your labor. If you're not depressed, you've got good reason to be!

But you must not believe it is only your sin that has brought you low. The Lord has done this wonderful work. And if He has brought you low it is only so He can raise you up. God has brought you low to bring you to repentance. As the Scripture asks, "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4)

"...<sup>6</sup>Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." <sup>7</sup>Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup>Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup>Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup>Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." (James 4:6-10).

### **No One to Help**

He has brought you to this place where there is no one else to help. All the bridges are burned. Even if you had any left, you're in here alone. But this passage isn't just about being in prison.

It's about being in a place where there is no one else to help. And that's a good place to be, for there is no other name under heaven by which men may be saved. Salvation is found in Christ alone. One of the best miracles in Scripture to illustrate this is when Christ heals a woman with constant hemorrhaging. Look at Luke 8:43-48:

<sup>43</sup>And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone. <sup>44</sup>She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased. <sup>45</sup>And Jesus said, "Who was it that touched me?" When all denied it, Peter<sup>f</sup> said, "Master, the crowds surround you and are pressing in on you!" <sup>46</sup>But Jesus said, "Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me." <sup>47</sup>And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. <sup>48</sup>And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

Note, especially, the end of verse 43: the woman had been struggling with this problem for 12 years and "though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone." No one could save her...except Christ! What hope is in this passage! Regardless of how long you've been sinning, no matter how great the consequences, Christ is able to save you! He has brought you to this place where there is "none to help"...except Him!

### **Then You Cried Out!**

Oh, and isn't that the way it is? We wait until we're in trouble and then we cry out. You were fine when you were free. But once you hit the county jail, once your problems came crashing down upon you, you cried out as never before, "God, help me!"

Mike Warnke, a once popular Christian comedian, once commented that when things are good it's easy to pray long, flowery prayers, but when things are bad, you hit your knees in the hallway, slide into the bedroom and cry out, "God!"

It's important to note here that there are two ways one can cry out. One is when we cry out because we're sorry we were caught and we're sorry for the consequences. The Bible calls this "worldly grief" that "produces death." But the other way to cry out is for mercy, which leads to salvation, and is best seen in the tax collector of Luke 18:9-14(ESV):

<sup>9</sup>He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed<sup>f</sup> thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." The tax collector, so ashamed, wouldn't even go near the altar. Standing far off, wracked with grief for

his sins, he wouldn't even lift his head toward heaven, but he beat his breast and cried out for mercy. And the Bible calls this "godly grief" that "produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret." (2 Corinthians 7:10).

But what's that last part mean: "without regret"? It means that we are no longer sorry that we got caught or we're in trouble because God used it to bring us to Him. And we have no regrets!

I recently had a friend who was diagnosed with aggressive, pancreatic cancer. When they went in to check on the pancreatic cancer, they also found a large mass on his kidney. My friend said, "Praise God for the pancreatic cancer because they wouldn't have found the mass on the kidney unless they had." In the same way, praise God you got caught! Praise God you're in trouble! If it wasn't for that, you may never have cried out.

### **He'll Save You!**

You've cried out to the Lord in your trouble and the Scripture says He has saved you! At long last, good news! It says, "And He saved them out of their distress." Note that there's no break in the sentence: they cried out and He saved them! The lame leap like a deer! In less time than it took you to wreck your life, Christ saves you and gives you a new life!

### **He'll Break Your Chains**

If you're in Christ, He'll break your chains. It is popular in the church today to believe that it's possible for someone to be a Christian and NOT

be free from the indwelling, reigning power of sin. It's popular but it's NOT true.

"...if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed," John 8:36.

I don't believe in perfectionism—the doctrine that Christians can live a sinless life this side of heaven. But I do believe the Scripture. It is clear that there is a definite change that takes place when someone becomes a Christian. The evidence of being a Christian isn't demonstrated in a mere willingness to obey but in the ability to do so.

When I was in prison, one of the truths that convicted me that I had not yet become a Christian is that when one is truly born again their life will show it. I knew that wasn't true for me. I went to church, I prayed, I preached, but inside I knew I was still in my sin. Nothing had changed. The Bible characterized me as "having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power," and then it advised all Christians to "Avoid such people." (2 Timothy 3:5)

What is the power of godliness? It's the power to NOT be: "lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God...disqualified regarding the faith." (2 Timothy 3:1-8) Basically, it's the power not to sin. It's not a perfect power in this lifetime, but it's there. It's the ability to say "No" to a sin you may not have been able to resist before. This is the power of godliness; it's the power of the Spirit of Christ in you.

Christians still sin. Christians may still have one form of habitual sin in their life or another. But there is a constant desire on their part to be free of sin and from this desire flows a constant turning away from it. More importantly, from the desire and the constant action of turning away comes victory where there was none before!

No one can judge whether or not you're still in your sin. Only God and you know for sure. Every Christian experiences times of progress and regress. There may be long periods of unrepentant sin in the life of a Christian as there was in the life of David, who was said to be a man after God's own heart. But the acid test is whether or not you, like David, will humbly obey the Word when it convicts you (2 Samuel 12; Matthew 18:15-20).

Have your chains been broken? Do you know that the reigning power of sin has been broken inside you? Is there a difference in the orientation of your thoughts, words and deeds?

### **Give Thanks**

I once saw former actor Kirk Cameron on a morning show called "The View." Kirk stated that as a young actor he felt like the only one who deserved any credit for his amazing success was himself. "But," he said, "When I became a Christian, I realized I owed everything to God. From then on, I made a decision that I was going to live my life in a way that said, 'Thank you.'"

One day I enjoyed the privilege of having lunch with Skip Ryan, Chancellor of Redeemer Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas (at the time of this writing). He asked me, "Chandler, what do you think is the mechanism for change in the

life of a believer? What do you think makes people want to change?" To which I replied, "I can't answer for everyone but, for me, it's been gratitude. When I think about the fact that Christ loved me in spite of the worst He knew I would do, and when I think about all His church has done for me over the years, I am filled with gratitude and I just want to live the rest of my life in a way that says, 'Thank you.'"

"Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe...." (Hebrews 10:28)

### **Testify!**

A mentor was teaching me the four marks of a true church (which we will discuss in detail later). The fourth mark is evangelism because, he said, the evidence of a church where hearts and lives are being transformed through the preaching of the gospel **MUST** be outreach.

This is the reaction we see in Scripture, isn't it? (See Matthew 9:31, 20:34; Mark 1:45; Luke 7:16-17, 13:13; John 9:11.) Many of the people whom Jesus healed couldn't keep silent. Can you?

Have you ever eaten at a great restaurant, tried a great product or received excellent service about which you just had to tell people? In the same way, people who have been changed by the grace of God will want others to know. Perhaps more importantly, people who've been forgiven much will want to live and love in a way that testifies to the grace they've been given (Luke 7:47).

**Whoever said it first, said it best: "You may be the only Bible some people ever read."**